

# Career or care

## Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland



## Carer Poverty Commission NI

The Carer Poverty Commission NI was established to better understand the causes of poverty among Northern Ireland's unpaid carer population and to deliver the fresh thinking needed to address it. The Commission is led by Carers NI and has two key goals:

- To examine the scale and drivers of poverty amongst unpaid carers in Northern Ireland; and
- To design new policy recommendations for the Stormont Assembly and Executive to help tackle that poverty wherever it exists.

For more information visit: [carersuk.org/CarerPovertyNI](http://carersuk.org/CarerPovertyNI)

The work of the Carer Poverty Commission NI is funded by the Carers Support Fund, delivered by the Community Foundation NI, and supported by the Department of Health.

## Carers NI

Carers NI is Northern Ireland's membership body for unpaid carers. We're here to listen, to give carers expert information and tailored advice. We champion the rights of Northern Ireland's 220,000 carers and support them in finding new ways to manage at home, at work or in their community. We're here to make life better for carers.

## Women's Regional Consortium

The Women's Regional Consortium was formed in 2013 after a need was identified for greater support for women in disadvantaged and rural areas. The Consortium is made up of seven women's sector organisations: Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN), Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Training for Women Network (TWN), Women's Support Network (WSN), NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN), WOMEN'STEC and The Women's Centre, Derry. Together these organisations work in partnership with government, the statutory sector and local women's organisations, centres and groups to ensure that women in disadvantaged and rural areas are receiving the support they need and having their views heard.

For more information on the Consortium's research visit: [womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/Research](http://womensregionalconsortiumni.org.uk/Research)

### Acknowledgments

We are indebted to all the unpaid carers who shared their experiences with us for this research.

We would also like to thank Action for Children, individual carers groups and the network of Women's Centres across Northern Ireland who helped arrange some of the focus groups that this report is based on.

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# Foreword

**Sinéad McLaughlin MLA**

SDLP Spokesperson for Jobs and the Economy



“ I am pleased to contribute to this report, which I believe shines a light on one of the biggest scandals of our time. Namely, the indefensible lack of support provided to unpaid carers, most of whom are women, and the intolerable impacts on their lives and careers.

“As this report demonstrates, each and every day, tens of thousands of women across Northern Ireland undertake an exhausting juggling act balancing the already heavy duties of work and family with the additional responsibilities of caring for their loved ones. They provide vital services to family members and prop up a health service that would simply not be able to cope without them. Yet far too many go unseen and unsupported.

“Indeed, the failure of government on this issue drives thousands of people out of the labour market every year, forcing mostly women to cut back on hours or leave employment altogether, holding them back from fulfilling their economic potential and acting as a handbrake on our economy. It is unconscionable that the constant hurdles faced by women attempting to navigate the social security system pushes many into poverty. These are challenges which impact women from our poorest communities worst of all, trapping them in low wage economies and stymying attempts to close the gender pay gap once and for all.

“We cannot let this status quo continue and it is clear that a complete step change is required for unpaid carers. Our society and our community must start valuing their role in our society.

“Not through sympathetic rhetoric or empty platitudes, but with real tangible support that breaks down all the barriers unpaid carers face and gives them the financial support and employment opportunities they need.

“For me, that must mean overhauling the current provision for carers, embedding a new approach in our economy that includes flexible working and introducing comprehensive legislation that puts the rights of carers onto the statute books, where they belong. Carers deserve nothing less than fully reliable, accessible and affordable support that empowers all those who want to work to choose to do so.

“These are just a few of the changes that are long overdue and this report makes a comprehensive and ambitious case for the transformation that is required. Fortunately, now that an Assembly is back up and running, it is within our power to reform these issues once and for all and create an economy that works for everyone. The levers are at our disposal and this report provides a roadmap for change. We should now get on with delivering it.”

**Sinéad McLaughlin MLA**

SDLP Spokesperson for Jobs and the Economy

# Key findings

## Within Northern Ireland:

- Nearly 60% of unpaid carers are women<sup>1</sup>
- More than 1 in 6 women in employment are providing unpaid care (approximately 71,000 women)<sup>2</sup>
- Women have a 70% chance of providing care in their adult life and are more likely to care early in their life.<sup>3</sup>

## Our research<sup>4</sup> found:

- 1 in 3 (34%) women with unpaid caring roles have given up employment to care
- 1 in 4 (28%) women with unpaid caring roles have decreased their working hours because of caring
- 1 in 6 (17%) women with unpaid caring roles have taken on a less qualified job or turned down promotion to fit around their caring responsibilities
- Women “juggle” their caring role and employment often at the detriment of their own career, finances and health and wellbeing
- The financial impact of stopping or reducing employment to provide care is felt by women not only whilst providing the care but also throughout their life course
- Carer’s Allowance in terms of monetary value and the low earnings threshold is inadequate to support women to balance caring and employment
- Support for carers in employment is often a lottery, dependent on individual employers and line managers
- Inadequacies in wider support services, including social services, healthcare, education and childcare, are stopping women with unpaid caring roles from staying in employment altogether or limiting the amount of work they can do
- For some women employment can be positive in terms of mental health and wellbeing and gives them a break from their caring role
- Women with unpaid caring roles believe that reliable, accessible, affordable support services, a range of flexible working options, carer’s leave, and a change to the eligibility criteria for Carer’s Allowance would help balance employment and unpaid caring
- A lack of support for carers in the workplace results in a loss of valuable and skilled individuals to the labour market.



# 60%

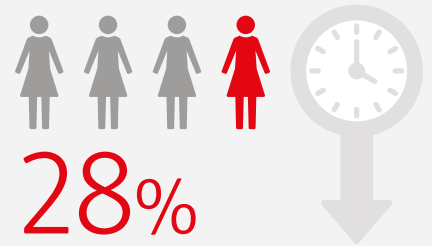
of unpaid carers are women



# 34%

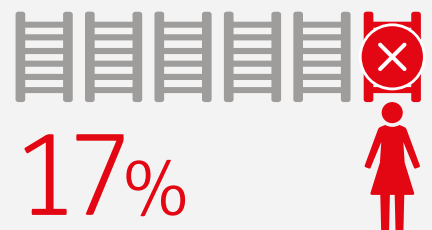
LETTER OF RESIGNATION

of women with unpaid caring roles have given up employment to care



# 28%

of women with unpaid caring roles have decreased their working hours because of caring



# 17%

of women with unpaid caring roles have taken on a less qualified job or turned down promotion to fit around their caring responsibilities

<sup>1</sup> Census 2021. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2021-census/results>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Will I Care? (2019). Carers UK. <https://www.carersuk.org/media/warllcph/carersrightsdaynov19final-2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> All findings from State of Caring 2023, Carers NI and the focus groups conducted with women with unpaid caring roles.



# Introduction

There are over 220,000 people providing unpaid care for sick or disabled family members in Northern Ireland, representing 1 in 8 of the population. This includes over 180,000 unpaid carers of working age.<sup>5</sup>



## What do we know about women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland?

Unpaid carers are a diverse population, encompassing child and young adult carers through to carers of pension age – and support people with health conditions like cancer, stroke, progressive neurological conditions and visual impairment; mental ill-health; learning disabilities; terminal illnesses, and more. For some, their caring role will be life long, for others it will be a sudden, perhaps unexpected, role change. The intensity of care provided also varies; for some it can be a few hours per week, others are caring around the clock.

Unpaid caring has a gendered dimension, with women making up 59% of all carers in Northern Ireland and those carers of working age.<sup>6</sup>

Table 1: The age of women providing unpaid care

Age (years)	Number of women providing unpaid care
0–15	1,799
16–65	109,633
66+	18,596

Source: Census 2021, NISRA

<sup>5</sup> Census 2021. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2021-census/results>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Women have a 70% chance of providing unpaid care in their adult life and are more likely to care early in their life, with many becoming carers whilst still at working age. By the time they are aged 46, half of women have been an unpaid carer; men have the same 50/50 chance by age 57, 11 years later.<sup>7</sup>

Evidence has shown that unpaid caring limits women’s access to incomes and their ability to participate in public life.<sup>8</sup>

1 in 6 women who are in employment in Northern Ireland have a caring role. This equates to over 71,000 women.

Just over half (52%) work full time compared to 56% of women without a caring role, with 48% working part time (30 hours or less per week) compared to 44% of women without a caring role.

Significantly, many of these women provide a large number of hours caring per week alongside their employment. Unsurprisingly, as caring intensity increases women are less likely to be in employment.<sup>9</sup> There is also evidence to suggest that it is women who are more likely to leave the labour market due to caring responsibilities.<sup>10</sup>

Women have a right to access the same social protections as men in cases of retirement, unemployment, sickness, invalidity and old age and other incapacity to work. These rights cannot be fully met, however, while women continue to carry out the bulk of unpaid caring unsupported.<sup>11</sup>



Women have a **70%** chance of providing unpaid care as an adult and are more likely to care whilst still at working age



Table 2: Employment by care intensity in women (16 years +) providing unpaid care\*

No. hours spent caring per week	Number of women who are in some form of employment	% of women in each care intensity band who are in some form of employment
1-19	41,671	72%
20-34	9,014	61%
35-49	7,503	50%
50+	13,016	32%

Source: Census 2021, NISRA | \* Women classified as economically active – in employment in the 2021 census

7 Will I Care? (2019). Carers UK. <https://www.carersuk.org/media/warllcph/carersrightsdaynov19final-2.pdf>

8 Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report (2020). <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

9 Census 2021. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2021-census/results>

10 Lost Connections: supporting carers in the workplace. Vodafone (2021) <https://newscentre.vodafone.co.uk/app/uploads/2021/03/Lost-Connections-2021.pdf>

11 The convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Article 11. United Nations General Assembly. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/convention-on-the-elimination-of-all-forms-of-discrimination-against-women-cedaw-articles>

# 240

people take on  
an unpaid caring  
role every week in  
Northern Ireland



The inability to take up or maintain employment can have significant effects on a carer's life course. For example, research undertaken by the Carer Poverty Commission NI identified the difficulty in combining paid employment with unpaid care as one of the main drivers of carer poverty in Northern Ireland, with more than half of unpaid carers who are out of work living in poverty.<sup>12</sup> Overwhelmingly the unpaid carers who took part in the research were keen to remain in work for financial security and the dignity it provided, however, to have time for their caring role many had had to make substantial changes to their working patterns.

Employment can provide carers with a sense of purpose. It can contribute to a life outside of the caring role, provide benefits in relation to mental health and can be an important source of social connections.

240 people take on unpaid caring roles every week on average in Northern Ireland.<sup>13</sup> Many of these will be women, and many will find themselves forced to try to combine that caring role with paid employment. We need to see major changes from government, employers and Health and Social Care services to make this easier and to support women to enter and remain in the labour market alongside their caring role if they wish to do so.

## Methodology

To explore these trends in more detail we analysed data on employment gathered from Carers NI's 2023 State of Caring survey. This was carried out online between June and August 2023. A total of 1,024 unpaid carers (546 women) responded to the survey in Northern Ireland. The demographics of these women are shown in Appendix 1.

We also conducted qualitative research with women with unpaid caring roles across Northern Ireland to hear directly about their experiences of combining paid employment with unpaid caring. They told us about the impact this has on their lives and the solutions they want to see from government, employers and beyond.

The experiences of women with unpaid caring roles were gathered through nine focus groups and a small number of semi structured interviews between October 2023 and January 2024. In total, 50 women took part in our qualitative research. Further details of the focus groups are included in Appendix 1.

## Limitations

Like any similar project, this research has its limitations. Northern Ireland's unpaid carer population is very diverse, and it was not possible to engage with every carer group to the extent we would have wished. Reaching women carers from ethnic and other minority groups was difficult, and further research is required to better understand the specific challenges this group may face in terms of unpaid caring and employment.

<sup>12</sup> Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland (2023). Carer Poverty Commission NI.

<sup>13</sup> <https://centreforcure.ac.uk/updates/2022/11/new-report-carers-rights-day-2022/>



# Women’s experiences of unpaid caring and employment

Our State of Caring survey highlighted the significant impact unpaid caring has on women’s experience of employment or capacity to work.

1 in 3 (34%) women with unpaid caring roles had given up employment completely to provide care.

Over 1 in 4 (28%) had decreased their working hours due to a caring role.



Those women caring for a greater number of hours per week were more likely to have given up employment to care, with 44% of women who provided care for over 50 hours per week ending their employment to care.

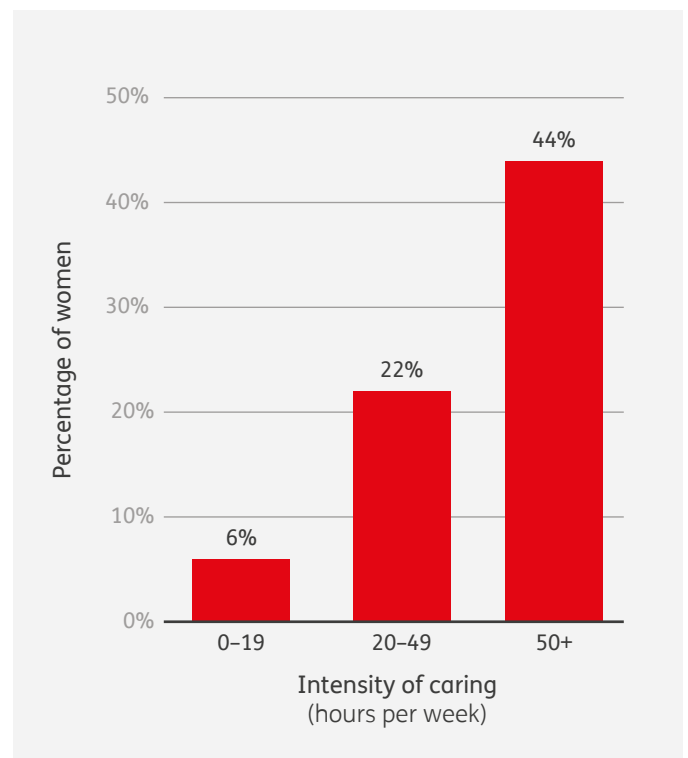
It was clear from our focus group discussions that many women providing unpaid care want to be employed, to be supported by both their employers and government to work and to remain in work alongside caring. They also felt they could continue to make an important contribution to the economy and be a valuable resource in terms of skills and experience to the workplace but, in many cases, were unable to do so due to caring-related barriers to employment.

“ I always wanted to be part of something more, to have a paid job, contribute to society, feel independent but unfortunately that was never on the cards for me as I was needed... My sister’s disability is significant and requires full time care.”

“ I want to work and if the support is good then I can.”

“ We’ve an awful lot to give. We have skills and experience and we’re sitting here basically unused.”

Chart 1: Percentage of women with unpaid caring roles who had given up work to care by intensity of care



Source: State of Caring survey 2023, Carers NI

For others the intensity and unpredictability of their caring role makes employment very challenging and, in some cases, simply impossible. It is often the case that women just have to “drop everything” to respond to the needs of those they care for or to deal with emergencies.

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

“I would like to be working. It’s just having enough hours in the day, it’s 24 hours a day. My daughter requires 24/7 care, she’s up during the night. She’s blind, autistic, non-verbal and has cerebral palsy. It’s never knowing when the needs are going to be. One day she’s OK then the next day she’s unwell. It’s just hard work at times.”

“At the minute work would add more stress to my life. With my son it’s so unpredictable. Some mornings he’ll come down and say ‘I’m not going to school’ and he won’t get dressed. I eventually get him in the car then he won’t get out of the car at school. I was working in [name of workplace] 18 months ago but before I even dropped him off and got into school I was completely stressed out because it took me half an hour and the principal of his school to get him into school in the mornings.”

“My mum got taken into hospital on Tuesday and still hadn’t got a bed on Wednesday, so I still had to sit with her. The guys that I work with were ringing me in the hospital saying ‘where’s my wages?’ I’d been in the hospital for 27 hours with no sleep then I had to go home and start sorting the wages to pay people because obviously they’re depending on their money.”

It was often the case that women who were new to caring did not know what to do in terms of accessing support or understanding their employment rights. Some described feeling like they were “in the wilderness”. For others it took time for them to recognise that they were an unpaid carer and to try and access the information and support they needed.

“I don’t know all the answers. When your child has a condition and you’re not given the right information and support it makes your caring job 100 times worse and that could mean someone having to come out of work.”

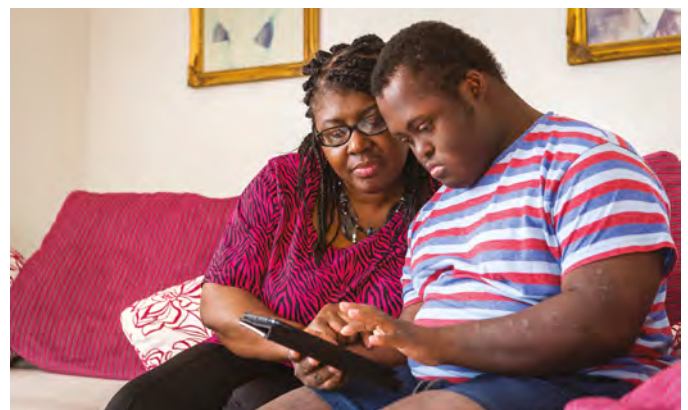
What was abundantly clear is that inadequacies in wider support services – including social services, healthcare, education and childcare – have significant implications for many women providing unpaid care, stopping them from working altogether or limiting the amount of work they can do.

1 in 4 (25%) women in our State of Caring survey indicated their reason for giving up employment or reducing their hours was not being able to find suitable replacement care; 19% highlighted not being able to afford care services to provide replacement care and over 1 in 5 (22%) listed a lack of support from HSC services as a reason for stopping paid work or reducing their hours of employment.

“We tried summer groups and were able to participate for a week and a half before my son was asked to leave because of his challenging behaviour. I was relying on that to go to work. We had a childminder one year and he lasted two days and she told me not to bring him back. I was going in at 7am and coming out at 2pm or 3pm and then my husband was going into work and working to 10pm just so the two of us could meet our commitments in work. Yes we had understanding bosses but honestly I don’t know how we got through that summer. It was an absolute nightmare, we were exhausted.”

25% 

of women with unpaid caring roles indicated their reason for giving up employment or reducing their hours was not being able to find suitable replacement care





58%



of women with unpaid caring roles had given up employment or reduced their working hours due to the stress of juggling work and care

52%



of women with unpaid caring roles described feeling too tired to juggle employment and care as a reason for stopping or reducing work

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

This may be a particular problem for families dealing with the transition of a disabled child into adult services.

“My son is in school until he is 19 and when that transition takes place, he won't have that Monday to Friday, 9am to 3pm care, so who is going to look after him then? Am I going to have to reduce my hours even more? We know it is on us to make the changes. There is no support out there.”

It was equally clear that having the right support in place can make a positive difference to women's experience in combining caring and employment.

“The difference in the pastoral care in my daughter's school has meant I would maybe need to deal with an issue once every two months instead of nearly every day. They have a better grasp of how to deal with her needs. Same with my other daughter at University, she has structures in place there to help with her mental health needs. This has really helped me in my caring role. The children now feel supported in their education environments and that lifts the

caring role off me during the day so that I can work. These support structures took a while to bed in and I had to go and meet people and fight for it. Previous schools were poor at this. Once they were put in place I didn't know myself.”

Over half (58%) of women with unpaid caring roles in our State of Caring survey had given up employment or reduced their working hours due to the stress of juggling work and unpaid care. 52% of women described feeling too tired to juggle employment and care as a reason for stopping or reducing work.

The word “juggling” was also frequently used by women within our focus groups when discussing their experiences of working in a paid role and providing unpaid care. This feeling intensified when care was being provided for more than one person.

“Your heads always sort of split, you're pre-empting what's coming, you're worried about what's coming next plus you're trying to focus on your job. You're kind of going 'how am I giving this my all if my head is everywhere else at the same time.' It's constantly trying to juggle things and it's exhausting to be honest.”

“I just found when you're looking after kids and looking after a parent – with both that really fried my head. That was above and beyond. It was exhausting.”



Women who were in employment and trying to juggle unpaid care described workplace support for their caring role as a lottery – dependent on being “lucky enough” to have a good line manager or employer.

“Carers support in our workplace is terrific but it can depend on your manager. I’ve a great manager, if I pick up the phone it’s ‘do what you need to do’ but I do know other managers view giving carers leave as if it’s coming out of their own pocket.”

“Everything was so difficult. Everything was at your line manager’s discretion. My manager did not support me opting out of rotas and it was really stressful.”

In some cases, even where good support was present from the line manager/employer, the pressure from the caring role can make employment impossible or extremely difficult to manage. Some women, especially those working for small employers or in small teams, expressed feelings of guilt about how their caring responsibilities – including alterations in work patterns or unexpected leave – affected their work colleagues/employers.

“Sometimes even though your employer is accommodating, your responsibilities in caring mean you are between a rock and a hard place. You know your employer is trying to be kind and wants you to come back but you know what you have at home and the two are never going to connect in any way that is not going to leave you torn in pieces not able to do anything properly.”

“My manager understands but still I’m struggling and very stressed at work. They’re really short staffed and under pressure [at work]. It’s very difficult to be off. I’m getting lots of phone calls from my daughter and if I don’t answer my mobile she phones [place of work].”

“I worked in [work sector] and I found them very supportive. My mum has dementia and I was able to do a lot of [work] from home during Covid and that worked well. They wanted to keep me on but it was just very difficult to organise. I love my job but I worked every hour God sends. I’d get mum to bed then I would [work] half the night... I’d be up to 2 or 3 every morning. Eventually I decided to apply for ill-health retirement.”

Disclosing that you are an unpaid carer in a job application, interview or subsequently in work can be difficult for women. Many were afraid to disclose their caring responsibilities for fear of it jeopardising their prospects or leading to detrimental treatment.

“I know there’s a lot of staff really struggling and don’t want to admit to caring impacting on their job because they’re afraid of being overlooked, not being involved in things, being seen as not pulling their weight or losing their jobs.”

“There are so many carers out there in organisations that just grin and bear it and get on with it. I went to a job interview recently and care came into the conversation and I just kept my mouth shut about my caring responsibilities because I thought if I say anything I won’t get the job.”

“There’s always going to be someone right behind you who doesn’t have any caring responsibilities. It’s always at the back of your mind in application forms and interviews... It shouldn’t be a lottery, you should be able to be open and honest about it.”





Some of the women were disappointed that even after having worked for an employer for a considerable length of time there was little or no support provided to them with their caring role to help them in employment. This had implications for their health and wellbeing and resulted in many leaving employment. 1 in 6 (16%) women with unpaid caring roles in our State of Caring survey had given up employment or reduced their hours due to a lack of support from their employer and many of the women we spoke to in the focus groups felt there was a lack of recognition of caring roles from employers and managers. While flexibilities are provided for other groups of employees this is often not the case for those with unpaid caring roles, leaving carers feeling invisible.

*“I ended up having to take redundancy because they wouldn’t accommodate my caring needs along with work. I initially asked if I could reduce my hours from 32 hours/week to two and a half days and they said no. Then I asked for hybrid working and they said no to that. Then I asked for a career break and they said no to that too. In the end the redundancy package came up and I had no choice but to take it.”*

*“I think there should be more mental health support for carers. If I had got mental health support when I needed it, I might not be in the position I am now where I can’t work at all. If I had had that support, I might not have had to leave.”*

*“A caring role is often disregarded [in workplaces]. People are happy to provide flexibility for parents but this is often not the case for carers. Those with children are always prioritised for leave as there is an assumption that adults, even those with disabilities are able to look after themselves but children, even teenagers, are not.”*

16% 

of women with unpaid caring roles had given up employment or reduced their hours due to a lack of support from their employer

# The impact of unpaid caring on employment for women

Our State of Caring survey and focus group discussions identified clear and lasting impacts on women arising from their caring roles. These personal, economic and health-related impacts were significant, often limiting women's lives, opportunities, finances and wellbeing.

## Identity

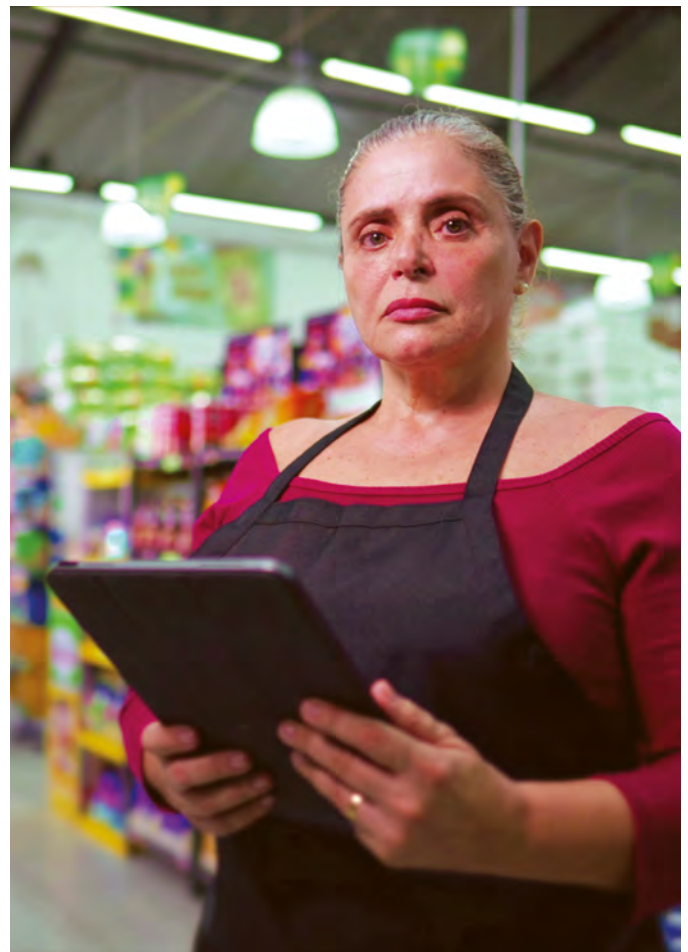
Employment can be an important part of many women's identity. It can give a sense of meaning and purpose and provide an important place for making social connections.

Women told us how important this is in dealing with the isolation that often comes with an unpaid caring role and how they valued the ability to "switch off" from their caring role while at work. 3 in 10 women with unpaid caring roles told our State of Caring survey that employment gave them a break from caring. The loss of identity, dignity and social connections was keenly felt by those women who were no longer able to work due to their caring responsibilities.

*“I like the fact that work keeps me physically and mentally well and gives me a sense of purpose. I have good companions and friends through work. I wouldn't like to be out of work – I need to have a reason to get up in the morning and I want to be able to make a difference somewhere.”*

*“When I came out of work I felt useless. When you're working you feel like you're contributing. I feel like I don't do anything so what's the point of me? I just feel worthless, useless.”*

*“I just feel very demoralised about work. When you meet people for the first time they ask what you do? I don't do anything. I stay at home and I'm basically a PA for my children. You don't want to say that but it's a fact – it's not how you want to identify but it's what you are. Years ago I used to follow up with, 'but you know I have a degree and I have all this experience and I had a really good job' but I've stopped saying this now. I don't say it anymore. You lose the confidence.”*



3in10



women with unpaid caring roles felt that employment gave them a break from caring

## Career prospects and opportunities

Our research clearly showed that responsibility for providing unpaid care has a significant impact on women's employment prospects and career progression with 1 in 6 (17%) of the women in our State of Caring survey having taken on a less qualified position or turned down a promotion because of caring.

Discussion within the focus groups also reflected this. For some women providing care meant that they were unable to stay in employment unless work was on a part-time basis or they had flexibility within their workplace, for example, the ability to work from home or variable hours. It was evident that some of the women felt trapped in jobs they were over-qualified for or felt unable to apply for more fulfilling jobs, full-time employment or promotions because they feared they would be unable to find the flexibility they needed to combine work and care. This concept of the 'sticky floor'<sup>14</sup> meant that women often became stuck in the lower ranks of jobs and could not progress.

For young adult carers the loss of career opportunities can be very significant as the disadvantage can start from the beginning of their working lives. Young women often don't recognise the opportunities they have missed until much later in life as caring is the "norm" for them.

*“I have a first class honours degree and 20 years of experience in work, but after we had our son and found that he had all these additional needs there was no such thing as a career after that.”*

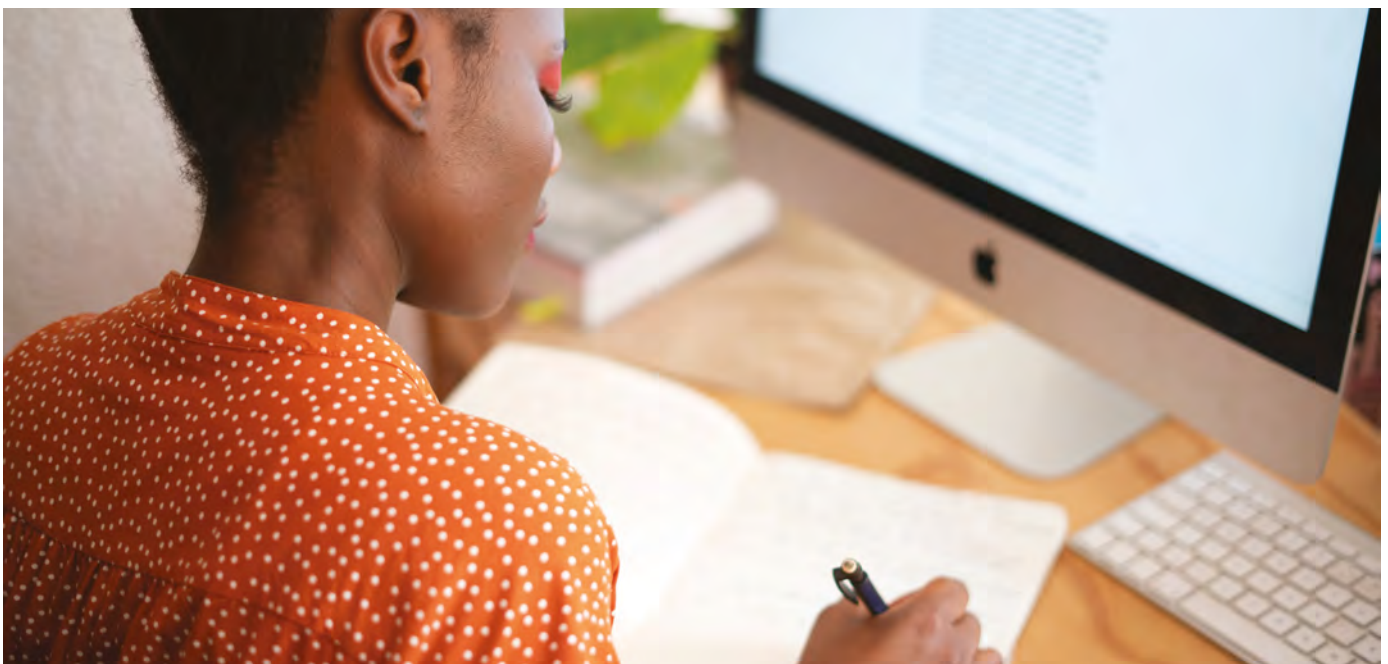
*“What I find limiting is being able to move jobs, being able to apply for promotions, things like that. I'm too afraid to leave the set up I have now in case it wouldn't be as flexible, wouldn't be as understanding that my number one priority is my mum.”*

*“If you're lucky to get a part-time job in the public sector that's where you're stuck. You're never going to go anywhere else, you're not going to go through the grades. You're stuck there with whatever scraps they're willing to give you basically.”*

*“I found as a [young adult] carer I'm limited on the hours and shifts I can do. For me personally, I could only work four hour shifts and daytime hours. Not a lot of places offer this or want people who are fully flexible.”*

Other women were worried about their future and if they would ever be able to return to employment, because while they were out of the labour market due to caring, they were losing skills and unable to keep up with professional accreditation.

*“I wouldn't be fit to return to work, because I haven't been able to maintain anything [eg skills, qualification] while I've been out of work.”*



<sup>14</sup> The 'sticky floor' often refers to the challenges and barriers that keep certain groups, including women, from progressing in their careers, moving up pay scales etc.



## Finances

Providing unpaid care can bring with it significant financial strain with more than 1 in 4 (28%) local carers living in poverty.<sup>15</sup> Being unable to work due to caring responsibilities leaves women without the income they need to get by, and even those women who are able to stay in some form of employment whilst caring may face limitations on their hours of work or level of work meaning their income is reduced.

21% of women in our State of Caring survey indicated that their income had dropped by £200-£499 per month due to giving up employment or reducing their hours to care; 31% had dropped £500-£999 per month; 20% by £1,000-£1,499 per month and 22% by over £1,500 per month.

These financial impacts can leave women living in a cycle of poverty from which they find it difficult or impossible to escape – a cycle only compounded by the recent cost-of-living crisis.

“I couldn’t leave work completely – Where would we get the money from? We still had bills to pay. So, I took the alternative of part-time working to try and find the balance. I lost out on £700 wages when I went part-time and you notice the loss of that extra wage. The money did worry me.”



# 21%

of women with unpaid caring roles said their income had dropped by £200-£499 per month due to giving up employment or reducing their hours to care



# 27%



of women with unpaid caring roles were worried they will end up in debt due to their caring role

“I don’t see myself being able to work full-time as a result of my caring responsibilities. It does leave things tight, if I was working full-time it would be easier especially in this current climate with the cost of living crisis.”

Young adult carers can be impacted from the beginning of their career. Money can be tight in families who have a caring responsibility and young carers can feel guilty asking for financial support for educational courses or other activities which would enhance CVs or skills. This alongside caring responsibilities can limit employment opportunities resulting in low paid jobs or zero hour contracts.

The financial impact of stopping or reducing employment to provide unpaid care is felt by women not only whilst providing care but also throughout their life course. 16% of women in our State of Caring survey had changed their retirement plans due to their caring role. These women with unpaid caring roles indicated they are saving less for retirement due to decreasing their working hours to care (30%) and due to the cost of care (17%).

4 in 10 (41%) women with unpaid caring roles felt they may need to retire later than planned due to their caring role with over 1 in 4 (27%) worried they will end up in debt.

“I’m not old now but I’ve been in and out of work for the last ten years because of my caring responsibilities. By the time I get to retirement age I’m not going to have a bloody penny. I’m going to be a wee old person that has worked all her life and have no money. There’s no pension.”

“My pension when it arrives is going to be so much reduced. When I started looking after my mother I had to reduce my hours down to 16 hours a week, my head was so fried I just couldn’t deal with everything. When I’m 67 I’ll get £100 a week! There’s no validation for taking the time out, as soon as you take time out/reduce your hours you’re going to be living in poverty as a pensioner.”

15 Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland (2023). Carer Poverty Commission NI. <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/policy-measures-to-tackle-poverty-among-unpaid-carers-in-northern-ireland/>



## Health and wellbeing

Providing unpaid care can be an exhausting and overwhelming role. Whilst being employed can have a positive impact on some carers' mental health, for others it can also add to the stress and exhaustion they experience trying to juggle their caring responsibilities with the demands of a job.

More than 1 in 4 (27%) women in our State of Caring survey felt anxious about caring while they were working and over 1 in 3 (36%) described feeling tired at work due to their caring role.

Some of the women in the focus groups discussed continually feeling under pressure trying to balance their caring role and working life – constantly rushing between one responsibility and another meaning there was little time for anything else, including their own health and wellbeing.

“It's the energy levels, I feel like I'm in a state of exhaustion all the time. Juggling appointments, endless appointments, arranging transport and all the other bits and pieces around work.”

“You just have no time for yourself. My stress levels at times would be quite high and I find it hard to sleep at night when I'm stressed – worrying about the next day, your work, worrying about everything. Stress does come out on you physically and mentally. You're the last on the list – You worry about everyone else and what they need first and unfortunately, you're the last one to get any help and support.”

“Even though you're working you're still caring. You still have to be at the end of the phone, you have to be able to get to them if something goes wrong. Tablets, appointments, chemist visits you have to do them all. You're still caring when you're working even if they're in day care, you don't switch off.”



# 27%

of women with unpaid caring roles felt anxious about caring while working



Some women were really worried about their own health and what would happen to those they care for if they became ill. Some also reported that the stress and anxiety that came with providing care and working had impacted negatively on their relationship with their partner.

“I'm terrified of being sick, I find my anxiety gets even worse if a bug comes into the house or someone has a cold. I'm terrified because I think I can deal with all of them getting it but I'm terrified of being really sick (myself) or long term sick. What happens to them that are relying on me then?”

“I was juggling children at home and my mother who lived 50 miles away. I had to make major compromises. I went part-time and then when Covid came there was nothing I could do but give up work and I went and lived with my mum. I made major compromises on my time with my children and husband and that eventually led to my marriage breaking down.”

Some women discussed having to use their annual leave for their care responsibilities. This left them little or no leave for their own needs or taking a break.

“I take term time to look after my son over the summer. Between myself and my husband we use our annual leave to cover the rest of the holidays and everything else... I am left with minimal annual leave for myself, for my own work-life balance at the end of that. It's so difficult to get that balance.”

“Where every other staff member uses their annual leave for rest and recuperation, a certain percentage of my annual leave I have to book off to take my mum to appointments. When they're just discharged from hospital there may be an appointment every week.”

# The barriers to employment faced by women with unpaid caring roles

The women in our research highlighted a number of barriers which made it difficult to balance employment with a caring role.



## The unpredictability of care needs

The unpredictability of care needs meant that, even with a supportive employer/employment policies, some women found it very difficult to work. Responding to the needs of those they care for, or dealing with emergencies, could mean leaving employment unexpectedly and at short notice. This is a significant barrier to both getting into work and remaining in employment.

*“I just kept getting called away from work and my dad is my priority – if he calls me and he is on his own in the flat I had to drop things and go and I didn’t feel good about doing that to people in the work around me.”*

*“I’ve lost count the number of times I’ve had to go to the school because of my son. It’s just finding that employer that’s going to understand that these things are going to happen and I’m the person that gets the phone call.”*



## Frequency of appointments

Most of the women talked about how the frequency of medical and other appointments for the person they provided care for impacted on their ability to take on employment or on their working life. Most of these appointments happen during the working day and issues like long waiting lists meant that scheduled appointments had to be kept otherwise they would face long waits for another appointment.

“From the time the children were diagnosed there were constant hospital appointments. There seems to be lots of appointments in work time during the day. If you don't do the appointments you're struck off the list.”

“Over the years I've had to take unpaid leave for caring responsibilities – appointments, etc. I had to work part-time when the kids were younger. Sometimes they would have had 12 appointments in a week, and they are prolonged appointments. Speech therapy nearly every week, long appointments over weeks and weeks same with OT appointments. This is a heavy burden for carers who are working. I was lucky that I could make up my hours, but many can't.”

“There's always appointments coming and that doesn't help. Then you're trying to find time to pick up prescriptions... I'm travelling to the office and then rushing to get back to the chemist in time before it shuts. There's always that kind of pressure to get things done.”

## Finding suitable work and lack of flexibility

Many of the women in our focus groups felt that there were not enough jobs available to suit the needs of carers, including part-time and flexible working. When combined with the negative attitude of some employers – who treat caring roles among staff as ‘a burden’ or ‘too much hard work’ – many women found it difficult to get suitable employment.

“There are not enough jobs suitable for carers, they have to be very flexible all the time. When you go for a job you have to explain I have loads of hospital appointments, we've lots of doctor's appointments, lots of dentist appointments. They just look at you going ‘Why are you even here?’”

“It's not a nice place to be in. You hate asking... you'd really like not to have your employer or somebody else look at you like you are a burden.”

“When I worked for a larger employer, you could have had three days paid Carer's Leave. In the six years I worked there I only needed to use it once. When I did, I honestly felt like I was begging. I'd asked for the time off as my son was going through a really tough time. My manager said ‘Yes I'll sign that off for you but don't make a habit of it!’ I just thought it was a cheap comment to make. Don't make me feel like I'm begging for something that's already written into my employment contract.”





Others reported an inability to travel for work because of the need to stay close to the person they care for. This meant fewer opportunities and sometimes lower wages.

“A lot of things that are funded and the decent jobs don’t come this direction [North West] so any jobs with a decent wage you have to travel. Obviously that impacts people because you’ve got poor wages for a start plus if you have caring responsibilities or if you’re a parent you may not be able to travel because the day is long enough and hard enough as it is.”

## Gendered expectations of care

Caregiving work has traditionally been thought of as ‘women’s work’. These gendered assumptions place a greater burden on women – sometimes through generations within a family – to provide the unpaid care needed within families and communities, often at the expense of their careers. This was strongly reflected in the focus group sessions, with most of the women reporting that the burden of care mostly fell to them and as a woman it was seen as their responsibility to do this.

“I’m the only daughter in the family and I felt the responsibility [to become an unpaid carer] very heavily.”

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

## Accessibility of support services

The women clearly outlined in both our State of Caring survey and within the focus groups that having a network of support across various systems was vital to ensure women could enter and stay in employment.

This included mental health support for both carers and the person they care for, healthcare including medical assessments, support systems in schools and education settings, childcare and social care including good quality and reliable person-centred replacement care, domiciliary care, day care and respite care. However, delays, waiting lists, funding and resourcing issues were all having significant impacts on the availability and extent of these services.

“We couldn’t get childcare over the summer, you still can’t get it for children with additional needs, they just don’t provide it.”



## Poor infrastructure

In certain areas, including in the North West, poor public transport, the condition of the roads and a lack of investment made things difficult for carers to combine employment and caring.

“*The wages are really bad here [North West], the infrastructure, the roads, trains, all of that. There’s a lack of investment here.*”



## Specific barriers faced by women living in rural areas

Women living in rural areas reported a number of additional barriers in relation to employment and unpaid care. Transport issues were most common including lack of access to public transport and the effects of bad weather on transport, the extra time needed to get to the person they provide care for as well as the extra time needed to get to work, appointments, and collecting medication.

“*In rural areas you have to travel so much further to even drop things to someone or if you have to drive them in or collect them from school. There’s that extra time. I find it really difficult to balance time.*”

“*I’m rural, I live in the back end of nowhere. When the winter comes, and the roads aren’t gritted, you’re stuck here. I can’t get to the town to get my brother-in-law’s groceries. And he’s up pacing about looking for stuff. There’s that added pressure as well. I do find it very isolating up here when it’s winter, we get snow when no one else gets snow. Even for getting to work as well. It’s just that added pressure and even going for appointments, if I look out and there’s snow there’s not a chance I’m going.*”

## Specific barriers faced by young adult carers

There are approximately 6,600 women between the ages of 18 and 24 providing unpaid care in Northern Ireland.<sup>16</sup> During our research young women discussed how when trying to develop a life of their own and build a career they often felt guilty about the potential impact on their family, including both the cared for person and other family carers. Sacrifices had to be made when applying for jobs, such as staying close to home to help with caring or having to look for a job with flexible working options. This took priority over any “dream” job and limited their employment options. Options for further study could also be limited due to the need to stay close to home, the financial implications of any course and the potential loss of their earnings to the family.

A reluctance to disclose or discuss a caring role at application stage or at interview was discussed with the worry that this might put them at a disadvantage, especially as their gender and age may already disadvantage them. Women felt this could be exacerbated by negative experiences within the education system as a young carer.

“*I would be worried that an employer would look down on me. That they would think I had another job [the caring role] and would just be a burden and not able to do the job.*”

Transition to work from school can be difficult. Poor attendance levels, a lack of support at school and a lack of time or money to undertake extra-curricular activities which can be helpful when applying for jobs or university places, often resulted in a lack of confidence and restricted young women’s opportunities. Transferable skills from a caring role such as organisational and communication skills, managing a budget and dealing with stressful situations were felt to be often not recognised by employers.

“*You are penalised in education [due to caring role], then in work. You are set back right at the start of your work journey.*”

When starting employment entry level jobs are not known for having good flexible working or carers’ policies and there was a strong feeling that employers can assume that young people, just starting out on their careers, have no responsibilities and therefore can work any jobs and any hours.

<sup>16</sup> Census 2021. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/2021-census/results>

This can result in employers not making any accommodations and favouring older adults with caring responsibilities for flexible working options.

“Just because you are young they [employers] think you don’t have any responsibilities.”

“Sort of felt they (the employer) presumed I was young, didn’t go to university or tech[nical college] so I had all this free time but that wasn’t the case, due to my caring role I was only able to work 16 hours and even that was a struggle at times.”



## The social security system

Women coming in and out of work due to caring may have frequent contact with the social security system. In our focus groups some women reported a lack of information/awareness of their entitlement to benefits meaning that they were missing out on financial help and that the system was complex to navigate with long claim forms which were overwhelming.

There were frequent discussions about the low value of Carer’s Allowance, the fact that it doesn’t take into account caring for more than one person and the low earnings threshold, which was felt to be much too restrictive and unfairly punishes carers for earning a wage.

“I am over the earnings threshold for Carer’s Allowance. The benefit for me of getting Carer’s Allowance would be that I could afford to buy in some services – even a cleaner once a week, I could rely on transport more rather than making runs out to do transport myself, I could reduce my working hours to a four day week and not worry about the cut in wages – it would be so much better for my own health and mental health.”

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

In our State of Caring survey 35% of women with unpaid caring roles indicated that a change to the eligibility criteria for Carer’s Allowance would help them return to paid employment or increase their working hours. Some of the women felt that there should be protections in place for those carers who came off benefits because of starting a job but who then had to leave employment because of care and faced long waiting times for benefits when they went back into the social security system. This is a particular issue with previous Universal Credit claimants, who may have to apply from scratch, and face another five week wait for their first payment, after coming out of work. There are similar issues with Carer’s Allowance.

“If you’re on benefits and you leave benefits for work and then you lose your job because of your caring role and have to go back on benefits then you’re back to square one. There should be some protections if you have to leave your job because of caring.”

Concern was also expressed that work requirements for Universal Credit when providing unpaid care could vary.

“I had a very nice work coach [for Universal Credit] but it was her own individual decision that instead of me looking for work 35 hours a week she brought it down to 25 because I also care for my mother. She said at any point in time I could be switched to another work coach and they might decide differently. So you’re left at the whim of someone sitting behind a desk – if they don’t like the look of you you’re automatically losing out. I thought that was really, really bad.”

35%



of women with unpaid caring roles indicated that a change to the eligibility criteria for Carer’s Allowance would help them return to paid employment or increase their working hours



## Society's attitude to caring

There was a general feeling among the women that care work, both paid and unpaid, is not valued by society and that this work is largely invisible. Many of the women felt that this attitude meant that they were always the last on the list to be thought of in terms of support and recognition.

- “ I feel the biggest area which would help me balance work and care is changing society's attitudes to caring and how important it is and how much it saves wider society.”
- “ There are so many of us out there but we're always the last group of people to be looked after. You're just at the bottom of the pile all the time.”



## Returning to work after a caring role has ended

For many women caring circumstances may eventually change and they will begin to think about the prospect of returning to employment. Some of the women at focus group sessions discussed the difficulties they faced in potentially returning to work because of gaps in their CVs and knowledge, the need for training and qualifications and even just being known within their area of work. Some had been unable to maintain enough hours to gain re-accreditation in their chosen profession.

- “ Carers don't have access to online, part-time training to be able to maintain our skill sets for when our caring roles end. Without that digital footprint, that bit of paper about your qualifications, it is a barrier to work. You need that to get in the door. You need that so you have options.”
- “ I know at some stage I'm going to have to give up work to care for my daddy. I'm thinking if I do give this up it will be for a period of time and when I think about going back to work things will have moved on fairly quickly. So, you're going to have to get on top of retraining or doing a wee bit of extra work and even just getting people to know who you are again. In this kind of work it's about knowing people, if there's a gap they forget about you.”



# What can help women combine unpaid caring and employment?

Within our research we explored how those women who wished to combine unpaid caring with employment could be better supported.

Our State of Caring survey shows that affordable, accessible alternative care and reliable health and social services are among the priorities women with unpaid caring roles identify when asked about the help they need to combine employment and caring. Less than half of women (44%) said access to unpaid carer's leave and fewer than 1 in 4 (24%) said access to paid carer's leave currently helped them. Access to paid carer's leave was identified as an important workplace support women with unpaid caring roles would like to have by 3 out of 4 women (76%).

Many women providing unpaid care said they wanted a "passport" or record in their employment which identified them as a carer and outlined the support they could expect, but this was not currently available to most.

Access to flexible working was available and helpful to some women but this was still far from universal.



Table 3: The workplace supports which women feel help balance work and care

Workplace support	% of carers who said this currently helps them*	% of carers who said they would like to have this to help them*
Affordable and accessible alternative care	7%	93%
Reliable health and social care services	7%	93%
Working Carers Passport (ie a record that identifies you as a carer and sets out what support will be provided)	9%	91%
Peer support network (eg a carer's network)	21%	79%
Ability to take time off – paid carer's leave	24%	76%
Ability to take time off – unpaid carer's leave	44%	56%
Understanding line manager	62%	38%
Flexible working	72%	28%

Source: State of Caring Survey 2023, Carers NI | \*as a proportion of those who answered each individual support



3 in 10 (30%) women with unpaid caring roles, who had given up employment or reduced their hours indicated they would like to return to employment or increase their hours.

Workplace support, such as a supportive employer, carer’s leave, and flexible working options were highlighted as important to facilitate return to work or increasing hours, alongside reliable social care and a change to the eligibility of Carer’s Allowance.

Discussion with women in the focus groups highlighted areas of good employment practices which support women carers in work and which could also help some carers get back into employment.

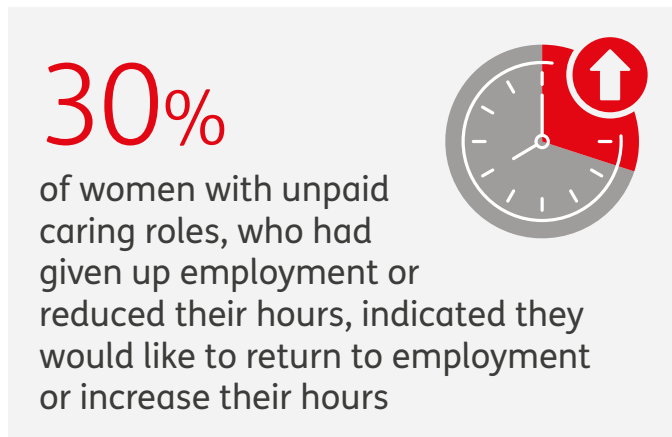


Table 4: The workplace supports which women felt would help them return to work or increase their hours

Workplace support	% of the women answering the question
A supportive employer that understands caring	25%
Ability to take time off – unpaid carer’s leave	23%
Ability to take time off – paid carer’s leave	35%
Ability to work from home	36%
More flexibility, including part-time work that matches my skills and experience	33%
Social care services that I can rely on	28%
A change to the eligibility criteria for Carer’s Allowance	35%

Source: State of Caring Survey 2023, Carers NI

## Good employment practices

While there was considerable discussion around poor employment practices impacting on carers, many of the women reported good employment practices in their workplaces. The ability to work from home and the availability of part-time working hours were seen as major benefits in helping unpaid carers to balance employment and care. In general, flexible employment policies were welcomed by carers including flexibility around start and finish times, taking leave and the ability to work around medical appointments and emergencies. The women reported a number of their employers having carer's policies which set out clearly what support carers could expect, and this was seen positively. The availability of carer's leave was also seen as a major benefit and where it was available it enabled carers to be able to use their annual leave for their own work, life balance. The women were very clear on the difference it made having a supportive, understanding employer and the clear benefits it brings for staff.

“ Working from home is really important for me. Not having to be in the office for 8.30/9 in the morning. I'm able to be on my laptop in the kitchen working away and being there to be able to care for my mum. I can't really apply for other jobs if I had to be in an office full-time.”

“ I got a phonecall in work that my daughter was having a meltdown and I needed to come to her. My boss was great she said 'drop everything and go and sort it out'. I'm so lucky, the company I work for is great, but not everywhere is like that.”

“ Covid was the best thing that ever happened to me in terms of employment. Being able to work from home, it opened doors for me. I couldn't do the drive to the office every day and then come home and do everything else I just couldn't.”

“ I tend to start work very early and finish early. I have to do that for my caring responsibilities which are mostly in the afternoon. I'm lucky to have an employer that allows me to be flexible with my time.”



“ My current employer is the best employer I've ever had – compassion, empathy and understanding of my health and my family's needs. She trusts me and I get the work done. That trust relationship is important and that caring doesn't mean slacking off that you get the work done around it. It's a trusted relationship and if you don't have that it makes your caring role a lot more difficult.”

Focus group discussions also identified areas where the women felt that both employers and government could do more to support unpaid carers in the workplace.

## What else employers could do to support carers

Flexibility from employers was highlighted often as being important for unpaid carers to enable them to manage employment and care. This included flexibility over place of work, hours of work and arrangements for appointments/emergencies. Women also felt that employers need to be more empathetic and have a greater understanding of how unpaid care impacts on their staff to enable them to put the proper workplace supports in place to juggle care and employment.

Many of the women felt that having a carer's policy in the workplace was helpful in setting out what they can expect from their employers and as a signal to carers that they are valued and will be supported in the workplace. However, the women stressed that this must be backed up by training for line managers/employers so that they recognise the value of their staff with caring responsibilities, that they fully understand carer's entitlements and afford them their rights/entitlements without any negative attitudes. Women also raised the value of having access to carer's leave to help with attending medical appointments and to deal with emergencies so that carers do not have to take this as annual leave.

**“Flexibility from day one, a proper carer's policy within workplaces and I would love something around attitude training for employers and boards and committees because while legislation/policies might be in place they can still make you feel like shit for asking.”**

**“You can get unpaid leave for an emergency in my work, but it has to be an emergency on that day. So if my son had a fit the night before it doesn't count even though I might be still dealing with the fallout of it the next day. It shouldn't be for emergencies only. Instead of me owing them four hours for a day because I've had to leave I should be able to take leave. Paid leave for carers would be great.”**

**“They make you feel like you have to beg for your entitlements. It comes down to the awareness of employers and managers, it all comes down to their training and awareness.”**

**“An agreed amount of carer's leave per year would be ideal, maybe three to five days. It would allow for appointments for my daughter and maybe an opportunity for me to have a day off work that isn't consumed by meetings and reviews for her caring needs.”**

**“Paid carer's leave would be so helpful. My mum was in hospital for a week and if I had got three days carer's leave that would have been three days pay I wouldn't have lost. Even one day, anything!”**





## What government could do to support carers

Most of the women felt that there was a need to have legislation in place to provide a statutory footing for carers rights, including the need to provide carer's leave. This would publicly recognise the difficulties carers have balancing employment and care and provide a minimum level of consistent support across workplaces.

**“ We need our rights enshrined in law to protect our status as carers... If I was any one of a number of groups I would have employment protection. I have nothing as a carer.”**

**“ I think they should legislate for carers that all workplaces should have a minimum standard of flexibility and support for those who provide care in terms of their flexibility, the leave, how that person has to make the time up, etc. It should be equal access across the board.”**

**“ Either give me some employment rights and help me get back into as full a time work as I can do or else you're going to have to support me at home. I really wish government would just make up their minds what they want me to do.”**

Women were very clear on the need for the government to do more to support carers financially, including increasing the value and earnings threshold of Carer's Allowance, and introducing regular carer's payments to account for the increased costs of caring for someone. The women also felt there was a need for government to ensure better pension provision so that periods of unpaid care did not affect their future financial wellbeing. This would be a signal that government values the care being provided and that it recognises the significant savings to society that carers make through their unpaid care work. However, it was also felt that government needed to accept that for some carers it is impossible to juggle employment and care due to the nature of that care and that unpaid carers in this situation should be valued and financially supported without being put under pressure to work.

**“ Care needs to be recognised and valued and if you're out of the labour market providing care there should be some provision for your pension, you're not sitting doing nothing.”**

Women felt strongly that government needed to adequately fund and provide accessible, affordable, good quality services to support unpaid carers. Inadequate services including replacement care, respite care, day care, domiciliary care, childcare, diagnostic assessments, mental health supports, were all mentioned as having a negative impact on women's ability to balance employment and care.

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

The need for access to training, education and learning opportunities for women who were trying to get back into employment after a caring role had ended or changed was also identified as an area for Government action.

**“ The Department of the Economy were running all these retraining programmes and some of them sounded amazing. I phoned up and said I'm a carer would you consider letting me do it on a part-time basis so that I could be around for my caring responsibilities? They said sorry we're not offering that at this time.”**

Finally, women needed access to information and advice relevant to their caring role and employment and the women felt that this was something that needed to be better resourced and organised so that carers were routinely given the information they needed.

**“ Government relies on unpaid carers just getting on with it. Many don't know what they are entitled to and loads of them are not getting what they should be getting. They're just left to get on with it.”**



## What young adult carers felt would help them

Young women carers told us that employers needed to recognise that young adults can have significant caring roles and understand the impact this can have on them as employees. With that recognition, employers should enable an open discussion with young carers about their caring role when they commence employment. Flexible working options and other support should be equally available to young carers as they are to older employees.

The need for help to start early, in the education system, was highlighted as important. Children need to be enabled and supported by a flexible education system which recognises them as carers and allows them to participate in education via part time options, as well as to study from home and online when required. The education system also needs to instil a belief that a caring role is valuable and that the skills obtained are important and transferable. Very often young carers do not recognise themselves as carers and therefore miss out on support.

The young women we spoke to felt that employers should recognise and value the skills developed during caring so that they can be more open to talking about their caring roles in their CVs and at interviews.

## The importance of carer support to women providing unpaid care

Our State of Caring survey shows that nearly 1 in 5 (19%) women with unpaid caring roles received help from a local carers organisation and indeed women at the focus groups were very positive about the support provided by local carers groups, support groups and Women's Centres. This support ensured they were able to find out the information they needed, receive much needed emotional support and understanding from those in similar circumstances and help with a range of additional issues including childcare, education and financial support. However, the women also raised the fact that this support was provided by charities or local groups which were often set up by parents/unpaid carers because there were gaps in statutory provision. These groups often rely on limited funding or fundraising themselves despite growing demand for the help and support they provide.

“For a lot of the women the crèche comes into play in Women's Centres. Women are able to do courses, better themselves, get qualifications, get into work.”

“Basically, you were getting a diagnosis and then sent off to cope not knowing where to turn. That's the reason why a parent set up the local autism group where I go. It's a great support but it's a charity and they are struggling with funding. There are other mums and dads there and they understand, they just get you.”



# The benefits of being a carer friendly employer

Employers can make a valuable difference to carers by recognising their needs and adopting a culture and policies which support them to enter and remain in employment whilst undertaking an unpaid caring role.



Accreditation schemes, like Carer Positive in Scotland, are already supporting organisations to do this.

As well as being good for employees with caring roles there are also clear economic and business benefits.

Carers can have transferable skills from their caring role and often years of experience in the workplace, with many carers in the 45–64 year age group, often at the peak of their careers. With fewer young people entering the labour market organisations need to retain their skilled staff.

There can also be a significant cost to business in not supporting employees with caring roles. It is estimated that the impact of staff turnover, absence, and stress as a result of juggling work and caring unsupported could be costing UK businesses over £3.5bn every year.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, when people give up paid employment to care, this can have a negative impact on the

economy through increased spending on social security benefits for people who have left their jobs, as well as taxes forgone on lost earnings.<sup>18</sup>

A flexible approach can:

- Attract and retain employees hence reducing recruitment and training costs
- Improve the wellbeing of employees, thus reducing sick leave, increasing staff morale and improving retention
- Increase resilience and productivity.

In an environment where it is often difficult to attract and retain good employees it is important that businesses realise the potential of carers and provide them with the environment they need to continue in employment or to attract those carers currently out of work, who with the proper support, would consider taking up paid employment.

<sup>17</sup> Carers UK's response to the BEIS consultation on carer's leave (2020). Carers UK. <https://www.carersuk.org/media/acmlig5p/policy-briefing-on-carers-leave-consultation-772020.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Public expenditure costs of carers leaving employment in England, 2015/2016. Pickard et al. (2017) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/hsc.12486>



# Conclusions and policy recommendations

This report has shown that while many women providing unpaid care want to enter or remain in employment alongside their caring responsibilities, a lack of workplace protections and support from the health, social care and education systems often means leaving employment, substantially reducing their working hours or facing a daily struggle trying to balance unpaid caring with paid work.



For some women it is impossible for them to work whilst caring due to the intensity and unpredictability of their caring role. All of this has a detrimental impact on women's own health, finances and career progression.

Whilst there is evidence of good practice amongst employers in terms of flexible working policies and support for unpaid carers this is often a "lottery" – dependent on individual employers or immediate line managers.

Women make up the majority of unpaid carers in Northern Ireland and it must be recognised that they provide not only an immense contribution to the Health and Social Care system but also have valuable skills and experience that can offer a lot to the economy. In addition, they have a fundamental right to employment and to avail of the same employment opportunities as anyone else, if they chose to do so.

Major change is needed in Northern Ireland to ensure unpaid caring is valued and those women who undertake caring roles have access to the support, range of flexible working options and good, reliable replacement care they need to be able to enter and stay in work.

The social security system must also be improved to enable women to undertake employment whilst caring without being penalised for what they earn and to adequately support women who have to reduce their hours or give up work to care.

Carers NI and the Women's Regional Consortium are therefore calling for a range of actions across government, the economy and beyond to support more women with juggling caring and employment.



## For the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly

- Work with relevant bodies to raise awareness of carers' existing rights within the workplace, as well as the benefits of flexibility for unpaid carers
- Enshrine carers rights in legislation to ensure consistency across employers
- Legislate for paid carer's leave from work that is separate to annual leave and a day one right to request flexible working for all unpaid carers
- Raise the Carer's Allowance earnings threshold to the equivalent of 21 hours per week at the National Living Wage. Introduce an interim Carer's Allowance Supplement scheme with a view to then increasing the level of Carer's Allowance to £120 per week<sup>19</sup>
- Cut waiting times for welfare support for carers who may move in and out of employment frequently
- Review how women who reduce or stop employment to care can be supported to maintain their state pension contribution
- Improve support for carers to access further and higher education through financial support, such as bursaries and increased availability of part time and online courses
- Reform the social care system to provide reliable, consistent, high quality replacement and support care, including domiciliary care, respite, day services and services for young adults with special needs to support the transition from children's services
- Deliver a fit for purpose and affordable childcare system across the whole of Northern Ireland including appropriate childcare for children with special needs (both during term time and in school holidays)
- Develop tailored employability programmes to support and retrain carers who wish to return to employment after a caring role has ended or reduced

- Provide accessible, timely mental health support for working carers
- Introduce an employer accreditation scheme for organisations to demonstrate that they are carer friendly, similar to the Carer Positive scheme established in Scotland.

## For employers in Northern Ireland

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

## For wider society

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

<sup>19</sup> This is the amount calculated by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as the minimum amount Universal Credit should be paid at to cover the cost of essential goods and services and has been recommended by the Carer Poverty Commission. Guarantee our essentials. (2023) Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/social-security/guarantee-our-essentials-reforming-universal-credit-to-ensure-we-can-all-afford-the>  
Policy measures to tackle poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland (2023). Carer Poverty Commission NI. <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/policy-measures-to-tackle-poverty-among-unpaid-carers-in-northern-ireland/>

# Further resources



## Employers for Carers

Employers for Carers is a business forum and service established by Carers UK in 2009. It now has around 230 member organisations with a reach of 3 million employees.

Member services include a dedicated web platform with a range of practical resources including e-learning, toolkits, model policies and case studies, access to expert training and consultancy and employer networking events.

[employersforcarers.org](http://employersforcarers.org)



## Carer Confident

Carer Confident is Employers for Carers UK wide employer benchmarking scheme. Launched in 2019, the scheme has over 60 accredited employers who are building a supportive and inclusive workplace for staff who are or will become carers.

Carer Confident also seeks to recognise employers who achieve these benchmarks, and to inspire others to follow suit.

[employersforcarers.org/carer-confident](http://employersforcarers.org/carer-confident)

# Appendix

The demographic breakdown of the women responding to the State of Caring survey is as follows:

- 2% are aged 18-34, 13% are aged 35-44, 28% are aged 45-54, 35% are aged 55-64 and 20% are aged 65+
- 99% of respondents are white
- 94% respondents are heterosexual, 1% bisexual, 5% preferred to self-describe or not to say
- 48% are in some form of employment and 24% are retired
- 1% have been caring for less than a year, 22% for 1-4 years, 27% for 5-9 years, 26% for 10-20 years and 23% for more than 20 years
- 15% provide care for 1-19 hours per week, 11% provide 20-34 hours of care per week, 11% for 35-49 hours and 15% for 50-89 hours and 48% provide 90 or more hours of care per week
- 67% care for one person, 24% for two people, 7% for three people and 1% for four or more people.

The focus groups were a mixture of in-person and online sessions to facilitate carers' attendance. They took place across Northern Ireland. They were open to all interested women who had a caring responsibility. One session was held specifically for young adult women who had a caring responsibility.





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