

The information in this paper is provided from State of Caring in Scotland 2023, an annual survey by Carers Scotland¹. It is Scotland's most comprehensive research into the lives and experiences of unpaid carers. The 2023 survey was completed by 1,771 unpaid carers and this briefing is based upon the responses of the 981 female carers who took part. Unpaid caring has a gendered dimension with women making up 59% of all unpaid carers in Scotland².

About unpaid carers

An unpaid carer is a family member, partner, friend, or neighbour who helps a person with daily activities that they would not be able to manage if they did not have help. This could be a partner, family member or friend who has a long term or terminal illness, someone who is disabled, has a mental health condition, is affected by addiction or who needs extra help as they grow older. There are approximately 800,000 people in Scotland providing such unpaid care³. It would cost an estimated £13.1 billion⁴ every year to replace the care they provide.

Key findings:

- The majority (71%) of female unpaid carers are caring for more than 35 hours a week.
- 1 in 3 (33%) of female unpaid carers have given up employment to care.
- 29% of female unpaid carers are struggling to make ends meet.
- 55% of female unpaid carers said that their physical health had suffered as a result of their caring role.
- 81% of female unpaid carers feel stressed or anxious and 47% feel depressed because of their caring role.

Carers Scotland recommendations:

1. **The Scottish Government should prioritise reducing costs for carers** by removing care charging, supporting additional household costs, and delivering flexible accessible childcare for parent carers.
2. **The Scottish Government should deliver a timetable for changes to eligibility for Carer Support Payment** including increasing the earnings threshold to ensure that the benefit does not restrict carers' employment choices.
3. **The Scottish Government should promote fair work in Scotland** by requiring all public bodies and those in receipt of public contracts to be [Carer Positive](#), in a similar way to requirements to pay the real living wage.
4. **The Scottish Government should consider opportunities to increase the pace of a right to a break from caring** including early pilots as part of the National Care Service and deliver additional funding for flexible short breaks through Carers Centres.
5. **The Scottish Government should urgently progress actions within the National Carers Strategy** to deliver health checks and flexible health appointments for carers, including providing replacement care for appointments.

¹ Carers Scotland is the Scottish nation office of Carers UK. Carers UK is a charity registered in England and Wales (246329) and in Scotland (SC039307) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (864097). Registered office 20 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4LX

² Scottish Government (2014) Health and Care Experience Survey 2013/14. Volume 1: National Results

³ Scotland's Carer vs update release, Scottish Government 2022

⁴ National Care Service Financial Memorandum, Scottish Parliament 2022

Women's experiences of caring and employment

Many women providing unpaid care want to be in paid employment with 26% of respondents to the State of Caring survey saying that employment gives them a break from their caring role and 33% saying that being in paid employment improves their health and wellbeing. A quarter (26%) of respondents were in full-time employment with 22% being in part time employment.

However, the State of Caring survey highlights the significant impact that unpaid care has on women's ability to take on employment. One in three (33%) women with unpaid care roles said that they had given up employment completely to provide care and over one in four (25%) responded that they had to reduce their hours due to their caring role. Even if carers do decide to balance employment and a caring role a significant amount (16%) have had to take on a less qualified job or turn down promotions due to caring responsibilities.

The responses to the survey made it clear that issues in accessing support services have played a significant role in many women's decisions to stop them from taking up employment all together or limiting the number of hours that they do. A quarter (26%) indicated that the reason for giving up employment or reducing their hours was not being able to find suitable replacement care services.

However, it is not just support services that have an impact on unpaid women carers decision to reduce hours or not be in employment. Good employment practices allow unpaid carers to better balance employment and care and 18% of female carers listed this as a reason they were able to stay in paid employment.

Financial impact of caring on women

Providing unpaid care often brings with it significant financial strain. The poverty rate for carers remains higher than for those without a caring role – 28% compared with 20%⁵. As outlined, many women are unable to take employment with their caring responsibilities and those in employment face barriers in terms of hours of work or level of work. This creates a vicious circle in which too many female unpaid carers do not have the necessary income they need to get by.

29% of female unpaid carers reported that they were currently struggling to make ends meet. Three in five (60%) are worried about living costs and whether they can manage in the future. One in seven (14%) reported that they are in debt as a direct consequence of their caring role. Low incomes have forced almost one in 12 (8%) female unpaid carers in receipt of Carer's Allowance to use food banks and food pantries.

"I am keeping my head above water at the moment I have had to budget but there has been on occasion where things have been a struggle."

[Unpaid carer, responding to State of Caring]

"We have the heating and hot water turned off in summer. The heating is only on in the winter and set to 14 degrees. The hot water only goes on once a week for a bath."

[Unpaid carer, responding to State of Caring]

⁵ UK Poverty 2024, Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2024

Female carers health and wellbeing

Providing unpaid care is often an exhausting and overwhelming role that has effects on mental and physical health and wellbeing. When asked what impact caring has on their health and wellbeing, more than four in five (81%) women said they felt stressed or anxious due to their caring role. In addition to this, over half (51%) said they felt lonely with similar numbers (47%) saying they felt depressed because of their caring role.

“Feel quite tired and stressed most of the time.”

[Unpaid carer, responding to State of Caring]

“I have become completely isolated as a result of my caring situation and quite frequently do not see anyone but my father for weeks.”

[Unpaid carer, responding to State of Caring]

The mental health impact of caring continues as the vast majority (87%) of women unpaid carers said they had suffered from continuous low mood with similar numbers (84%) reporting a feeling of hopelessness. Of most concern, is that 38% of women unpaid carers whose mental health was bad or very bad reported that they had thoughts relating to self-harm or suicide.

“Tearful & very emotional, trying hard to accept how my life has changed since my caring role began in July 2021”

[Unpaid carer, responding to State of Caring]

As noted, it is not just mental health that is affecting unpaid carers physical wellbeing can also be affected. Over half (55%) of women respondents said that their physical health had suffered as a result of their caring role and over one in five (21%) had suffered an injury because of caring. In addition to this, many have been unable to concentrate on their own health as 44% reported that they had put off healthcare treatment because of their caring role. When they do choose to take treatment 30% said that they have been waiting over a year for specialist treatment or assessment.

It is known that taking a break from caring can improve both physical and mental wellbeing however responses to the State of Caring shows that many women face issues when attempting to take a break from caring. A third (33%) of female unpaid carers said they were unable to take a break from caring because it was too difficult to do so with only 12% able to take a break from caring with replacement care coming from health and social care services. Most carers who were able to take breaks (only 28%) had to rely on friends and family to provide replacement care.

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