



The Cost of Being a Woman at Work

Annual Report



women and work
all party parliamentary group

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Foreword

The past two years have proven to be amongst the most challenging in living memory, with no exception for women in the workplace. With the All Party Parliamentary Group in its sixth year, we have wanted to focus on the factors that still to this day affect women in the workplace, from a structural point of view and on societal pressures around the delivery on unpaid labour. The issue is not just about getting women into work but ensuring retention of female employees by rapidly improving workplace systems and infrastructures to enable women to thrive.

Our Women and Work APPG events have highlighted the need for employers to involve their employees, especially those affected by pay gaps, in conversations around action plans. Employers and employees must work collaboratively in creating actions plans that make real changes to the workforce, understanding the intricacies and needs of all the workers.

The APPG's meetings have seen excellent attendance with a broad range of industry-leading stakeholders. The insights and research from our APPG's sponsors and wider contributors have formed the basis of this report and have helped us to formulate recommendations for the UK Government and our parliamentary colleagues.

Ultimately, we can only ensure equality in the workplace and prevent further damage by acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges and costs that women face.

We will continue to raise these issues with government and engage with stakeholders; and we will continue to listen to women to discover and solve the problems that still plague women in work. We sincerely look forward to making progress on this important agenda in 2023.



Jess Phillips MP
Co-Chair



Flick Drummond MP
Co-Chair

Introduction

The Women and Work All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) is a cross-party group which provides a parliamentary forum to constructively examine how we can deliver gender balance within the economy and improve career outcomes and opportunities for women. This includes exploring the responsibilities of employers and what more is required from the private, public and third sectors to deliver the Government's ambitions for women and work.

In 2022, the APPG focused on what aspects of a woman's working life affect their earning potential, including the gender pay gap, the effect of the menopause on a woman's working life, the cost of childcare and the barriers for women entrepreneurs.

What we noticed in almost every session is the ever-prevailing societal expectation across all sectors that women will take on the responsibility for unpaid care work, including for elderly and disabled relatives and children. Many women cite balancing paid roles with caring roles as the primary reason for taking part-time roles, and indeed, women are more likely than men to be in part time employment: according to data collected in 2020 38% of women were in part-time work compared to only 11% of men. However, working part-time can often mean women are working in lower skilled and therefore lower paying roles. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021)

Other factors affecting this imbalance also include occupational segregation; with women being socially encouraged to enter care-centred roles where pay is often lower, whereas men are socialised to be interested in roles in areas such as STEM work and investment, both of which result in higher pay. Although many may argue this is through choice, socialisation of men and women throughout their lives leads to encouragement into specific jobs where the pay gap manifests itself.

Women across the UK would collectively earn £90 billion more every year if the gender pay was closed. Given women are 50% of the UK population and account for just 40% of UK GDP, closing this gap would also significantly increase the UK's output: research published by McKinsey Global Institute stated that £150 billion could be added in GDP in 2025 by improving gender parity in the workplace. In context, this figure roughly equates to the size of Britain's total annual government expenditure on transport, defence and education combined. (Bulman, 2016) It is therefore imperative that we address this in order to address the current issue around UK productivity.

It is because all factors that we have called this year's report "The Cost of Being a Women at Work". We hope that through the cross party recommendations outlined below, we will continue working together to achieve a more equitable workplace for all.



Recommendations

1. The Government should introduce mandatory gender and ethnicity pay gap reporting for all companies of 100+ employees, as well as the development of mandatory follow-up action plans to address the gap if present

2. The Government should work with employers to discourage salary history questions during recruitment, as well as discouraging questions on gaps in employment history, as those tend to harm women who have taken career breaks for childcare purposes

3. The Government should work with the Women's Health Ambassador to ensure basic needs like HRTs to be granted and work across departments to introduce menopause as a protected characteristic

4. The Government should encourage employers to produce plans for accommodating menopausal employees, including signposting of resources and guidance for all affected

5. The Government should increase statutory maternity pay to match the living wage to harness female talent – as women are currently driven out of the workforce by childcare costs

6. The Government should appoint an "Early Years" Cabinet Minister to address the childcare crisis and enable more women to return to work if they wish to do so

7. The DWP should introduce changes to the pension system, including ensuring pension contributions are considered through divorce proceedings, applying auto-enrolment to workers from age 18 (rather than age 22) and employers' contributions throughout parental leave

8. The Government should consider a communications campaign to better showcase financial literacy programmes and workshops – including through funding of British Library Business & IP Centres

9. The Government should encourage venture Capital Firms to adopt quotas for businesses powered by female talent

10. The Government should work with the private sector in increasing the number of apprenticeships offered and to tailor them to female students to increase the number of women in STEM

The gender pay gap



Introduction to the gender pay gap

The gender pay gap is generally measured as the difference between women's and men's wages on average and are seen as a symptom and cause of different types of inequalities. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021) In 1970 the Equal Pay Act made it illegal to pay different salaries and wages for genders doing the same role. To further cement this work, the Equality Act in 2010 focused legislation around 'allowing claims for direct gender pay discrimination where there is no actual comparator' and 'making pay secrecy clauses unenforceable.' (Paterson, 2010)

In the past decade the gender pay gap has slowly started to narrow, however in recent years this progress seems to have plateaued. Research suggests that by age 40, women are earning 13% less than men and by their 50s, 16% less. A separate analysis by the Young Women's Trust discovered that over a woman's lifetime, they earn £223,000 less than men. This in turn alters a woman's ability to invest or save as much money as men, leading to less financial flexibility in their latter years.

The gender pay gap and the lack of gender pay gap transparency underpins a lot of gender inequality issues that the Women and Work APPG has focused on this year.

So what is the current situation surrounding the gender pay gap?

In one session of the Women and Work APPG, the Fawcett Society explained that though there has been progress towards closing the gender pay gap, still today women only earn 88% of every pound a man earns. The problem also persists in the public sector, with UNISON noting that in 2019 the median average gap for public sector employers was just over 14%. She explained that despite a predominantly female workforce in the NHS and the national pace system put in place more than 15 years ago to prevent pay inequality, 60 trusts had pay gaps larger than 14%. While local councils performed better overall, 17 reported gaps

bigger than 20% and 96 reported gaps more than 10%. Nearly half of police forces reported gaps above 20%. (Women and Work APPG, 2022)

This situation has not been helped by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately impacted women. In the first 11 weeks in particular, when part-time jobs fell by 70%. This impacted women in particular, since women make up three-quarters of the part-time labour force. According to a study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, mothers have been 47% more likely to lose their jobs than fathers during the pandemic, adding to their already large financial burdens. Research also suggested that mothers have been more likely to be furloughed and have their hours cut back 50% more than fathers.

Addressing the gender pay gap?

Though there have been attempts to address the gender pay gap, a report written by King's College London notes that current UK legislation that aims to tackle this gap has 'no teeth', since they note the focus is on monitoring the problem but there is little aim to actually fix it. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021) The current gender pay gap reporting system is simply a monitoring tool and does not require employers to act upon their reported gap. The idea is that pressure from a range of different sources, for example the media and employees, will encourage organisations to act on the gap, however this is shown to often not be the case. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021)

According to the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, the UK ranks joint-last in terms of the strength of its gender pay gap reporting systems when compared with countries such as Australia, France, Spain, Sweden and South Africa. The paltry ranking is largely due to the UK's lack of legislation that mandates employer action plans. Research by King's College London also notes that although reporting gender pay gaps within organisations is positive, focusing on a headline number can lead to some organisations



aiming to “window dress” their figures by outsourcing lower paid jobs. Therefore, when addressing the gender pay gap it is crucial that UK legislation focuses on data on women’s representation at different levels of organisations and through the different pay quartiles. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021)

The Ethnicity Pay Gap

The gender pay gap is also influenced by other, intersecting pay gaps. For example, black women in the UK also face the ethnicity pay gap. The British Association of Social Workers notes that life outcomes for black women are impacted by what they call a ‘double jeopardy’ of racism and sexism. (Pierre, 2020) This therefore puts women from ethnic minority backgrounds in the UK even further behind when it comes to their earnings. Despite Section 14 of the Equality Act, which attempted to address discrimination on the basis of two or more protected characteristics, intersectional discrimination still occurs in the UK today. Research by the London School of Economics (LSE) suggests that black women are the least likely to be among the top earners compared to other racial or gender group in the UK. 1.3% of UK-born white men are in the top 1% of earners, while only 0.2% of UK-born white women and lower than 0.1% of UK-born black women are in this category. LSE’s research notes that these findings are often criticised as skewed due to more women in part time work or choosing to stay home with children. However, LSE has found that these conclusions still stand when looking at full time, full year workers only. (LSE, 2021)

The existence of the ethnicity pay gap means that we cannot fully address the gender pay gap without considering ethnicity alongside it. (CIPD, 2022) Alongside the moral case that no one should be paid differently based on their ethnicity, there is growing evidence that addressing the ethnicity pay gap also has economic advantages. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy calculated that improving workplace personal progression and employment rates for people of ethnic minority backgrounds could contribute £24 billion per year to the UK

economy. Additionally, McKinsey’s 2018 study ‘Delivering through Diversity’ found that organisations with the most culturally and ethnically diverse workforces were the most successful financially. (CIPD, 2022)

To fully address the gender pay gap, Dianne Greyson, founder of the campaign group Ethnicity Pay Gap, noted that we must focus on the intersectional barriers that inhibit all women to have a holistic approach to addressing the pay gap. (Women and Work APPG, 2022) Joanna Gregson from the Equality and Human Rights Commission suggested that companies should be required to conduct impact assessments, which would include intersectional analysis to fully understand their workforce and actions required to eliminate discrimination. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021)

So why is this issue so important?

Naturally, if women earn less money, they save less. A survey by GoBankingRates in 2021, highlighted that women have far less money saved in an emergency fund than men, creating financial instability for many. (Livingston, 2021) Later in life, this instability is keenly felt with the pensions gap: since earning less means they contribute less to their pensions. The Independent suggests that the average net income of female pensioners per week is around 85% of their male counterparts. Moreover, two thirds of pensioners in poverty are women. (Turner, 2016) Kings College London suggests that the disparity between men’s and women’s pay underpins the power imbalance that is present in global working populations and will inhibit global efforts for economic recovery in the wake of Covid-19.

Arguably, the implications of gender pay gaps can also be connected to negative health outcomes for women due to the links between lower socio-economic status and poor health. The Gates Foundation suggests that women do not always have the ability, often due to finances, to find and pay for the correct treatment. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021) A recent study suggested that women whose income was lower than their male

counterparts had nearly 2.5 times higher risk of depression. The study's author suggested that gender discrimination was likely a prominent explanation for mental health disparities between men and women, as arguably discrimination can result in higher levels of stress and poorer health behaviours. (Milner, et al., 2016) Consequently, the more health related help needed, the more costly this is for the government.

In addition, research suggests that lower-income families depend more on a women's earnings, which if are lower than a male's, can lead to family and child poverty, something key on the current government's agenda to address. (Livingston, 2021)

The gender pay gap also creates an investment gap, as naturally if you have less to invest, you are less likely to want to take risks with the money. (Currie, 2018) Research by YouGov found that 52% of women in the UK have never held an investment product compared to 37% of men. Moreover, first-time investors often seek professional advice before investing, however male financial advisors outnumber female financial advisors six to one. This is not to say a male cannot advise a women on finances, but male dominated industries can often overlook the specific needs of a woman, such as living longer. (Holder, 2019)

The gender pay gap also has negative effects for UK society and government. Firstly, the existence of the UK's stark gender pay gap plays into negative perceptions of the UK, and the slow progress towards closing the gap can also feed into negative views of the Government itself. The other impacts of the gender pay gap on health outcomes and poverty can also deepen problems that the Government is keen to address.

What can be done to help close the gender pay gap in the UK?

As a starting point, greater government spending on family benefits would significantly help close the gender pay gap. Greater availability of affordable childcare, for example, would arguably increase female participation in the workforce, by helping parents, in particular mothers, return to work. (Gallagher, 2018) Job flexibility would also empower women in work, since responsibilities such as childcare would not eat into women's working hours. Earlier this year, a Women and Equalities Select Committee report proposed making all jobs flexible by default . (Turner, 2016)

In addition, making pay gap reporting mandatory and requiring action plans to address the gender pay gap would also contribute towards closing the gap. At a Women and Work APPG event, the Fawcett Society noted that the current voluntary approach is not working, as only half of employers publish their pay gap statistics. Josie Irwin from UNISON explained that top line figures when reporting pay gaps can also be dangerous, as employers need to dig beyond the statistics to understand the dynamics and intersections of their workforces that will enable a view of the full picture and how to address inequalities. (Women and Work APPG, 2022)

Once organisations have published their gender pay gaps, it is essential that they put actions plans into place. Kings College London research highlighted the need for mandatory action plans , noting that they ideally should be embedded within a holistic equality assessment to enable organisations to contextualise their figures beyond just pay. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021) They also suggest the introduction of automatic fines for non-submission of reports. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021)

A further way to improve the UK system would be to lower the minimum employee threshold needed to report gender pay gaps. This currently stands at 250, which is far above other countries such as Sweden, where the threshold is 10, and Spain, where it is 50. This would help to capture and publish data on a wider range of women. (Cowper-Coles, et al., 2021)

During the APPG session, participants agreed on the need to end the salary history question. This question imports pay inequality into new organisations, thus continuing the pay barrier throughout a woman's career. (Government Equalities Office, 2022) There must also be a right to know policy in all organisations to ensure women have the information they need to be able to show that there is a male comparative doing the same work for more pay. (Women and Work APPG, 2022)

As previously highlighted, legislation is key for addressing the gender pay gap, however it does not address the structural and cultural factors surrounding women in work. Addressing these will require government to lead a wider societal and cultural shift. Normalising conversations around pay will help us move towards closing the gender pay gap.



The menopause

“Menopause has been ignored and hidden away for too long. There is nothing shameful about women’s health, or about getting older. Supporting those experiencing menopause makes sense for individuals, for the economy and for society.”

(Women and Equalities Committee, 2022)

Menopause is a transition which half of society can expect to pass through. It primarily affects women between the ages of 45 and 55, when they have considerable professional experience and are established within their workplaces. Despite this, knowledge of this transition is scarce, and it is subject to considerable taboo. The menopause can have significant physical and psychological symptoms, including hot flashes, mood swings, difficulty sleeping and memory problems, among many others. Yet women have historically been pressured and shamed into enduring these changes without seeking help or relief. For women to reach true workplace equality these medical problems and obstacles of later life must be highlighted and normalised from the start of women’s careers. Inadequate medical support may result in capable workers being pressured into accepting lower-paid roles, moving to part-time employment or even retiring early. The gender pay gap cannot be addressed if women are routinely pushed out of the labour market as they reach their highest earning potential. This can also lead to their families suffering from a cut in earnings, and can cause friction as family members watch their loved one endure a major medical transition without adequate support.

Progress in 2022

This year, there has been significant progress in countering menopause discrimination, thanks largely to the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, Carolyn Harris MP and her private members bill, and the establishment of the role of Women’s Health Ambassador. This increased expertise and government representation will be vital to addressing both menopause policy and broader gender health inequality. Additionally, the NHS has launched “The Menopause Pathway Improvement Programme” and “Our Vision for the Women’s Health Strategy for England” to improve NHS treatment of the menopause and promote a better understanding of it.

With these measures, the UK has made considerable progress; however, the Women and Equalities Committee argues that there is still more to be done. Their report on Menopause in the Workplace (published 28 July 2022) (Women and Equalities Committee, 2022) calls for a series of medical, workplace and legal changes in order to improve the quality of life and productivity of women. Other recommendations include the introduction of a specific Menopause Ambassador in addition to the Women’s Health Ambassador, the introduction of the menopause as a protected characteristic and the removal of the dual prescription charge for oestrogen and progesterone. There is clearly more that can be done, and it is vital that we maintain momentum following these reforms.

An inclusive response to the Menopause

Any attempts to help menopausal workers must be inclusive and intersectional. However, what little research there is on the menopause has a disproportionately white focus. Where there are task forces and menopause education groups, they often fail to grasp the variety of cultural understandings of the menopause and of ageing more generally. Scientific research often falls into similar pitfalls, with the Good Housekeeping Institute producing an article in 2021 that stated there had not been a study of black women’s experiences of the menopause since 2007; this study involved seven participants whom it classed as “BME” (Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds), thus eradicating any specificity within their cultural experiences (Akpan, 2021). Moving forward, the extent of these cultural differences needs to be recognised across the NHS, workplaces, and government programmes. Taskforces and public health programmes should cater to all ethnic groups, and we should always endeavour to see these groups represented, especially in government bodies. In addition to different cultural expectations and experiences around the menopause, employers should also consider the differing experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals and address those challenges when formulating internal policies.

The Role of Healthcare

Medical interventions are often necessary to help women cope with symptoms of the menopause. The primary medical treatment is hormone replacement therapy (HRT), but there are also more specialised treatments including anti-depressants and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for mood swings. However, access to these vital treatments is far from guaranteed. Research by Mumsnet and Gransnet found that 36% of women who sought help for perimenopause symptoms and 26% of those who sought help for menopause symptoms visited their GP three or more times before being prescribed appropriate medication or help (Mumsnet HQ, 2021). A quarter did not trust their GP to diagnose the menopause correctly. In 2022, shortages of HRT forced many women to turn to expensive private treatment (Roxby & Reed, 2022). Madelaine McTernan was appointed as HRT tsar to tackle the shortages, which was a significant step, but she returned to her previous role overseeing vaccine distributions in August despite the fact that there were still restrictions on the supply of 12 HRT products (BBC, 2022).

Workplace adjustments cannot be expected to stand in for medical help. Women should feel that they are taken seriously by their doctors, and they should have access to appropriate treatments. As the NHS backlog grows, these rights must be

defended; women's health must not be sacrificed in the name of NHS efficiency.

Workplace Acceptance, Understanding and Accommodation

Research from the Faculty of Occupational Medicine found that almost 8 out of 10 menopausal women were in employment. Since the menopause typically lasts between four and eight years, this means that menopausal workers make up a significant percentage of the total workforce. (Faculty of Occupational Medicine, 2016) Ensuring that these women are comfortable is therefore relevant to national productivity. Yet, the stigma against the menopause in this area remains particularly prevalent. Having an open, honest conversation with a boss or a line manager is a key step for offering women workplace support, but often this can be difficult when the manager is either a man or is significantly younger. The CIPD surveyed 1409 women experiencing menopause symptoms and found that 30% had taken sick leave due to their symptoms, but that only a quarter of them were able to tell their manager the real reason for their absence; of those who did not disclose the reason, 32% said that this was due to them having an unsupportive manager. (CIPD, 2019)

Providing training for managers on the menopause and establishing channels for dialogue on the issue are therefore fundamental to tackling it. Health issues should always be taken seriously where they impact on workers' productivity and comfort, and yet often there is a culture of shame when discussing them, and especially for women. Some companies are introducing solutions: Zurich Insurance, for example, has a menopause policy to draw attention to the issue which contains a manager toolkit with clear ways in which managers can support their workers. Organisations can also, where feasible, offer greater flexibility in working hours and arrangements. The work

environment can also be improved; desk fans are one cheap and easy way to make menopausal women more comfortable through reducing the impact of hot flashes. Office temperature regulation and ventilation are also helpful for company-wide health and comfort. Women should not shoulder the burden of menopausal symptoms alone, while there are multiple actions that a company can take to become more accommodating. Companies like Barratt Development have recently introduced a Menopause Policy, along with a range of advice and support, to help reduce stigma, encourage conversations and enable managers and teams to better support colleagues going through the menopause.

Menopausal women are an asset to their workplaces. They bring professional and lived experience to their roles, and as women disproportionately leave the workforce after having children and as they grow older, their lack of representation is depriving companies of an invaluable perspective. In this context, it is odd and unhelpful that this stage in life is cause for shame and disapproval.

A Broad Discussion of Health

Sadly, the attitudes towards the menopause in the workplace are reflective of a wider culture of silence around women's health and wellbeing. Mental health concerns can be either dismissed or met with judgement, women often feel pressured into reducing their maternity leave for the benefit of their employer and menstrual conditions such as endometriosis are poorly understood, if known about at all. If workplaces are to benefit from a happy, productive workforce, illness and health concerns must be treated with openness and respect, but most importantly, employers must be open to taking action for the comfort of their employees.



Maternity leave, post maternity pay freeze and the childcare tax

Having a child is a momentous event in a woman's financial life. However, it has unfortunately been identified as a significant contributor to the gender pay gap and can have drastic negative impacts on a woman's working life. In 2016, the Institute for Fiscal Studies published a report which found that before a woman had children, the gender pay gap was 10%; by the time that her first child was 12 years old, this had widened to 33%. (Costa Dias, et al., 2016) These percentages are likely to have changed since the pandemic, during which women disproportionately left work or reduced hours in order to provide childcare due to the closure of schools and nurseries, and the cost-of-living crisis, which threatens now to plunge millions into poverty. For single mothers, these impacts are intensified. Women find themselves forced out of work during pregnancy, disproportionately expected to take leave after the birth and then burdened with the high cost of childcare, leading many to cut down their work hours or leave employment altogether for years.

Sadly, these issues are not new and have frequently been a topic of discussion at this APPG for many years – reflecting how little progress has been made. The expectation that women should be the primary caregivers for children is an ancient sexist cliché that deprives women of their independence and men of closeness with their children. It is vital that we support parents through pregnancy, parental leave and their children's early years, to promote empowered parents and supported children.

Pregnancy and Redundancy

Mothers often face the most severe threats to their livelihood before their children are born. Research by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that 11% of pregnant women were dismissed, made compulsorily redundant or forced out of work through poor treatment. (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018) Scaled up to cover the general population, this would translate to 54,000 mothers a year having to leave their jobs. One in five received harassment or negative comments about pregnancy or flexible working, while one in ten said that their employer discouraged them from attending antenatal appointments. (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018) Furthermore, many women cannot afford to take their employer to a tribunal in the event that they suffer maternity discrimination. One suggestion for tackling this is to introduce a period during which pregnant women cannot be made redundant, except under very specific circumstances (such as the company folding). With Dan Jarvis' latest Private Members Bill making its way through the Commons and Lords, we have the opportunity to provide greater security from redundancy to parents at such a momentous time in their lives.

Parental Leave Pay

Assuming that a mother is able to keep her job upon becoming pregnant, her next hurdle is managing the maternity leave period. During this time, women often face a significant drop in earnings due to low rates of maternity pay, while also seeing household spending increase, resulting in potential increased stress and financial hardship. The [current basic rate for maternity pay](#) is £156.66 a week; this equates to 47% of the National Living Wage. (Moran, et al., 2022) In 2012, the basic rate of maternity pay equated to 62.5% of a 35-hour week on the National Living Wage; this rate is far below what should be acceptable, and yet since then the rate has only continued to decline further. It should therefore be no surprise that research from Maternity Action found that 64% of working mothers who responded to their survey reported that they "worried a lot about money while they were pregnant or on maternity leave", with a further third reporting that they were "sometimes worried". (Moran, et al., 2022) Meanwhile, 51% were forced to rely on credit or borrowing to manage while 2% used foodbanks during this period. This research suggests that the majority of pregnant women are forced to take out debt in order to maintain a reasonable standard of living throughout a delicate time. These problems are only being exacerbated during the cost of living crisis: According to ReWage, an independent expert advisory group, a staggering 25.8% of households with children has experienced food insecurity compared to the year before, showing how the cost of living crisis is heavily impacting on parents.

This raises many troubling implications. First of all, pregnant women are often advised to reduce stress during their pregnancy, out of concern that it may impact their health or that of their child, and yet current UK policy gives them ample concern for their finances and that of their families. It may risk jeopardising their safety, especially if they cut back on necessities such as heating to get by. Secondly, it may have unforeseen impacts on babies' earliest days of life, if they are brought into households that are stressed from taking a financial hit. The impact on children and families only continues when parents are forced back into work earlier than preferred; if they also have to take on longer hours to pay for the expenses that come from a new child, this could impact bonding with the child and the caring and stimulation they are able to provide at this vital developmental age.

Mothers take another hit to their career from the expectation that they will take the majority, if not all, of the parental leave on offer from their employer. They end up taking longer breaks, impacting career progression, and for couples this establishes a pattern whereby the mother shoulders disproportionate amount of the childcare. One potential solution for this societal trend is the offering of shared parental leave, which allows parents to share leave and pay to care for their child in a more flexible way. However, uptake for shared parental leave in the UK is



low. Between 2017 and 2018, research from the University of Birmingham found that just over 1% of those entitled to shared parental leave chose to take it. (TUC, 2019) In 2019, the TUC called for an overhaul of shared parental leave to correct this.

This is an area in which the private sector can work to support families. At Barratt Developments, Company Enhanced Maternity Pay has been extended to 26 weeks, including for adoption leave. As well as improving its maternity provision, Barratt increased its paternity pay, has made family friendly policies gender neutral and provides paid support for those undergoing fertility treatment; policies such as these are a useful reminder that parenthood can be immensely complicated, and that while adequate parental leave is vital, it is not the only goal. Family-friendly policies have to be inclusive to be effective, and through extending support to all family circumstances private companies can do more to help all women in work. While there are steps that the government should be taking to improve parental leave provision, we should not minimise the immense and immediate impact of companies improving their own policies, and setting an example for others.

The Childcare Tax

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has found that childcare in the UK is the second most expensive in the world, with a full time place costing an average of £14,000 per annum. (Ng, 2022)

These immense costs are deeply damaging to families. First of all, it is incredibly harmful to single parents, as this is taken from only one source of income. Research published by the Department for Education showed that 40% of single parents struggled to meet childcare costs in 2019, compared to 24% of couples. (Early Years Analysis and Research, 2019) It forces many onto Universal Credit, and reduces the hours that parents are able to work, impacting on the finances of the family and the country. In fact, this research suggests that 34% of non-working mothers cite childcare issues as the main contributing factor to them not working. (Early Years Analysis and Research, 2019). While the government has implemented policies to improve childcare, these are restricted by the capacity of local councils to deliver it: while working parents of three and four year olds in England are entitled to thirty hours of free childcare a week, fewer than half of English local authorities are able to provide this. (The People's Pension, 2019) The TUC has advocated an "urgent cash boost" for childcare, similar to financial support given to transport networks. (TUC, 2022).

While parents of children aged 3 to 4 years old are entitled to 30 hours of free childcare, this is a very specific window and depends heavily on region. In April 2022, the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) warned that 85% of nurseries were operating at a loss or breaking even, forcing many to close. 30 hours of free childcare is only helpful where nurseries have the capacity for the children. Their parents are trained, talented workers, and that they are forced out of work is both their loss and that of the economy at large. A lot has been said throughout 2022 about the significance of growth and productivity; rectifying the dire state of childcare is an obvious, non-controversial and ethical solution to this.

This is viewing childcare at its most basic level: as babysitting. This is an unambitious perspective on how we raise new citizens, and misses the potential for us to support and cultivate children through their earliest years to boost their development and wellbeing. Speaking at our APPG session, the Early Years Alliance spoke of a need for us to change the rhetoric around childcare, to reflect its actual importance and potential. As Britain enters recession and public funding is cut, we must protect and prioritise the quality of our childcare. First and foremost, we must increase investment into the industry. Parents can't afford childcare, underfunded nurseries are struggling to provide it, and the next generation will bear the consequences.

A Route to Growth

Supportive policies around pregnancy protection, parental leave and childcare are beneficial to every level of society. The improve the quality of life for families, who are financially stronger and share domestic tasks more evenly. They benefit employers, by reducing the need to recruit replacements for mothers being forced out of the workforce and by supporting working parents alongside their working hours. And finally they benefit the government, by reducing the number of citizens forced to use Universal Credit and maintaining tax levels from citizens who are able to continue work after having children. But this also feeds into a much larger, long-term debate. Growth has been rightfully mentioned repeatedly throughout 2022, becoming a governmental priority. Parent-supporting policies are directly tied to this. They increase families' spending power, workers' productivity and the birth rate. First and foremost, we must improve these policies to help women and families. But it is also helpful to remember the wide-ranging benefits to policies such as this.



The pension pay gap

Society has given close attention to the gender pay gap, and rightly so, with women historically being underpaid and undervalued due to discrimination, motherhood and underrepresentation in certain industries. According to the union Prospect, from 2019-2020 the gender pay gap persisted at 15.5%. (Prospect, 2021) And yet this figure pales in comparison to the gender pension gap, which according to Prospect increased to 37.9% within the same time frame. NOW Pensions found that by her sixties, a woman has on average £51,000 in pension wealth, where a man has £156,000, (NOW: Pensions, 2019) while Scottish Widows found that right now, a woman in her twenties can expect, on average, to retire with £100,000 less than a man of her age. (Scottish Widows, 2021) This stark contrast becomes even more significant considering women's longer lifespans and higher chance of needing care in later life. (Scottish Widows, 2021) Our APPG meetings studied this huge discrepancy, and its pressure on women in their retirement, as all the different financial, social and familial pressures that they face are magnified into a growing hole in their pension pot.

According to the Chartered Insurance Institute, on average, women's pensions are worth five times less than men's. This can in many cases lead women to experiencing poverty later in life due to the financial gaps created early on in their careers. (Holder, 2019)

Time out of work and the "Caregiver Penalty"

While there are many contributing factors to the pensions gap, the largest seems to be women's higher likelihood to take time off work and the "Caregiver Penalty". NOW Pensions calculates that this causes a 47% drop in women's pension wealth compared to men's in their late fifties. This conclusion is supported by research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), which found that in the private sector, while men and women invested in their pensions similarly until age thirty, following this age the percentage of women saving plateaued while for men it

continued to increase. (Crawford & O'Brien, 2021) It seems likely that any meaningful attempt to close the gender pension gap will need, first and foremost, to address women's non-linear working lives.

The solutions to this dovetail nicely with solutions to close the gender pay gap: improved investment in childcare would reduce the need for women to take substantial time off work, for example. Extra protections for pregnant women and new mothers against redundancy would prevent employers from forcing women out of the labour market, while greater uptake of paternity or shared parental leave would encourage new families to split childcare more evenly, reducing disruption to women's working lives and offering fathers more opportunities to spend time with their children. Better support for women going through the menopause would also enable many women to retire later. Campaigners have argued for these reforms for decades, and progress has been made: nonetheless, the continuing severity of the gender pension gap shows that we must do more. The pandemic has highlighted both the stress of balancing childcare with work and the huge potential benefits of flexible working arrangements. We must not let this increased flexibility be rolled back post-pandemic. These are general, far-reaching reforms, which would make a considerable difference to the pension gap and to women's wellbeing.

Our APPG meetings also offered more specific solutions to the issue of women taking breaks from work: firstly, employers can continue to contribute to their employees' pensions throughout parental leave. They also have the opportunity to pay for employees to receive financial literacy training, to promote a better understanding of how to manage a pension. Secondly, the issue of pensions should be raised more often during divorce proceedings. If a woman has carried out the majority of childcare during her marriage but does not receive any percentage of her partner's pension on divorce, then said partner is free to accrue a larger pension while paying her back nothing for her labour. This is yet another dimension to the "caregiver penalty". It has been suggested that dividing up the couple's pensions should be a default consideration in all divorce cases. Thirdly, couples need to be having conversations about future childcare when they first plan to conceive, while considering the impact this will have on their pensions. There are many financial literacy resources, such as Pension Wise appointments or workshops run by charities such as The Money Charity; these need greater signposting, so that people have access to free, reliable and accredited advice on

financial decisions. Many large companies already offer pension guidance to employees for free through their existing pension services; unfortunately, where a company is less valuable to the pension firm this guidance is less likely to be offered.

Civil Service Widows and the Remarriage Clause

There are some specific situations in which the effects of the gender pay gap are felt even more, such as for widows. Over the past ten years, legislation has been passed so that civil service widows will not lose their partner's pensions on remarriage, but progress has been slow, and not all of this legislation has been applied retrospectively. Few are affected, and so the costs are low, and yet in 2017, 42 widows were forced to give up their pensions due to them entering new relationships. This era of pensions penalising bereaved spouses should be consigned to history, and all civil service widows should be comfortable for the rest of their lives, regardless of their romantic futures.

Making Pension Policy Work for Low-Earners

Returning to the broader issue of the gender pay gap, the unfortunate truth at this moment is that women on average have lower salaries than men, and as such are more likely to live in poverty. Our APPG meetings found that another effective route to narrowing the gender pension gap is to improve pension provisions for those earning the least. Automatic enrolment has already proven very successful at encouraging women and lower-earners to invest into their pensions. (Association of British Insurers, 2022) At this time, only workers over the age of 22 are included in auto-enrolment; many organisations, such as the Association of British Insurers (ABI) have advocated that this age limit be lowered to eighteen. These extra four years could make a substantial difference through improving the amount of compound interest earned over the individual's lifespan. Similarly, auto-enrolment only applies to incomes over £10,000. This is particularly significant to people working part time, who because of childcare and other caring roles, are disproportionately female. Scottish Widows has advocated the removal of this lower band altogether by 2025, as well as an increase of the current

automatic enrolment contributions from eight percent to twelve percent. (Scottish Widows, 2021) Those on the lowest incomes are those with the least ability to save for their retirement independently; with that in mind, it makes little sense that these policies penalise and exclude them from vital policies such as auto-enrolment. Reforming these policies would greatly help not only women, but all of those in need of pension support.

An extra caveat to these schemes, is that the automatic enrolment contributions from employer and employee are designed to only be the bare minimum. Research conducted for the ABI found that of 4000 adults of working age, over half did not believe that they even had a pension. Knowledge and understanding of pensions is severely lacking; all groups within society need greater education on the issue, but the gender pension gap shows us that women in particular would benefit from this information. Women should be encouraged to invest in and get to grips with their pensions sooner, so that they can factor them into life decisions and earn greater interest from contributions beyond those provided by automatic enrolment.

Where to begin?

It is clear that there is plenty for legislators, employers and individuals to do to close the pension gap, and to support women's comfort and independence in their later years. But where would be a good place to start? One leading suggestion from our APPG meetings was that the government should be obliged to report on the gender pension gap. People are familiar with the gender pay gap, and the government has a duty to report on it to Parliament; the gap within pensions is far larger, and yet it is far less known. In raising awareness of this within Parliament, we can also highlight it to the wider world. The government will be encouraged to produce a plan to address this inequality, and in turn, it will be publicised to the wider world, causing individuals to consider their own retirement provisions. Because until our wider society sees and reacts to the gender pension gap, women will continue to retire less supported, less comfortable and less noticed.



Women in technology

In their 2019 to 2020 ranking of the “Most Valuable Brands”, Forbes ranked the following as the top 5, in descending order of value: Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Facebook. The ranking found that Apple had a “Brand Value” of \$241.2bn. And all five are tech companies, or at the very least, entirely reliant on the internet.

If we are to tackle gender equality in the world of work, especially the gender pay gap, we need women to have equal access to and support in this industry. This becomes only more urgent as the cost-of-living crisis deepens. We cannot underplay the importance of money: it eases maternity leave, provides childcare, strengthens independence and improves overall health.

The benefits are not just limited to women working within the industry, or even to women generally. The products and services produced by tech companies are increasingly vital to both high level government policy and everyday family life. As a society, we rely on algorithms without realising it, and as coders are predominantly men, their biases and expectations are filtering through to the machines. This is not a theoretical threat: in 2019, the US regulator launched an investigation into the Apple credit card after it was widely reported that women were offered far lower credit scores than their husbands’, despite having entirely shared assets. (BBC News, 2019) The tech industry has produced awe-inspiring, life improving inventions, but it has also contributed to growing online misogyny and gadget misuse, including spy cameras and stalking. Having more women working in tech will lead to tech being better adapted to women, and will encourage and accelerate the response to misogyny. It will also bring greater originality and variety, boosting profits and growth. While this report and our APPG are focused on women, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that this also has implications for biases regarding to race, ethnicity and culture as well.

The Internet

The internet is a useful starting point, as for new generations, social media will be their initial and most profound introduction to the potential for technology. It is also home to some of the most significant inequalities in the industry. Research by Amnesty International in 2017 found that 1 in 5 women had suffered online abuse or harassment, of whom 55% said they experienced anxiety, stress or panic attacks as a result. With the normalisation of teenagers and children having social media accounts on multiple platforms, they could be exposed to this behaviour earlier and it could have a profound impact on their relationship with technology. In particular, girls are at risk of being exposed to hate, body-shaming, “cyber-flashing” and misogynistic political material. If the digital sphere is unwelcoming to women, women will be put off from entering digital industries. At our Women in Tech APPG session, Shadow Minister for Tech, Gambling and the Digital Economy Alex Davies-Jones MP advocated making misogyny a priority harm. She also recommended that the Online Safety Bill be tailored to enable the government to tackle online



misogyny. Social media takes up a significant amount of time for today’s teenagers, and can have a significant impact on their outlook. We cannot allow it to set back equality, and alienate a generation of girls from the digital sphere.

Education and the Pipeline

Counteracting the negative effects of internet misogyny may prevent women from feeling alienated by tech, but we need to go further to positively motivate women to join. In 2017, PwC interviewed over 2000 A-Level and university students to study the gap: it found that only 3% said that a career in technology would be their first choice. (PwC, 2017) This is shockingly low, considering the heightened salaries and prestige that come from this industry. There are also less practical reasons why a young person might be drawn to working in tech; videogames have significant popularity among teenagers, and provide a significant creative outlet. There are ample reasons for a teenager to be drawn to this industry, so it is important to scrutinise why girls are so reluctant. One reason is a current lack of representation: it is undeniable that technology and the digital sphere have a masculine association. The PwC research reflects this: 78% of students could not name a woman working in technology. While 5 years have passed since this research, it is tempting to think that this statistic would not have changed greatly. Girls must be able to see themselves represented in the industry to join it in the same number as boys. A lack of representation is not only impacting on female students. Of those surveyed, 16% had been advised to pursue a career in technology; this is less than half the number of boys, of whom 33% had been nudged towards a career in tech. (PwC, 2017) This also suggests that teachers and families may also share an association of tech with men and boys.

As a result of these issues, tech was a primary career choice for 3% of female students, compared to 15% of male students. Any attempt to tackle disparity within this industry therefore needs to impact schools. One solution is to send women from relevant companies into schools, to provide advice on entering the industry and show the benefits of working within it. This may be useful for both students and their teachers. We also need further research on the topic, to highlight why this disparity is so significant. It is vital that we are able to fully understand what is putting girls off of working in tech, as its influence on industry is only going to grow.

Training

We also need to advertise alternative routes into a tech career, especially so long as uptake of computer science degrees among women remains low. Humanities degrees may offer important skills through written and verbal communication and creative thinking, while artistic qualifications are vital to good design. Innovation and originality requires diverse skills and thinking, which won't be found through coding skills alone. We also need to consider other qualifications beyond a university degree. Apprenticeships offer far more hands on experience far more quickly, with a salary and without the student debt; this may entice female students who otherwise would have felt uncomfortable committing to a three year course in higher education. We should actively encourage more openness and risk taking from both women and tech companies to make this happen: potential recruits should be taught to be bold enough to apply to tech from all angles, while companies should retain an open mind about what a new recruit could bring to the table and be open to offering extra training to accomplish this. The industry has the option to hire considerable untapped potential; it just needs to take the risk.

A Supportive Working Environment

For those women who do enter tech, many rise to considerable heights and enjoy rewarding careers. However, compared to women entering the sector, there is a considerably low number of women in leadership positions. . This year's Nash Squared Digital Leadership report found that 23% of the tech team is now female, while 28% of new hires in the last two years have been women. (Nash Squared, 2022) However, only 14% of digital leaders are female. With more women entering the profession than ever before, we should work to preserve these numbers throughout their careers. As with all industries, a strong parental leave policy is fundamental to progressing women's careers. Vodafone's 16 weeks of fully paid parental leave is one such example, as it gives any employee whose partner is having a baby, adopts a child or becomes a parent through surrogacy the flexibility to take up to

16 weeks paid leave at any time during the first 18 months. This can set up families with a more equal distribution of domestic labour, rather than setting a precedent in which the women take on the largest burden. The Digital Leadership Report attributes much of the growth to an increase in flexible working due to the pandemic, which has undoubtedly assisted those with caring responsibilities, reducing the need to take time off of work. It is of course, also important to support those returning to the industry after taking time out. These steps are not strictly limited to the tech industry; they are useful across the workforce. However, the gendered statistics behind tech show that here the need is particularly dire.

Women already in the industry can do a great deal to help, both by implementing these changes as well as through mentoring and through simply being visible. Nonetheless, gender equality benefits the whole of society, and so we should not burden only women with advancing it. The good news is that many men in tech are doing their part. The Nash Squared research found that regarding new hires over the past two years, 16% of male tech leaders had hired at least 50% women; by comparison, 14% of female tech leaders said the same. Neither statistic may be ideal, but it is extremely promising to see male leaders providing a similar level of engagement as female leaders.

Women in Tech Today

While the balance may be off, there are currently many women in the tech sector doing important work, including those who work in the world's largest companies, designing life-changing products and deeply significant algorithms. Some are recognising the potential for technology to help women specifically; "Femtech" for example, has given women greater control over their own health through menstrual and fertility tracking. For women in dangerous and abusive situations, the internet provides a potentially life-saving connection to the outside world. The potential of what women can give to tech and what tech can give to women is unlimited, it just needs to be harnessed.



Facing the entrepreneurial gap

During the pandemic, as highlighted by our APPG contributors, many women encountered one of two things: either an excess of spare time, as they were not able to go out and socialise, or a sudden lack of spare time, as schools closed and childcare responsibilities were suddenly left to them. In response to this, while some pushed onwards, others took the opportunity to look around and make something of a situation. They found their passions, and began to look for a way to develop and commercialise them, or many turned away from a rigid corporate structure and instead chose to work on their own terms. They founded businesses. In the year ending September 2021, there were 810,000 UK business incorporations, which formed a rise of 22% compared to the previous year. (Bounds & Romei, 2021) Through the internet, small start-ups were able to market and sell their products, and women were able to see other women succeeding, and follow in their footsteps. This momentum is incredibly important, as it is setting up the business leaders of the future. The UK now faces recession, rising costs and a lower real wage, threatening this rise in female entrepreneurship. Each of these new business represents a potential for growth out of the current economic climate, and should be supported where possible. If the UK wants to consider increasing its productivity and growing out of the slump, it should work to foster the next generation of female business leaders, and to nurture and grow the businesses we now have.

Taking the Leap

The first step into becoming an entrepreneur is often the hardest, requiring confidence and self-belief. It is a huge risk, giving up the set hours and benefits that come from working in a company. One of the most significant risks of leaving an organisation to become self-employed for women is the loss of her pension. The 2019 Women and Retirement report by Scottish Widows found that 35% of self-employed women were saving nothing for their retirement. (Scottish Widows, 2019) As it is, there is an existing gender pension gap that has the average man saving thousands more than the average woman for his retirement, due to less frequent career breaks and a typically higher income. It is therefore a more significant commitment for women to give up the benefits of being an employee to start their own business. Starting a business does not only require women to stop receiving these benefits – it also requires women to sacrifice some of their own assets, which due to the gender pay gap are likely to be lower than men's.

Venture capital is vitally important to help start-ups off the ground, to help them finance their necessary infrastructure and equipment, and to instil entrepreneurs with confidence that their business has potential. According to HM Revenue and Customs, Venture Capital Trusts issued shares worth £668mil in 2020 to 2021. (HM Revenue & Customs, 2022) This support can therefore be a deciding factor in which start-ups find success. Unfortunately, distributors of venture capital are known to be majority men. Harvard Business Review found that in 2020, women-led start-ups received 2.3% of venture capital funding; and about 12% of “decision makers” at venture capital firms were women. (Bittner & Lau, 2021) While increasing numbers of entrepreneurs are female, receiving this leg-up to success relies on appeasing a “boys’ club”. Fair distribution of venture capital is

made harder still by the fact that it is inherently risky; because of this, those distributing it will lean towards the most trusted start-ups, and it is in human nature to trust what is familiar to you. In short, male investors will lean towards male-targeted products. The economic instability from the pandemic and the current recession both risk entrenching this bias, as investors become more risk averse. We need to continue promoting women's businesses, and fostering women's careers so that they can help support others in business.

Business and Opportunity

While it may require extra financial and emotional sacrifice for women to establish their own company, this is not to say that entrepreneurship has to remain male-dominated; in fact, if done correctly, women can have the most to gain. At the APPG session, Business Scaling Consultant & Gender Pay Gap Expert Emma Clayton talked about how a large portion of the growth of female entrepreneurs can be traced to women's unwillingness to put up with corporate regulations. While being expected to balance full time work with caring responsibilities and housework, many women looked for alternative sources of revenue that would be less rigid. They sought to create their own feminist working environment, that would work around their schedules. Full time work has become the accepted industry standard, but it relies on personal support, to prevent burnout from balancing professional and household tasks. Flexible working is often hard to find and can be wrongly used to deny people professional advancement. However, in light of these choices, flexible working is a popular choice for many women. It is also likely to be an important step towards having more women business leaders in the economy, serving as an example to other women and with the opportunities to foster other women's careers, affording them the same flexibility and choice that drove them to establish a company to begin with.



Supporting Women's Businesses

As increasing numbers of women look to start businesses we should work to support and grow these ventures, especially entering a difficult economic period. Building on the need for role models and female business leaders, women also need access to networks of other women in business, to form vital corporate connections, share experience and reinforce their confidence as a woman in a business space. As Alison Cork, Founder of Make It Your Business told our APPG session, this is a tangible, solvable problem: Cork herself established the Make It Your Business network in response to discovering a vacuum in female business support. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this to new businesses: research from 2016 by the Economist Intelligence Unit revealed that 78% of start-ups found that networking was essential for their success. (Barratt, 2019) In a survey by the Female Founders Forum of 59 female entrepreneurs, 80% believed that men had access to better networks. (Howard, 2022) If these social and professional groups continue to be male dominated, this will be fatal to women's companies.

There are some projects which promise to benefit female entrepreneurs. At the APPG session, we talked about the promise of the British Library's network of Business & IP Centres. These exist up and down the country to provide free resources and training to entrepreneurs on starting and developing new businesses. Between January 2016 and December 2018, the centres helped 43,000 people face-to-face, and of those who started new businesses with their support, 55% were women, and 31% were from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. (British Library, 2019) Compared to the business community at large, this is over twice as many women, and over six times the national average of people from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background. These statistics show a hunger from these groups to enter business at a far greater rate than we see happening elsewhere. With services ranging from Ask an Expert to providing relevant research, these libraries already exist to everyone's benefit; if one could be established in every library in the country, it could bring greater knowledge and experience to the entire

country using existing infrastructure, helping women but also helping spread knowledge further, and through that, helping with levelling up. Greater signposting of these services is vital so that people know support is out there for all economic and social groups.

The American Express Ambition Project was launched in 2020, in partnership with our Women's Interest Network (WIN) with a goal of inspiring women colleagues to confidently pursue their ambitions and pay it forward. The program has been hosting regular conversations, networking sessions, and events to bring our colleagues together and raise awareness about the critical role ambition plays in women's professional and personal success.

Confidence is Key

Many of the obstacles that face female entrepreneurs, such as lack of funding, lack of networking and a lack of representation, share a single thread: they are all exacerbated by a lack of confidence. Many women, consciously or unconsciously, are taught that the business landscape does not have space for them and that they do not have the talent to compete with other entrepreneurs. It is tempting to trace the root of this problem to infancy, when small boys are expected to be bold, daring and impulsive, where girls are sweet and docile. These pressures form a blanket of politeness and modesty that many women spend their lives trying to cast aside. And nowhere in adult life does this boldness pay off more than in business. At our APPG session, we discussed how men are more likely to exaggerate and celebrate their accomplishments and potential, where women are socialised to provide an honest commitment of how they expect to perform. In a bid for funding, the male attempt is simply more compelling, even if it is less authentic. Assuming confidence is vital for women outside of self-employment as well, helping them successfully ask for pay rises and promotions. It is their psychological barriers that could be the hardest to overcome, but also the most rewarding. Only once women know their own value will true equality be achievable.



Women and the cost of living

Since 2020, women and families in the UK have been subject to a whirlwind of external political and economic circumstances that have upended normal life and seriously hit finances. The impact of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine has been devastating for many, through skyrocketing mortgage rates, dropping interest in retail and hospitality and increasingly burdened public services. This has the potential to hit women particularly hard. Industries with a higher proportion of women are also more likely to be hit by economic downturn. Women are also more likely to be burdened with childcare costs and due to the gender pay gap, women on average simply have less money to cushion them when times are hard.

In April of this year, the Office of Anneliese Dodds MP shared analysis of data from the Department of Work and Pensions: this showed that from 2010-11 to 2019-20, the number of people living in relative poverty increased by just under 1.5 million: women made up 890,000 of these people, or around 60%. (Oppenheim, 2022) As current circumstances threaten to plunge more into poverty, we need to consider how to tailor the help we provide to women's situations, for the benefit of their families, their children, but most of all themselves.

Energy Costs

As Russia cuts off gas supplies to Europe, and energy becomes a treasured commodity to be fought over, the government has provided some much needed support to households. The Energy Price Guarantee (EPG), through capping household energy charges, will save the typical energy bill payer £630 between January and March 2023. (Resolution Foundation, 2022) While expensive for the economy, without this support the average annual energy bill of a typical household would have reached £4279. (Resolution Foundation, 2022) This will be difficult for the entire country, especially for those in poorly insulated houses, or with increased energy needs, for example due to medical equipment. People with disabilities and chronic health conditions in particular need greater help. Research from the Office for National Statistics suggests that from 2019 to 2020, 22.3% of women reported being limited ("but not severely") by a health problem in the past six months, compared to 18.5% of men. (Office for National Statistics, 2022) This research also found that 23.1% of women provided informal care or assistance, compared with 17.4% of men. (Office for National Statistics, 2022) As these factors may make people less mobile and less likely to pursue full time work, they are more reliant on their home's heating and more vulnerable to the cold.

Another factor that women disproportionately face is extra costs from children and domestic labour, particularly for single mothers. The Living Wage Foundation's Life on Low Pay polling suggested that 42% of low paid women had fallen behind on household bills, compared with 35% of low paid men: one reason that the foundation suggested for this, was that there are "gendered expectations such as disproportionate responsibility for household shopping". (Living Wage Foundation,



2022) Therefore, when inflation drives up the costs of everyday household goods, women feel this more acutely. There are then the added costs of having children. At our session, Project Development Manager at National Energy Action (NEA) Jess Cook highlighted the fact that, according to research by the NEA, 39% of low-income parents may in future need to use a friend or family member's washing machine for their children's school uniforms due to the rising cost of water and energy. (National Energy Action, 2022) The research also showed that 50% of low-income parents were considering handwashing their children's school uniforms to save on costs; this increased physical labour as well as psychological pressure is disproportionately weighing on women, and further reducing their leisure time, as well as potentially their working hours. Solutions to this are varied, and current government schemes to reduce energy bills are welcome, particularly those targeting lower income households. Universal Credit will be a lifeline for households in the coming months, and any extra support through this would be welcome.

Vulnerable Industries

Another reason for women's increased exposure to economic turmoil is the industries that they work in: these industries are often either exposed to market changes and inflation (such as hospitality) or are chronically undervalued and underpaid (such as care work). Analysis of the ONS' Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings by the Living Wage Foundation this year found that 20.4% of women in work are paid below the real Living Wage, compared to 14% of men. (Living Wage Foundation, 2022) One of the reasons for this, it suggests, is that across sectors including "care work, the arts entertainment and recreation, as well as accommodation and food services, low paid roles are predominantly done by women". (Living Wage Foundation, 2022) As consumers cut back their spending in response to the threat of recession, this will unfortunately impact an already struggling high street, and therefore will impact women more. The demand for care work will not decrease – if anything, the rise in conditions such as long covid and the NHS backlog will increase need for care workers. Care work and unpaid carers provide services involving considerable manual labour, often an emotional toll and with huge value to society. And yet, according to the Office for National Statistics from 2021, care workers earn around £18,084 a year, subject to regional variation. (Indeed Editorial Team, 2021) The treatment of workers such as care workers suggests a larger issue at play: the systemic devaluation of typically feminine work. Because this is labour traditionally done by women for free, as a social expectation at the expense of women's free will, there seems to be a reluctance to pay women adequately for it. Carers now face a potentially cold and hungry winter considering the cost of living.

Restructuring Work

According to government statistics, of working age people in employment in 2021, 77% worked full time and 23% worked part time; men were more likely than women to do full time work in every ethnic group. (Ethnicity Facts and Figures Service, 2022) As women tend to bear the brunt of arranging childcare, especially for single mothers, part time work enables them to reduce childcare costs and have more flexibility organising their families. As the cost-of-living crisis encroaches however, this is likely to affect the number of people working part time, and their reasons for doing so. At our APPG session, Professor Clare Kelliher and Doctor Charlotte Gascoigne discussed these changes and the benefits of flexible working.

For some, part time work will not bring in enough revenue to support themselves and their families, and they will likely move over to full time work. For those without any current employment, they may look for part time work to contribute to the household income; others may seek it out on top of their current employment. For all of these groups, it could provide a lifeline for them at this difficult time. And yet, while there is an abundance of demand for part time work, there is not yet enough provision of it, and it is currently more common in vulnerable industries such as hospitality. We need more availability of flexible work at higher skills levels, and with opportunities for career progression outside of full time work. It can be used to serve employers, allowing them to hire employees to fill shortages and meet workers' requests without committing to the cost of a full time worker. It can also enable new parents to continue working while meeting childcare responsibilities, rather than leaving altogether and forcing the employer to fill their gap entirely. In fact, while full time work is the current norm, this may require a more significant shift in future if we are to achieve equality; full time work, especially with children involved, requires the full support of another to make it sustainable. Providing the option for workers to reduce their hours can ensure that their partners don't have to sacrifice their careers to maintain the home.

Many private sector companies that have embraced virtual and flexible work have found it to be well received by workers. In March 2022, American Express introduced its Amex Flex programme to provide employees with the choice of working in the office, virtually, or a hybrid of the two, depending on role and business needs. The programme has proven immensely popular: in August 2022, 90% of surveyed colleagues at the firm reported that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with Amex Flex. (American Express, 2022) The company stresses how the programme enabled a better balance of employees' personal and professional lives, and has since included how parents working at the firm have been able to spend more time with their children while continuing to pursue their career ambitions. (American Express, 2022)

Women as a Priority

It is tempting in times of economic strife for governments to reprioritise, and when this happens, women's needs and priorities may fall in urgency.

Research from ReWage (Rewage, University of Warwick, 2022) also suggests that a more timely uprating of benefits could be beneficial in supporting women through this crisis. They note how, by default, benefits are uprated each April in line with inflation levels from the previous September – leading to a substantial fall in value in real terms, therefore leaving more people in harsher economic situations. Their research suggests that the Government should aim in future to implement changes to benefits in April based on the inflation rate in January of the same to reduce the effects of the time lag causing considerable hardship at times of economic disruption.

Childcare providers come under increased pressure to care for more children, real wages for female dominated industries drop and interest may wane in schemes to improve equality in the workplace. This absolutely should be prevented from happening, for a multitude of reasons. For a start, female workplace participation is vital to the growth that will change the tide of economic misfortune. Restricting women's opportunities to pursue their career success restricts their companies and the country at large; women's education, training and potential cannot be allowed to go to waste. Secondly, it will in turn impact their families, and could reduce the quality of living for their children. Financially independent, fulfilled mothers have the power and control to pursue healthier marriages and to support their children. Thirdly, following the work that women have done in work and outside of it during the pandemic, considering the sacrifices made by disproportionately female nurses and retail workers and the extra workload taken on by mothers who were suddenly required to home-school their children, it is right that we recognise the role women have played over the difficult past three years. If we are now able to predict that those same women will be more vulnerable over the coming months, we have a social obligation to offer support.



Thank you

We would like to thank all parliamentarians and speakers who have contributed and attended our sessions though the year. Your support and participation has enabled us to deliver an especially rich programme this year.

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