

**Scottish  
Women's  
Budget  
Group**

**Aberdeen Gender**

**Inequality and Poverty**

**Report**

**Executive Summary**

**2025**

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# Executive Summary

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The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) were commissioned by Aberdeen City Council's Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee to explore the impact of poverty and gender inequality on women and their families in Aberdeen and identify with participants solutions that could address these issues for individuals, families and the wider community.



*You know, women, if we're broken, then so is society and so are the communities, because if we're broken, who's going to keep the backbone of the community going*

***Focus Group Participant***

The full report sets out how women's everyday experiences in Aberdeen are affected by gender inequality and what can be done to tackle the systemic barriers which are built into our systems to make life fairer for women in Aberdeen.

Women's poverty and inequality are deeply rooted in systemic and structural issues, requiring solutions that address societal norms and economic structures to achieve gender equality. Women's caring responsibilities often impact on their involvement in the labour market. This results in economic inequality which reduces women's financial independence, restricting their life choices.

Recognising that women and men experience the world differently and face different economic realities and challenges is hugely important if we are to tackle these deep-rooted issues. Women's experiences of inequality are further complicated by intersecting factors, such as age, race, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation and socio-economic status, which can lead to multiple forms of discrimination.

To overcome these issues, and as set out in the recommendations of the full report, it's vital that there is an understanding that the way services are delivered, how budgets are set and used, and how systems interact with each other can either exacerbate or address inequality. How the council collects and uses data to understand how their policies are impacting on its citizens and how implementation is achieving its priorities needs to be at the heart of how it does business. There needs to be a move away from talking about people to understanding different people's needs. Better use of disaggregated data can only help elected members and officers to prioritise limited resources.

Increasing transparency and improving communication is fundamental. Ensuring participation and truly working in partnership with communities (both geographical and of interests) is central to achieving the transformational change needed to address gender inequality and inequality more widely.

It is essential that Aberdeen City Council take a gendered lens to service design and budget setting while using sex disaggregated data to monitor the impact of their decisions, if they want to achieve a more gender equal city particularly in these difficult financial times.

An overarching recommendation from this project is for Aberdeen City Council to ensure those in decision making roles clearly understand that the way in which money is raised and spent is not a gender-neutral process. Any decisions taken at the Council level can drive work forward to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and poverty or make life harder for women and other disadvantaged groups.

As part of this project, the Anti-Poverty and Inequality Committee have committed to providing a response to those who participated within 6 months of them considering the contents of this report.

## Process

The project took a mixed methods approach, using the principles of a citizens assembly combined with a gender budgeting approach to guide the research. A local steering group of **9** women from a wide range of backgrounds supported the development, focus, analysis and solutions identified in this report.

### Key principles included:

**Participative:** the challenges and the solutions were identified by the community;

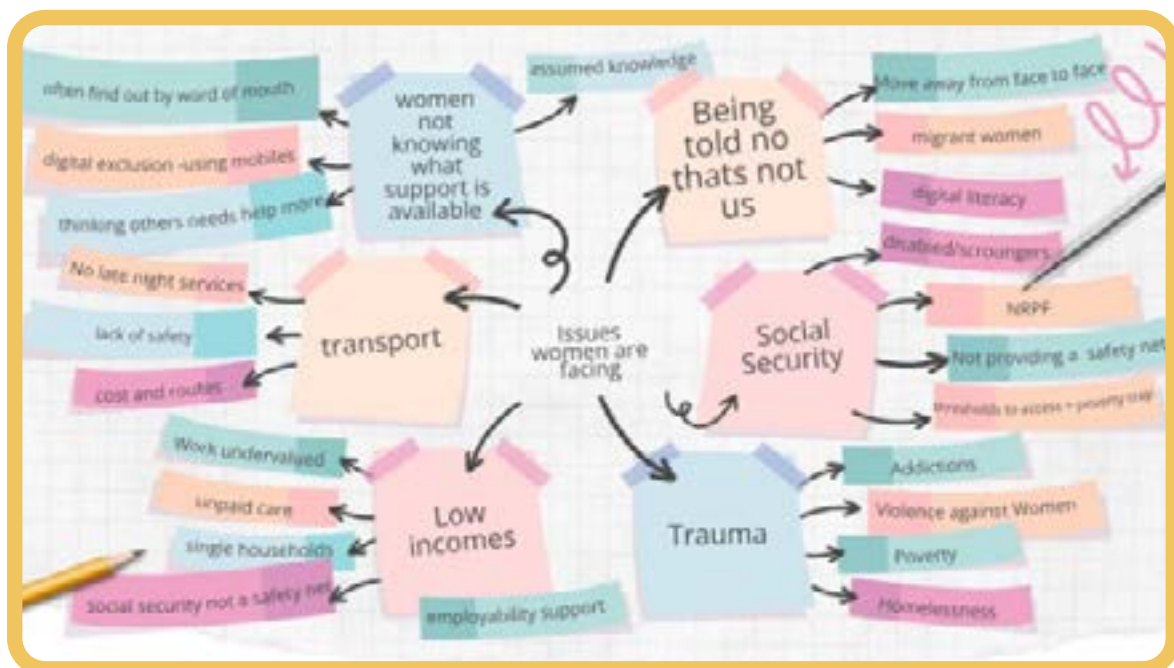
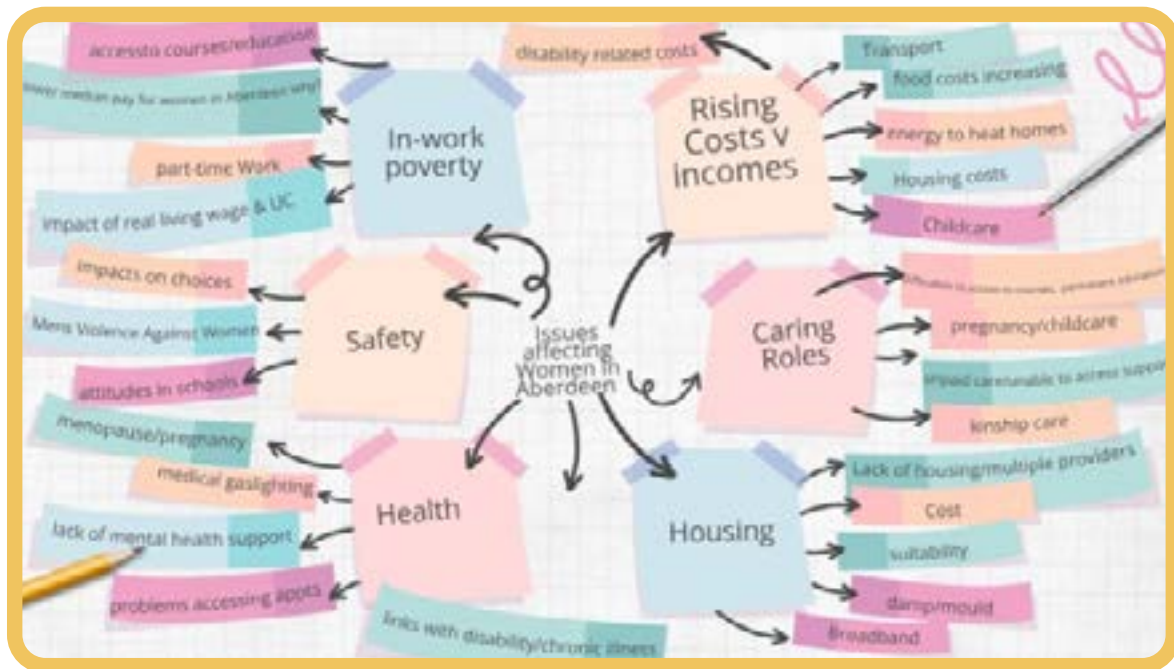
**Intersectional:** ensuring we involved and heard from a diverse range of people;

**Informed:** the steering group were supported to build on their experiences and understanding.

The mixed methods approach enabled us to hear from those who have experience of living on a low income, those who work in organisations that provide support, as well as those who have experience of both.

## Overview from the Steering Group

The steering group worked to identify the issues that were affecting women in Aberdeen thinking about their own experiences and those of their family, friends and wider community. The following illustrations highlight the areas identified:



Many of the challenges identified highlight interlinked structural barriers that women face because the different needs of men and women are not recognised within decision making at a local or national level. These systemic barriers need to be addressed

at a societal level as opposed to being left to individual women to address. Caring responsibilities, social security, work, transport, health and housing were all highlighted as significant issues for women in Aberdeen that impacted on the choices and options available to them. This means a gendered lens needs to be taken to decisions around how services are delivered, whether these are new services or about the delivery of services currently provided. As highlighted in the following example:

Women who experience domestic abuse often lack the finances to leave an abusive partner or seek support. They do not have the resources to take expensive buses, or the time to spend over an hour to reach services without exposing themselves to increased risk. They might not have access to a phone or computer to be able to use online/phone based services and they cannot take the chance of losing any support systems they have by having to move for housing.

The steering group spent time considering how the way services are currently delivered can create unintended barriers to women (and other groups) while trying to get the support they need. They felt that:

- Siloed approaches taken by the public sector often meant people did not get the help they needed as agencies often only deal with one thing;
- ‘Gatekeeping’ stops people being able to speak with the individuals they need to;
- If people’s situation is complex, the digital support service which people are being pushed to use cannot cope because this does not follow the flowchart that has been developed in a service design process;
- People often do not know who can help or what support they are entitled to, there are a lot of assumptions made about people knowing who can help.





# Findings

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## The cost of living and how its impacting survey respondents

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*The prices of things are too high. I am exhausted from working so much and not able to afford all meals in a day.*

Across this project the majority of people stated that compared to this time last year they felt financially worse off. This amounted to **65%** respondents. This was due to costs rising faster than wages/benefits and people not having an opportunity to increase their incomes.

About a third of respondents stated they were struggling to manage everyday household expenditure (see table 1 for a breakdown). This increased for single parents, disabled, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and single households and decreased for male respondents (the men who took the survey tended to have higher incomes, were more likely to work full time and in the private sector. They were less likely to be disabled and there were no single parents).

## Care and Caring

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*I cannot work as childcare before and after school is expensive and there is no availability.*

The hours women work are often dependent on the number and ages of their children and their access to affordable childcare. The disproportionate responsibility for childcare constrains women's employment opportunities and their income which has lifelong impacts.

**40%** of women who have childcare responsibilities felt that childcare had impacted on the hours of paid work they can do, while **25%** said it impacted on the type of paid work they can do. For BME women (where there is often little extended family support) this increased to **64%** and **29%**. While nearly half of all single parents stated that managing childcare had impacted their financial wellbeing.

The average cost for childcare for children under 3 is over **£14,000** per year. Over **50%** of those with childcare costs (for all age groups) said they struggled to manage childcare costs while **34%** had to make changes to other areas of household spending to be able to afford their childcare costs.

Aberdeen has seen a decrease of **23.6%** in the number of childcare providers between June 2017 and June 2024. This figure was **33.7%** for childminders.<sup>1</sup> The lack of accessible/flexible childcare meant that women have had to turn down work or give up work which involved non-9-5 hours.

The Steering Group mapped the provision of ELC funded childcare, breakfast clubs and school aged childcare and private nurseries and childminders from the information available on the Aberdeen City Council website. The mapping exercise shows there a number of areas of Aberdeen where there is little or no provision. This often places an additional burden on women to get to childcare in other areas of the city, this can be compounded if they rely on public transport.

Women reported that even where there was childcare provided in their area, this could be oversubscribed making it difficult to get their children in. While the provision of school aged childcare is not a statutory responsibility there is a duty to provide this for children in need. Without access to these services women are often restricted to jobs which are available during school hours (which are often in lower paid sectors). This is particularly the case for single parents, parents of disabled children and migrant women.

## Kinship Care

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*I wanted to keep him in his school with his friends, it was important that we did that, but I don't drive and it was impossible to keep working and keep him there, I couldn't get any help with childcare and my employer wouldn't change my hours.*

Kinship carers and families are often faced with a very sudden change of circumstances and responsibilities as a result of a family crisis. While they may have a pre-existing relationship with the child(ren) this does not mean the support needs of the child and the carer are less than for children who go into foster care. The kinship carers we engaged with during this research stated that they often felt that their support needs were not fully recognised, including the financial impact that these caring arrangements had on them.



## Cost of the School Day

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*I lost access to the school clothing grant for my 3 kids as a I work in social care and my wage went up, when I asked about it I got told to find a job that paid me 18p an hour less or reduce my hours.*

Mums highlighted how the costs associated with children in school impacted on them and their families' finances. These included:

- Cost of public transport to get children to school (adult day ticket at the time of the data collection was **£5.30** a day);
- Cost of school uniforms;
- Cost of school trips/activities and lack of access to grants to support this if women are working.

According to CPAG, parents across the UK typically need to find at least **£39** per week for a child's secondary school education, and **£19** for a primary-aged child.<sup>ii</sup>

The school clothing grant is a cliff edge benefit, which means the minute people earn a penny over the threshold they lose all access to this. This has a major impact on families who are still on a low income, particularly within the context of the current cost of living crisis.



## Unpaid care

Similarly to childcare, caring for other family members impact on women's ability to take paid work or to increase their working hours. Survey respondents stated:

- **26%** said that caring impacted on the paid work they can do;
- **48%** that it has affected their physical health;
- **57%** that it has affected their mental health;
- **39%** it has affected their financial wellbeing.

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*Between 2015 and 2019 I had to provide more intense care to my adult daughter, which meant that I could not work many hours, which really impacted my ability to keep my career going - ended up having to take low paid precarious jobs. I've not really fully recovered my mental health, life feels really precarious*

Only **9%** of survey respondents cared for someone who received formal social care support. Respondents stated they had been seeking help and had been told that their individual care needs were not serious enough. This means that family members are taking on additional caring responsibilities which can have an impact on the person providing the care. It can also be difficult for the person being cared for (for example, if this changes relationships and family dynamics).

## Safety

The steering group were clear that domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment at work, in schools and public spaces reinforced gender inequality by limiting women and girls access to education, employment, and other opportunities. Gender inequality therefore sets the underlying context for violence against women.

In Aberdeen in 23/24 Police Scotland recorded **110** incidents of domestic abuse per **10,000** population (slightly below the Scottish average). Over four-in-five incidents (**81%**) of domestic abuse in 2023/24 had a female victim and a male suspected perpetrator.<sup>iii</sup>

Women often experience safety differently than men, with studies showing women feel less safe when using public spaces. Women and girls are socialized from a young age to be fearful in public spaces, leading them to understand that by presenting as female in public space, they are vulnerable to male aggression. As a result, women often engage in unseen 'safety work'. Other minoritised groups such as members of the LGBT+ community, those from BME communities and disabled people can also have differing feelings of safety.

**39%** of all survey respondents said they felt very safe, this reduced for members of the LGBT community at **18%** and was higher for men at **54%**.

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*The streets are so dark I don't feel safe outside at night*

Poor street lighting was identified as one of the key issues affecting women and girls feelings of safety, impacting on whether they go out at night and/or how they travel. Not feeling safe getting to and from bus stops is a major barrier to women seeing public transport as a realistic option. Women were clear that the new LED lighting being used across the city did not provide a level of illumination which helped them to feel safe.

Women highlighted that despite areas of the city being redeveloped, the differing safety perspectives of women did not appear to have been taken into account during the design or the redevelopment phase. For example, Union Terrace (lack of lighting at night), Union Street and the Beach Boulevard (being funnelled into areas that don't feel safe) were all mentioned. It was felt that women's needs were absent from the urban planning being undertaken to redevelop the city.

The young women we spoke with highlighted the everyday nature of sexual harassment they experienced. A small number of mums raised concerns over the level of harassment their children have to deal with in schools in general, and the safety in school particularly in relation to toilets, which they felt was impacting their child's health as well as their education.

## Welfare/Benefits

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Having paid work is an effective way out of poverty. Families where all adults are in full-time work have a low poverty risk. However, having a job is not always enough. In Aberdeen in 22/23 the percentage of children in poverty was **21.8%**.<sup>iv</sup> It is estimated that over 21-24 **75%** of children in relative poverty after housing costs were living in working households.

The way work interacts with the benefits system can create a poverty trap for many women which due to lower levels of wealth can be difficult for them to get out of, this is often due to a number of means tested benefits being lost once they go above a certain income level i.e. school clothing grant, carers allowance etc.

“

*I was happy getting my job but then my universal credit went down and now I struggle to repay debt which last year I wasn't in it's a bad feeling I want to pay more but can't.*

It is essential that the way different policy areas interact in this area are understood. For example, how does the Scottish Government's drive to pay the Real Living Wage in the care sector, interact with means tested benefits and how does this impact on different groups.

## Council tax

The level of Council Tax and the prospect of further increases was an issue which was highlighted on many occasions. The regressive nature of Council Tax disproportionately impacts low-income households. According to data from the Office of National Statistics, households in the bottom quintile pay **4.6%** of their income on Council Tax, whereas those in the top quintile pay just **1.4%** of their income on this tax.<sup>vi</sup>

In comparison to other local authorities across Scotland, Aberdeen has one of the highest council tax payments (for 24/25 band D rates were the fourth highest).<sup>vii</sup> People felt that their council tax was too high and that there was unfairness built into the system due to property values not having been reviewed for some time.

There was a lack of clarity about what individuals received for their Council Tax and a perception that money was not used effectively. While the current debt recovery approach for Council Tax, which with one missed payment can spiral rapidly for low-income households, leads to increasing demands and increasing costs that risk pushing low-income families further into poverty.<sup>viii</sup>

## Health & Wellbeing

The steering group identified that it was not just one area or service which impacted on women's lives and their experience of inequality. The way systems were designed and developed and how these interacted with each other causing barriers and hurdles, played an important role in increasing inequality. This included systems/services such as transport, healthcare, maintenance of public spaces and access to support.

## Accessing Support

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*You get pushed from one person to another and nothing ever gets sorted*

**20%** of those who completed the survey had tried to access a wide range of support services from the council or other services within the last 12 months. Of these, some successfully accessed help for their finances, repairs to properties or emergency food

provision. The majority felt they did not get the help they needed as people did not get back to them, waiting times were too long or they were told they had to speak to someone else.

Respondents were asked if they thought they would be successful in accessing support in the future if they needed this. Only **22%** of respondents felt they would get the help they required.

One of the main barriers people felt they would face was not qualifying for help. In relation to this, 58% of respondents thought they would be told no. This, combined with women in particular feeling that others deserve the support more than them, means that the lack of clarity over eligibility criteria for financial support increases the chances of women self-selecting out and not asking for help.

**28%** of migrants said they wouldn't access support as they would be worried it would affect their immigration status.

Participants spoke about how systems and the way information is provided, is based on the assumption that people know about the support they are entitled to and how to access it. This can be particularly challenging for migrants (as things can be very different in the countries they were born in).

## Digital Support

Most public authorities have undertaken a shift to services being provided digitally to manage budgets and increase efficiencies. This has often been coupled with the closure of local offices and a reduction in face-to-face support. Audit Scotland found that Covid 19 had accelerated the use of digital technology but that this had been developed without citizens at its heart and that there had been limited involvement in service design.<sup>ix</sup>

We heard from women that they felt the council had become more remote and more difficult to access.

The lack of clear and accessible information was problematic for many, and the need to improve communication was suggested by more than **10%** of respondents.

Participants across the community sessions highlighted the need for better collaboration and communication across services. At the moment it is the individual who bears all the responsibility for navigating the different systems. This can feel impossible when people are struggling.

## Transport

Affordable, reliable and dependable public transport allows people to access essential opportunities such as paid work, education, shopping, health appointments. Poor public transport infrastructure can negatively impact women to a greater extent as they tend to rely on this more than their male counterparts.

The way in which public transport systems are designed are often problematic for women because they are designed to take people in and out of the city centre for work during peak hours. However, women are more likely to undertake multiple short journeys during the day. Women are also more likely to be reliant on buses for travel.

**“You can’t rely on the buses to get to important appointments, if the first bus is late then this has a knock-on effect to the next bus.”**

Women told us:

- Buses in Aberdeen are often unreliable, with instances of buses arriving late or not at all. Passengers have reported waiting for extended periods, leading to missed appointments and delays for children going to school;
- There is a lack of adequate night bus services, making it difficult for individuals to return home after events or outings. Many areas are not serviced by night buses, forcing people to rely on taxis or other means of transport including walking;
- Women felt unsafe while using public transport, especially at night and this puts them off going out;
- Passengers often lack clear information about bus schedules and routes, which can lead to confusion and frustration;
- Roadworks and changes to road layouts have complicated travel within the city, leading to further delays and confusion for bus users;
- The cost of public transport can be prohibitive for some users, particularly families.



**24%** of survey respondents told us they struggled with transport costs and **33%** said they had to make changes to other areas of household expenditure to manage these costs.

The cost of buses in Aberdeen were seen as extremely expensive. Fares have just risen to **£5.55** for a day ticket. This compares to **£5.90** in Glasgow, **£5.00** in Edinburgh and **£4.65** in Dundee.

For a woman working **5** days a week and earning the median wage, travelling by bus would account for about **4%** of their wage.



The full report sets out a wide range of recommendations across Aberdeen City Council, as well as for the Scottish and UK Governments. A number of these recommend that the council analyses the data it collects to understand who benefits from current provision and how this helps women to undertake paid work and how this contributes or addresses the issues outlined in the report. Others including embedding a no-wrong door approach and involving citizens in service design processes aim to ensure that services are not inadvertently putting up barriers that stop people getting the support they need. Undertaking gender analysis to further understand how responses to the housing crisis, to the development of major infrastructure projects and to the move to digital responses are all recommended to ensure that response do not exacerbate women's experiences of inequality. A full set of recommendations can be found at **Appendix 1**.



# Scottish Women's Budget Group

[www.swbg.org.uk](http://www.swbg.org.uk)

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SWBG Is a Scottish Charity,  
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