The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 21 February 2012

Session 4

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
3rd Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
*Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con)
*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Margaret Boyd (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Kirsty Connell (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Elaine Dougall (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Barbra Farmer (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Ann Henderson (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Anne-Marie Mackin (Play First (Scotland) Ltd)
Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab)
Emma Ritch (Close the Gap)
Pauline Rourke (Scottish Trades Union Congress)
Linda Somerville (Scottish Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 21 February 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 14:04*]

Women and Work

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the third meeting in 2012 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I remind everyone to switch off their mobile phones and BlackBerrys completely, because they interfere with the sound system even when on silent. No apologies have been received.

As this is a round-table evidence session, with the committee members interspersed among the witnesses, I would like everyone to introduce themselves. At the table we also have our clerking and research team and the official report staff, and around the room we are supported by the broadcasting and production services and the security office. I welcome our visitors in the public seats.

The purpose of our discussion today, during trade union week, is to explore the work-related issues that women face. The discussion will inform an inquiry planned for later in the year.

My name is Mary Fee and I am the convener of the committee.

Margaret Boyd (Scottish Trades Union Congress): I am from the STUC women's committee.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): Good afternoon. I am the MSP for Aberdeenshire West.

Emma Ritch (Close the Gap): I am from Close the Gap.

Linda Somerville (Scottish Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology): I am from the Scottish resource centre for women in science, engineering and technology.

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con): I am an MSP for West Scotland.

Kirsty Connell (Scottish Trades Union Congress): I am vice-chair of the STUC youth committee.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I am an MSP for the Highlands and Islands.

Pauline Rourke (Scottish Trades Union Congress): I am a member of the STUC general council.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): I am an MSP for West Scotland and deputy convener of the committee.

Barbra Farmer (Scottish Trades Union Congress): I am chair of the STUC disabled workers committee.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am an MSP for Central Scotland.

Elaine Dougall (Scottish Trades Union Congress): I am from the STUC women's committee.

Ann Henderson (Scottish Trades Union Congress): I am assistant secretary at the STUC.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I am a Central Scotland MSP.

Anne-Marie Mackin (Play First (Scotland) Ltd): I am from Play First (Scotland).

The Convener: Thank you very much.

I will chair the discussion, the setting for which is less formal than usual, as it is a round-table discussion. If you wish to speak, please indicate to me and I or Douglas Thornton, the clerk, will take a note of your name. We will take you in turn. We will not forget about you—I will ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to speak.

I do not know whether anyone is particularly keen to start the ball rolling. A paper has been circulated to everyone that contains some suggestions for discussion. I am not sure how you feel about starting with the topic of jobs that are typically held by women and occupational segregation. Putting on my hat as a member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, I know that USDAW organised in places—mainly in retail and in packaging and distribution centres—that were staffed predominantly by women who worked part time and who tended to work quite antisocial hours. They faced a number of issues, including being asked to work at short notice and having to take time off for childcare. That is quite a good topic to start on. I hope that we will be able to work our way through all the topics that are in the paper. I will throw the discussion open to anyone who would like to speak.

When I was at Tesco, one of the most common complaints that I dealt with as a shop steward was the issue of women being asked to change their shifts at short notice. Because of their childcare responsibilities, women tended to work antisocial hours, in the evenings or at the weekend. They were expected to do things, which they did because they had no choice. Although much progress has been made on the hours that women

work, there is still an expectation that women will take any hours that are going, because they are the ones who juggle their childcare. That needs to be looked at.

Elaine Dougall: That topic has been very much to the fore of the discussions that have been held through the STUC women's conferences. As the convener said, women are expected to change their shift patterns at the drop of a hat. When requests for shift pattern changes are made, it is sometimes the case that less than 24 hours' notice is given, which puts a huge stress on the living environment, because women have to get carers to look after their children or other people whom they support, whether an older parent or someone else in their family. Unfortunately, that often leads to periods of ill health, because women suffer from stress as a result of trying to meet their commitments to their employer and their commitments as a carer.

As a full-time official for Unite, I see an awful lot of that in the care sector. I am a full-time official with an industrial remit within the not-for-profit, voluntary sector. The childcare issue is coming very much to the fore as organisations are having to change their working patterns at short notice to support vulnerable people in our communities. However, that often impacts detrimentally on women in particular because we bear the brunt of the caring commitments in the family. The situation is of great concern to the women's committee and to the trade union movement as a whole.

Ann Henderson: When we have talked in the STUC about childcare we have looked at both sides. Our clear view is that childcare should be widely available and meet the needs of workers with shift patterns, and that it should be available free at the point of delivery. It should be delivered as a public service that we value and respect. However, flexibility should be built into childcare provision so that it meets the needs of families who are out early in the morning or who finish late, or who have some flexibility.

Childcare provision throws up another question that I am sure that Anne-Marie Mackin and others will say more about, which is what it means for the workforce who provide the childcare. There must be sufficient capacity in the workforce, but my experience is that it does not have huge spare capacity. For example, if somebody whose job is in industry or wherever has been asked to work late for some reason, there is not the flexibility in the childcare sector to pull other people in to provide later childcare and to cover the childcare worker who delivers the service. Elaine Dougall is picking up on that point with regard to the huge number of women who are employed in the care sector. There are some quite complex issues there.

We are in a different economic situation in the United Kingdom in that there are—or were—more women in the labour force than there were during the last major economic recession. That should alter how we view and deal with economic needs. We are in a different situation because far more households depend on the wage of the female worker, and there are more of those in lone-parent households than there have been before. However we dealt with things in the past, it may be different this time.

Emma Ritch: The STUC and the Trades Union Congress have recently put out papers pointing to the underemployment issue in the Scottish labour market. Some work has been done by the TUC to try to estimate how many people are underemployed, using the US Citizenship and Immigration Services categorisation. Using that metric, a figure of 6.3 million has been produced of people who are either unemployed or underemployed. It is the case that across the labour market women have been employed in part-time, low-status, low-paid jobs into which they have been crowded because of their caring responsibilities and the need to balance caring with participation in the formal labour market.

We now have a situation in which men are being crowded into part-time work because there is no full-time work for them. There is therefore the likelihood of increasing pressure on women's wages because more people are seeking the same kind of low-paid, low-status employment. From our perspective at Close the Gap, the likelihood is that women's employment situation will only worsen because of that. We see the beginnings of indications of that with the workfare scheme, for example, in which many people were under pressure of losing their benefits but sufficiently desperate to take up the opportunity of working for zero pay with the prospect of an interview from an employer who does not pay particularly high wages or offer particularly enhanced benefits, and whose flexibility is for the employer rather than the employee.

Anne-Marie Mackin: I agree with Elaine Dougall and Ann Henderson. As we know, the childcare workforce is predominantly female and probably more so than most sectors. As well as the issues around the fact that the workforce has the same care issues as other workers in terms of flexibility and sometimes having to be available at the drop of a hat because there is undercapacity in the sector, there is also a need for people not to be at work if they are ill in a way that in a non-care job is perhaps not such an issue.

I will mention three very big additional things for our workforce. First, there is the registration and

qualifications issue, which people will be aware of. Even to run a small playgroup, for example, people will soon have to be educated to degree level. There is no proportionality or leeway for the current workforce. Secondly, there is the cost of the protecting vulnerable groups scheme for people who work part time and possibly sessionally. Thirdly, there are welfare reform issues. All those things are additional. As I said, the childcare workforce is primarily female and those are female workforce issues.

14:15

The Convener: That is a good point. Last week, it was mentioned to me that if an older woman who has been involved in childcare for many years has to go through the whole registration process, by the time that she has got the qualifications, she might be too old to go back in and start again. It might be too late for her to do that.

Many hurdles are being put in the way. I am not saying that registration is not a good thing; it is a good thing. There should be registration, but there should be more acknowledgement of people's on-going work in building towards a qualification. I am concerned that registration may have the knock-on effect of taking people out of the childcare business, as the number of hoops that they must jump through to become registered and do everything that is required of them may be a disincentive. A knock-on effect of that would be that women who used to use those carers would no longer be able to do so and might be forced to use childcare that is more expensive or is a distance away, which could cause problems in their own workplace. The topic is interesting.

Kirsty Connell: I will continue Emma Ritch's discussion about underemployment, which has always been an issue for women, particularly because of the lack of quality part-time work. That was the case even before the recession. Women have had to be able to balance their family commitments and their work and career choices, and that is becoming a more acute problem, as Emma Ritch said. People have to take low-status or low-paid jobs, or jobs with part-time hours perhaps. That crosses both genders, of course.

That will have a longer-term impact, particularly for young graduates who are coming into a job market in which there are very few graduate jobs. Graduates have to take jobs that need lower skills than those that they have, and that obviously has an impact on people who would like to take those jobs, which are no longer open to them.

There will also be a longer-term impact on young women who are qualified graduates. They have to spend time in temporary or part-time posts. They usually work as temps or in areas such as administration or retail that are perhaps not suited to them, because of their degree choice, but to somebody else. That will have a long-term impact on women's ability to have decent pensions from their savings. Even further down the line, there will be problems because of delays in starting careers and the ability to take the top jobs later. We discuss the problem of boards of directors having too few women. Those problems will only get worse if investment in women's careers is not made earlier.

Barbra Farmer: I will pick up on something that Emma Ritch said about the workfare scheme. Obviously, disabled women are, in effect, doubly disadvantaged in the labour market due to gender and the impairment. We have fairly major concerns about the workfare scheme on the basis that most people are being told that it is only for eight weeks, but disabled people can go on to it on an unlimited basis until they find work.

Linda Somerville: On occupational downgrading and women who are working below their capacity or their qualifications and skills level, it is apparent in many sectors that women often move into areas simply because the hours of work are suitable. They might be forced into those hours of work because of the cost of childcare. I am speaking specifically about women who are involved in science, engineering and technology. I hate to use the word "professional". The most professional person I know is the woman who is employed in our office to clean; she is certainly the most professional person I come across in the week. However, women in salaried career-type employment would normally progress in a certain way, but they cannot do so, as they get to a stage in their employment at which they must look at the different options, particularly where there is a long-hours working culture and they might be expected to work for long hours. Women might therefore choose to work part time because of caring responsibilities, and part-time opportunities are very limited in the science, engineering and technology sector. It is difficult to put a cost on that, but we can probably expect the loss to the Scottish economy to be about £150 million a year just for women not having the opportunity to work to their full capacity.

The Convener: Yes, it is horrifying to think about how many women are doing jobs that they are way overqualified for, are forced into part-time hours and cannot get promotion. Even those who are promoted do not get beyond the glass ceiling.

Siobhan McMahon: Something that struck me when Kirsty Connell was speaking was that young women leave university or school without the opportunities we would expect them to have. The Parliament debated the youth employment strategy just before the recess. I took part in the

debate, and we did not come anywhere close to talking about this issue. The strategy covers young people in general and does not particularly mention females or single out any group.

This question is a bit out of left field, but we are talking about historical problems repeating themselves, with part-time work and the ceiling effect, so what would people want to see in the strategy with regard to opening doors to women, so that they did not need to do jobs for which they were overqualified, and were allowed into the sectors that they wanted to enter?

We are all enthused by what is happening with modern apprenticeships in certain sectors—not so much by what is happening in others—but what can we do to open them up to women? I hear that women are being asked to do clerical apprenticeships, which are not what we really think of as apprenticeships. It is great that the programme is opening up into other sectors, but women are not getting the same choices as their male counterparts. What are people's opinions on that?

The Convener: I welcome Margaret McDougall MSP, who has joined us. It is good of you to come along; your participation is more than welcome.

Margaret McDougall (West Scotland) (Lab): Thank you.

Emma Ritch: The modern apprenticeship programme has been of concern to all of us who work on gender and the labour market because it represents £50 million of public expenditure a year on an intermediate skills programme that, by and large, perpetuates occupational segregation and does little to diminish it. The programme is seen as part of the solution to youth unemployment and as critical for the skills plan. "The Government Economic Strategy" talks about occupational segregation and the need to challenge it, and the equality statement attached to the budget talks about the modern apprenticeship programme and the potential therein to tackle such segregation, but we are still waiting to see the concrete proposals that will be put in place to deliver on those outcomes. Although we seem to have been having this conversation for a long time—certainly for the entire seven years that I have been at Close the Gap—we do not seem to be much further forward in identifying exactly what will be done to tackle some of the issues.

This is not an underresearched topic, as those of you who have received the many publications, previously from the Equal Opportunities Commission and now from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, will be aware. A huge number of people are researching the issue in Scotland, including Professor Ailsa McKay and Emily Thomson at Glasgow Caledonian University, Jim Campbell and Morag Gillespie, but we have yet to see a robust action plan. I absolutely encourage the members of the committee to stay mindful of the issue, particularly if the programme is to be seen as a panacea for youth unemployment and part of our future skills provisioning.

Stuart McMillan: My point follows on from Kirsty Connell's point about graduates being either underemployed or unemployed when they leave education. Today is about women in the workplace and women in work, but the situation regarding graduates affects all graduates, both male and female. When they leave education, not everyone will automatically walk into a job. When I graduated, in 1997, I graduated with two degrees and was unemployed for six months. I managed to get a short-term position in a factory in the run-up to Christmas just to bring in some money. Unemployment is something that affects graduates of both sexes.

Kirsty Connell: I do not think that anybody believes that a degree is an immediate passport into a well-paid job. People appreciate that a degree provides only part of the skill set that they need. That is probably the key to what Siobhan McMahon was talking about. What to do to reduce graduate unemployment and underemployment is part of the skills agenda and, as Emma Ritch said, apprenticeships are not the panacea for Scotland's skills shortage. The third sector internships Scotland programme that the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations is running with Government funding is really good and is encouraging students to consider a career and to take up an internship with a third sector body—be it a charity or an associated organisation—that is paid at the rate of the living wage.

There is work to be done to ensure that the most frequent destinations of female graduates, such as the public sector, are not subject to cuts, job losses and pay reductions and that they are encouraged to enter other, higher-paid destination sectors, particularly science, engineering and technology. That work must start well before girls choose their destination. The STUC has committed to do a lot of work and campaigning around modern apprenticeships, and the introduction of adult modern apprenticeships for people over the age of 25 has seen an increase in the number of women who are participating. However, the horizontal occupational segregation that seems to exist from the get-go, when someone starts their modern apprenticeship, is particularly unfair. When somebody starts their modern apprenticeship, they are often already sitting in a stereotypical role: women are in childcare or administration while men are in construction, plumbing or car mechanics. They are already setting themselves up to be stuck in a

stereotypical role with that pay gap for the rest of their career.

A shift in awareness is required, which involves talking to girls before they choose their destination after school or college so that they are aware of the opportunities. At the last STUC congress, the youth committee had a fringe even at which we heard from Laura Rennie, a woman who had undertaken a modern apprenticeship in a typically non-female role at Spirit Aerosystems. Laura was also a Unite member, which will please Elaine Dougall. We need to be able to tell people that sort of story. It is about awareness and providing opportunities throughout the whole process of training and education before people enter the jobs market.

Pauline Rourke: I will pick up on comments that have been made by Kirsty Connell, Siobhan McMahon and Emma Ritch about modern apprenticeships. I represent people in the telecoms sector—the private sector—and I think that education is at the heart of everything. When we are bringing young people into industries, we should make them aware that females could go forward for engineering positions. I did a fringe meeting for the STUC women's committee a few years ago, and I do not know whether we have moved on much. BT announced yesterday that it is going to introduce 200 new apprenticeships. Everybody here should be policing that to see the gender representations in percentages. There are now massive opportunities for women in the telecoms sector, but we must deliver on those. We cannot just keep ticking the box and saying that we are aware of them; we, as trade union affiliates, and the Government must police the situation. That will open the door to a lot of opportunities, which is what we need.

Annabel Goldie: I cannot quite remember why I wanted to ask a question, so I will come up with something else that interests me. I am interested to hear what Linda Somerville and Margaret Boyd have to say about this. I was fascinated to learn about Margaret's background—was that the biscuit factory?

Margaret Boyd: Yes.

Annabel Goldie: That is my idea of heaven.

Margaret Boyd: It was not really.

14:30

Annabel Goldie: If it cannot be Tunnock's, let it be a biscuit factory.

I will wind back to when I was in practice as a lawyer. I found myself in the role of staff partner in my firm. I am not sure whether the staff regarded that as terrifically good news, but my male partners regarded it as singularly bad news, because our staff were predominantly female, and I tended to see things differently from my male partners.

I am genuinely interested in employer attitudes in the workplace. Given their backgrounds, Linda Somerville, Margaret Boyd and whoever else wants to chip in might be able to help us on that. One of the self-perpetuating difficulties is that we struggle with the challenge of getting women into positions of responsibility in the workplace—with all respect to our male colleagues, such women are well placed to understand issues that confront female employees. If we find that a challenge, there might be almost an institutional difficulty with attitudes in the workplace. Maybe that is a little harsh and unfair to our male counterparts, but I am concerned about attitudes. I would welcome contributions from our guests on the situation. Is the issue as embedded as it ever was? Are there things that we should look at and which we could do?

The Convener: Another four people have indicated that they would like to speak. After they do so, I would like to move the conversation on and pick up Annabel Goldie's point about attitudes, particularly to flexible working and zero-hours contracts. Flexible working was kicking off in my previous workplace before I left it. A lot of employers have the attitude that providing a zero-hours contract gives employees flexible working. With the committee's indulgence, we will move on to that after the next four speakers.

Linda Somerville: Siobhan McMahon asked about youth employment. It is welcome that the Government is willing to look at and ask for contributions to the strategy on that. One of the main bits of research that we have done, through Edinburgh Napier University, has looked at the influences on young people when they make employment choices. All too often, careers advisers and teachers are blamed for guiding young people up the wrong avenue, but it is parents and parental influences that most commonly reinforce people's attitudes to or stereotypes about gender and employment. A wider piece of work has to be done on how we interact with that. We can all look to try to have high-profile people in positions and to use women as case studies in non-traditional industries.

Employers have quite a responsibility, too. At the national economic forum in 2010, a group of manufacturers blamed a lot of teachers and careers advisers for the fact that they could not get staff and that their industry had a bad reputation and image. However, when I asked them whether they had taken steps to address that by building links with local schools and colleges and with their communities by inviting people in and having open days or women-only open days, they thought that

taking such steps was beyond them. Industry has a responsibility to do something about the situation, too.

Work experience is one of the best ways for young people to see what the world of work is about and what it feels like to work as an engineer or whatever else for a day or a week. We in Scotland are not very good at giving people meaningful work experience. Our education system is set up with a derisory work experience programme and people have little opportunity to move into non-traditional areas in school work experience. All too often, young people are left to find their own work experience, which leads them simply to reinforce attitudes, perhaps of those who are around them. The opportunities that young people can find might also be limited by their social background.

The Government could bring in a proactive programme that gives meaningful work experience and tries to move both sides into non-traditional industries. A pilot project in the north of England has used college work experience to move young men and women into non-traditional areas. The feedback and evaluation from the young men was particularly interesting—they said that the project allowed or authorised them to do things that their peer group would otherwise have prevented them from doing, such as beautician work.

The Convener: That is an interesting point. An employer in my area runs a successful apprenticeship scheme every year and has made a point of recruiting women into engineering apprenticeships. Such action is quite rare and is not done across the sector, but that employer does it deliberately to encourage more women to come in. It also has apprenticeships to become a—I was going to say a draughtsman, but you cannot call the person a draughtsman if it is a woman, can you?

Margaret Boyd: You could say "draughtsperson".

The Convener: That employer's approach is an example of really good practice. We should see more of that; it should be the norm rather than the exception.

Anne-Marie Mackin: I will make three points that will build on comments that have been made by others. The first relates to capacity in the childcare workforce. The pyramid structure means that there is not much chance of progression for those who want it, especially because most posts are part time, which links with the points that are made in Allison Johnstone's submission.

The second factor is that the more qualified people become, the more likely they are to leave. That is also partly because of the pyramid structure. If someone does a level 3 qualification, they will look for a job as, for example, a support for learning assistant in a school, because of all the issues about childcare for themselves.

My last point ties in with Kirsty Connell's comments about age and career. I work mainly in out-of-school care—in the crèche and playgroup sector—but women of childbearing age are also a huge part of the full-time workforce in nurseries, so there is a capacity issue in the sector, not only because there is high turnover, but because even if people stay in the sector, they tend to have career breaks or go on maternity leave. It is difficult to build a career if one does not get far into a career before having children then trying to get back in. That is a linked issue.

Dennis Robertson: Much of what I was going to say has probably been covered to some extent.

I come back to the issue that has been raised about stereotypical roles. Part of the problem is that sometimes when our children are very young we push them into stereotypical roles, even in play. We must move away from that. I know that when my daughters were very young they dismantled a pram and used it as a go-kart. They were not stereotypical in that respect and wanted racing cars when they were five.

What concerns me is that when children are in school we often get them to envisage certain career prospects—the teaching is not at fault, but the problem is to some extent in how we set up the whole curriculum. I was very fortunate a few weeks ago to visit a school in Westhill in my constituency. It has a modular programme that gets secondary 2 pupils to consider going into the energy industry and the subsea sector. The programme encourages mainly girls to examine the prospects in the energy sector, in which there is a skills shortage. It covers engineering, such as drilling, and various other aspects including sciences and much else. There has been reluctance among the girls because they had never envisaged themselves working in the oil sector other than in administration or human resources, although they come from families in which people work in the oil or energy sectors. I wonder whether we sometimes perpetuate stereotypical roles.

The people who have influenced me in my life have been women—primarily my wife, but my daughters to some extent, and teachers before that. I have always found women to have skills—they have a multiplicity of skills that some of we men, poor mortals that we are, perhaps do not have. Women cope better in many different circumstances. Women in their roles, whether in the caring sector, in running a home, or whatever—it does not matter; those are, again, the stereotypical roles—have all the skills. It is beyond me why we cannot utilise those skills in industry. It

is about the attitude of employers, but the people who can influence the employers are probably the mothers of the managing directors and everybody else. We need many more people to bend the ears of their managing-director and chief-executives sons, and we need that to happen from the bottom up and top down before we can make a difference. I really believe that.

The Convener: Thank you, Dennis. On behalf of the sisters, may I say that we are delighted to have an enlightened man present?

Dennis Robertson: I know my place.

Ann Henderson: I want to pick up on a couple of points. First, I was bothered by something that was said about the language that we use. Linda Somerville mentioned professionalism and the role of the office cleaner and similar staff members. The term "low status" is difficult. I know that we are using it in relation to the drawing up of tables, but there is absolutely nothing low status about the work of some of the cleaners, carers and others whom everybody works with and knows. We should all think about the language that we use when we are considering what we want.

I used to work in the railway industry, in which the cleanliness of trains and their toilets was a high priority. The staff did not get the wage that they should have received for dealing with some of the things that make a good public service and transport system. That applies to many sectors. I wanted to say that because I feel a wee bit uncomfortable about some the language that is being used.

Secondly, on the youth employment strategy, the Government has had many conversations and progressive and improved statements have been issued and published. Alongside that, we have the work of the Equal Opportunities Committee, the equalities analysis of the budget and the genuine wish across Government to improve how data are collected so that we know where women and people with disabilities work, and to separate that information so that we can identify the gaps.

Given all that work, it is unfortunate that the youth unemployment strategy does not contain any such disaggregation or the other things that could have been included in it right from the beginning. Small projects in Scotland that support women working with women to get them back into work from unemployment are known to work. We know from our experiences in the trade union movement that work that focuses specifically on women always delivers results. Many companies also know that when a women-only open day is held at a workplace that is usually considered to be a man's place of work, that conversation opens the door.

The strategy is weak, because it does not pick up on that. That does not mean that we cannot make suggestions, some of which relate to initiatives that are specific to women and girls. Such initiatives should be linked to any work on youth unemployment. There should also be a requirement on modern apprenticeships to provide childcare where young people need it. Statistics show—I do not know the figures off the top of my head—the number of people who will be parents by the time they are 24 years old. The strategies relate to young people; if such young people are planning to start a family, the provision of childcare will alter their approach to their apprenticeship application and to the labour market. It would be welcome if the committee and MSPs could develop those two things in the youth unemployment strategy.

The Convener: That is a good point.

I am keen to discuss a couple of other topics. How widespread is flexible working? In the workplace in which I was based, flexible working was bubbling underneath and starting to raise its head. On my employer's attitude to flexible working, staff were offered either zero hours contracts that were flexible for the employer but not for them, or flexible contracts, which are different from flexible working. Both give flexibility to the employer, but absolutely no flexibility to the employee. How widespread has flexible working become throughout the sectors that you represent? A few members and witnesses have indicated that they wish to speak, so I want to bring in Emma Ritch and then Clare Adamson before moving on to Pauline Rourke.

14:45

Emma Ritch: I will try to offer a partial answer to Annabel Goldie's question about culture and flexibility. Close the Gap works with a range of private and public sector employers, specifically those that are covered by the Government's economic strategy. We find a mixed picture when it comes to flexible working. There are a lot of unintended consequences to the design of the working day, performance management and how managers perceive employees to be contributing in terms of their productivity, that act against the idea of flexibility.

For example, a team in the finance sector will have financial performance targets. If a team member wants to work flexibly and reduce their hours but the performance management framework is not flexible enough to reduce the team's performance targets, it would act against the interests of the team's performance for its manager to agree to a flexible working proposal. The obvious solution is to have more flexibility in the performance management targets but—as I

am sure Elaine Dougall and others who work in the sector could tell you—that is a difficult task.

Budgets also act against managers' agreeing to individual flexible working requests. Sadly, we see little centrality and few human resources departments have oversight of flexible working requests across their organisations, so individual employers often do not know how many requests come in. There is a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which does not act in the interests of those who want to work flexibility—men or women. Whether there is a centralised or devolved budget for staffing issues can affect decisions on whether to agree to an individual's flexible working. It might be that the budget holder does not have enough in their budget to employ someone to backfill for someone who wants to work flexibly; that is not within the budget holder's control. In our experience, such perverse incentives operate in a range of sectors.

From our perspective, there are some examples of good practice, although the unions that operate in the companies might have other views. BT is often cited as a company that has taken a radical look at the issue and has reworked flexibility in some of its operations. I can sense that Pauline Rourke has an alternative opinion.

Pauline Rourke: I disagree.

Emma Ritch: There are ways of ensuring that work does not have to be done in the nine-to-five structure, with everyone in the same place. Some companies exploit teleworking and other opportunities to use communications technology more than others, which allows their employees flexibility. There is also an impact on sustainability if a company does not maintain a central office full of staff. If they are dispersed, that reduces the company's environmental footprint.

All those steps are more salient in tight labour markets. We can create a better business argument for such radical rethinking when there is tight competition in recruiting and retaining staff. We currently have slack and slackening labour markets, so there is space for the committee and the Government to think about how it can encourage employers to grasp some of the nettles. If we do not do that, women will start to backslide in terms of their position in the labour market and the take-up of flexible working, which is critical if women's attachment to the labour market is to be retained.

Clare Adamson: My comments will represent some more anecdotal evidence, I am afraid. I come from an information technology background and I know, from research that the British Computer Society has done at United Kingdom level, that even within three years of graduating there is a big pay gap between men and women in the IT industry.

My experience is that IT offers many opportunities for flexible working, and I have worked in organisations that encourage it. However, I can also say that, without exception, the women's pay was at a far lower level than the equivalent levels of full-time staff. I have not seen the company passing that saving on to customers, who were charged a rate for the service that was being provided. The attitude is just accepted and is not challenged enough. I seek any opinions on how we could challenge employers on equal pay.

Pauline Rourke: On what Emma Ritch said about BT, I concur that BT is very flexible with the contracts that it offers, but that is not done on behalf of the workforce: it is for the business. Some people work on 7 until 11 contracts Monday to Sunday, and there is evidence that many women who return want to reduce their hours, perhaps from full time to part time, and so they volunteer.

I am dealing with a couple of cases in which individuals want to return and have offered different work patterns, but the company is still reluctant to work with them. You would think that it would be quite easy to fit someone who wants to work for four hours into a 12-hour parameter. It should be quite easy to meet those individuals at least half way, but the evidence shows something quite different. Unfortunately, those individuals often leave and thereby lose their skills. They often go off ill because they are working shift patterns, or they reduce their hours to help with childcare and their wages are reduced, which means a double dip. It is unfortunate that private industry and business is so reluctant to work with such individuals, who often form only a small percentage of the overall workforce. They should look at sliding other people's shifts.

Emma Ritch also raised the issues of performance management and targets. Although I digress, it is essential to look at those for women in the workplace, particularly for part-time women workers and women who are on job-sharing contracts. There is clear evidence that those women struggle with the targets that are given to full-time workers. I have given evidence on that and it brings in another strand to the equation.

The private sector has so much more to play for in ensuring a healthy workforce by working within the jeopardy hours for the company or providing more homeworking facilities. We have been encouraging BT to do that for a long time. There was a homeworking project, but the caveat was that there would have to be reduced terms, conditions and wages. We are looking for a bit of fair play here.

The Convener: Thank you for that. From the little that I know about flexible working, it seems that employers are frightened of it and think that it will disadvantage them, so they put up barriers to it without looking at the issues properly and without seeing that there can be huge advantages to it. It was interesting to hear what Pauline Rourke said about homeworking and BT, because when I worked for BT many years ago, quite a lot of people worked from home on exactly the same terms and conditions. That is a further slip which is quite unfortunate, and it is sad to see it.

Elaine Dougall: I agree with Pauline Rourke. Employers seem to have a fear factor when the flexible working request comes to their table or when an employee goes to their team leader to ask for it. It is a struggle. Every day I receive phone calls and e-mails from concerned members from across the public and private sectors that express the same concerns. As Pauline Rourke said, sometimes employers who have a 12-hour or even a 24-hour working window do everything in their power to give the business reason for not helping and supporting an individual. If the committee could look at the issue objectively, it could look at the exact reasons for employers' refusals to grant flexible working.

We are working with Close the Gap on work in relation to local authorities and the impact that the cuts are having, particularly on women. We have asked how many requests for flexible working have been agreed or rescinded. My experience has been that the recession has hit and employers want to change shift patterns, so people are being served notice of changes to their contracts, working hours and flexible working patterns, which is a catalyst for other problems.

We want to keep the talent in our workplaces. Women bring diversity to an organisation. They can change an organisation's dynamic, whether it is already female-dominated, male-dominated or 50:50. We have to remember that. There is a real concern that organisations are only talking about what they cannot do rather than what they can do.

I have noticed that women are being asked to spread, say, a 20-hour contract over five or six days, which is not helpful to people with caring commitments. If you allow two hours a day to travel to and from work, that represents a full-time job. People feel pressured because they need the money. They are not out there in the world to work for pin money; they are there to support a family, and are often the only person working in that household. I think that there is a bit of naughtiness, for want of a better word, on the part of employers in relation to the way in which they expect women, in particular, to manoeuvre and bend to suit the needs of the company.

The Convener: That is true. I have seen the fear factor being used. People are told, "If you don't agree to do these hours, there's a queue of people outside waiting to take your job. Just leave." Women are too frightened to do anything but what they are told. They are forced into work and are doing jobs that they have to do to support their family and they have to fit them around the other things that they do. In such circumstances, they are forced into agreeing a contract that, in different circumstances, they would not take. Employers know that women will bow down and sign the contract, and they use that to their advantage.

Annabel Goldie: I thought that what you were saying was extremely interesting, Elaine. However, I would like to clarify what you said about the fear factor. Did you say that the fear factor involved an employer being afraid that they cannot cope with the request for flexible time? It is not even getting down to the level of any other issue, it is as simple as someone saying, "I can't cope with this," and pulling down the shutters.

Elaine Dougall: In my experience, as soon as the request comes through, the employer says, "Oh my goodness. We have to deal with something." That causes the dynamic in the relationship between employer and employee to change slightly.

Annabel Goldie: Thank you. I just wanted to clarify that point.

The Convener: Yes, that is the fear factor.

Kirsty Connell: To continue the point about employer refusal of requests for flexible working, from my experience as a trade union shop steward in a Scottish non-departmental public body, I would say that the attitude of the employer and the activity of the employer can be quite disparate. The flexible working policy of my previous employer was that it could be requested by any parent of a child under 18, which is better than the legal minimum. Unfortunately, the other trade union representatives and I found that our most frequent bit of casework involved supporting women who were returning to work after having a baby and wished to reduce their hours. The reason why that was such a problem, even though the employer's policy was good on paper, was that, although it was possible to make the flexible working commitment, there was a reluctance at the middle-management level to release staff. That goes back to Emma Ritch's point about performance management.

We have also found that there are certain sticking points. There seemed to be no problem with someone reducing their hours from five days to four days, but any further reduction—perhaps to three days, following the birth of a second child—

caused a lot more problems. That sort of managerial decision is the source of a lot of the problems that arise, and that is the case even with decent employers that have good flexible working policies.

Anne-Marie Mackin: You probably will not be surprised to hear me say that flexible working and associated initiatives such as carers' leave do not really work in the childcare sector or in relation to any registered care provision that has ratios and services to be maintained. As I mentioned, there is no back-up qualified and registered sessional support workforce that is ready to step in if people are off. It is a nightmare. When the initiative was first announced—I worked in project management at the time—people said, "Oh no. This cannot work in our sector." It goes against what the sector is trying to do for the rest of the population.

As an aside, anyone who works in childcare and finishes at 6 o'clock—which most do—cannot use childcare themselves if they do not have someone else to collect the child or children. There just are not enough flexible support services, such as sitter services, which are expensive but are one way around the issue. Further, child minding does not always meet the needs of families, and I understand that childminders are de-registering because of all of the issues that they have to deal with.

On the impact of flexible working on the childcare sector, many services are not busy on a Friday because so many people work flexibly—there are issues in Edinburgh anyway, because of the half day of school on Fridays. If two thirds of parents do not need care on a given day during the week or in the holidays, that can have a massive impact. If the service is not sustainable, there is no childcare for anybody. That goes back to the point about the unintended consequences of something that might seem like a good idea.

It also goes back to Ann Henderson's point that we need childcare to be free at the point of delivery and provided in the right places. We are so far from where we need to be to deal with all the issues that have been discussed this afternoon. If the childcare issues were dealt with so that care was available for longer hours, was more responsive to family needs, was provided in the right locations and was either free or relatively affordable, that would deal with many of the other issues. Sustainability is a massive issue in the childcare sector. Once several people lose their jobs, cut their hours or start working flexibly, that can have a massive impact. The issues are linked.

15:00

Linda Somerville: I will talk about some of the points about culture and how we start to change attitudes in organisations. Without doubt, there has on the surface been a massive shift in employers' attitudes towards women at work and flexible employment in the past 10 years. Legislation has driven some of that and some employers have taken the initiative to take things further.

However, there is a huge gulf between employers' agreed policies and procedures and the implementation of those across companies. There is an issue at the decision-making level at which such procedures are enforced. All too often, lower-level management make the decisions without any training or understanding of their impacts and from a narrow business perspective. The leadership or human resources people in a company might be seriously committed to widening flexible employment and might think that they are doing a good job but, at a lower level, that is not filtering through at all. Any trade union representative will have such issues as a large part of their case load. That is my experience, too. Dealing with people whose flexible working requests are often unfairly or unreasonably refused is a large part of the case load.

Another large part of a trade union official's case load in representing people at work involves, without a doubt, people who have been on long-term sick leave, who are all too often women, returning to work, and women returning from maternity leave. Answering questions about that takes up the majority of a trade union official's time. Even when an organisation goes through massive redundancies and restructuring, there will still be an enormous workload from people asking, for example, whether they can be downgraded, why they cannot change their hours or why they can come back only on an evening shift when they used to work during the day. That continues.

Although attitudes have changed a lot, there is a lot of work to be done on the ground to implement flexible working throughout and in a fair and reasonable way. Flexible working does not always suit families, because they can end up as a revolving-door family. All too often, women return to work after a career break and end up taking some of the many back shifts in employers.

Specific sectors have limited opportunities for part-time working and family-friendly policies. In engineering, for example, there are limited opportunities, even with the big employers. They might say that they offer such opportunities, but nobody has ever done it before or taken them up on that because women are in such small numbers in the workplace.

The situation is no different between the public and private sectors. In higher education, most of the large universities offer all the right policies and often make more generous statements, but the

situation on the ground and the mechanics of how things work are very different. An example of that is research grants. Many researchers in Scotland are funded through research grants that are paid through university departments. They do interesting, challenging and innovative work to further our knowledge-based economy. However, when somebody is being appointed to a two-year research grant, the supervisor for the grant will know that they will not receive any maternity leave cover should the person whom they employ disappear for six months or potentially longer. Therefore, the supervisor is not encouraged to take on women whom they think might be in that position. There are structural issues about how funding councils hand out research grants. For example, they do not make provision for maternity leave cover from core funding.

Another cultural issue is that, no matter how much we try to prepare women to move into areas of occupational segregation—such as information technology, which is still very male dominated, construction or engineering—there is still a flip side. If you put women into workplaces that have not been prepared for them, you will find that they will simply leave. The attrition rate of women entering those sectors is high and many who do so, perhaps just after graduation, leave after two or three years. Around 75 per cent of the women in Scotland with science, engineering or technology qualifications who have had occupations in those areas have left them; in comparison, the figure for men is less than 50 per cent. Such a significant difference indicates that something structural is driving women out of those workplaces and the issue is as much to do with culture as it is to do with long working hours or other factors. As I have said, the workplace needs to be prepared for women through, for example, gender awareness training for employers and employers at a senior level taking leadership and making it clear that they are going to change workforce attitudes.

My final point is about the societal norm of full-time working. Employers assume that full-time working is the norm and that anyone who deviates from that in any way—by making, say, a flexible working request, a request to work part-time or whatever—is somehow seen as not being serious or committed to their employment. Employers need to change their approach and be more creative in looking at and designing part-time jobs. I am talking not about cutting a full-time job in two but about jobs that can be done part-time. There is a high demand for part-time employment among women, not just those with young children or caring responsibilities. After all, many women never return to full-time employment in their working lives, and a skills match between those women and the sectors that have big skills gaps and shortages needs to be carried out. Dennis Robertson has already mentioned the energy sector, which has particular problems. Even though it is expanding, only 16 per cent of the workforce is female. There is a mismatch with regard to what employers can do to attract women into those sectors.

John Finnie: In a past life, I was a full-time official with the Scottish Police Federation. In 1995, I was involved in negotiations with the then Scottish Home and Health Department about the introduction of part-time working and job sharing, and I am dismayed to hear that many of the attitudes that I encountered then still prevail.

I found it hugely fascinating to understand how people saw these matters. Terminology, for example, was hugely important. People would vigorously argue that things such as equality, fairness and human rights apply to them but, in many instances, might not feel so strongly about how they might apply to others. For example, I used to have lots of debates over the term "full-time working"; I would say, "Well, we all work 40 hours a week. That's not full-time, so how can we value anyone less who's averaging 36, 38 or whatever number of hours a week?"

The biggest attitudinal change that I saw in my dealings with some conservative—with a small c—senior police officers who took an interest when in fact it should have been more junior people taking the interest came about when the first male officer in my force came forward and requested to work part-time. It was all seen as quite a macho thing. He wanted to average 24 hours a week and was told, "No, you must work more than that." I cannot recall who mentioned it, but one of the people around the table talked about evidencing a position; in that particular case, I said, "Either the request can be accommodated within work practices—as we all know it can be—or you will need to evidence that it can't." As I have said, terminology is hugely important.

Many people have talked about education and respect. Actually, the issue can also be about workplace respect. Things might be different in a larger workforce, but I know that people in smaller workforces who would want to work different combinations, be that part-time working, job sharing or whatever, feel a certain peer pressure. Indeed, it is the kind of pressure that is felt by women when they go on or return from maternity leave or by those on return-to-work programmes who are staging a gradual return to work. Education is still a huge issue, and it is not just about dealing with belligerent employers but about encouraging workforces to understand that we can all benefit from these practices and be respectful of our colleagues.

Margaret Boyd: First of all, I should apologise for the way I am speaking. I had dental treatment this morning.

I have listened to and agree with absolutely every point that has been made, no matter whether it applies to the public or private sector. I have worked in the private sector for 39 years with McVitie's—I am sorry, Annabel, but I cannot get you Caramel Wafers. [*Laughter*.]

Dennis Robertson: They do Jaffa Cakes.

Margaret Boyd: Yes. I can get you Jaffa Cakes.

As I said, I have worked with McVitie's for 39 years, and in the 1970s a lot of things were hard. The chairman at the time was Lord Hector Laing, who was a good employer. We had only four sites, but now we have 11 sites nationally and in Europe, so McVitie's is becoming quite a global empire. Different people from different walks of life have come into that environment through changes in management, takeovers and so on. In the 1970s, it was predominantly women who worked in McVitie's, who obviously had families and childcare issues. The women were loyal long-term workers because they loved McVitie's, or what used to be McFarlane's.

However, things started to happen when different chairmen, management, HR and suchlike took over. We are talking about flexible working as if it is an absolute law, but everything had to be negotiated by the trade unions, which introduced everything that affected how women worked in the factories. A young woman worker in the 1970s and 1980s who was full-time and had a first child could come back to work on the back shift, but that does not happen any more.

I agree with Pauline Rourke that employers tend to favour a 12-hour shift pattern now because they want fewer workers. The 12-hour pattern creates a skilled workforce for each shift when a factory runs for 24 hours, but it reduces the workforce numbers. It is basically all about money and being interested in profits and nothing else.

I understand where Stuart McMillan is coming from regarding apprenticeships and work for young men as well. For example, I was training a guy to pack who had come out of university and was a microbiologist, but he just could not get a job. He is still there as an office boy in HR. I understand every point that has been made. The ratio of women to men in the workforce now is about 60:40, rather than the workforce being predominantly women. Young men are coming in to do packing as well and work in the warehouses or whatever.

There are a lot of equal pay issues because a lot of factories use grading. As Elaine Dougall said, we still have to negotiate when one person asks for it, although there is an equality policy. The trade unions still have to negotiate everything that is brought up in any meeting.

McVitie's is a fairly good company to work for and it has always had a good name, particularly for equality. It does not tolerate bullying, for example—I do not know how that happens within management. However, a woman cannot go forward for shop-floor management, no matter how clever she is. Men get the jobs in shop-floor management. The most that a woman can get is to be a supervisor or a team leader on the shop floor, controlling a little team—that is about it.

It has been proven through the years that that is how it all works. There are not a lot of women at the top of McVitie's. I was at a company meeting two years ago with all the directors and I was the only woman there. That was pointed out to me when I was there and I said, "That fazes me how?" Things like that still happen. It is done very politely and in a subtle way, but there has been no movement. Although the policies are in place—we always work to get the policies in place, and we always manage to do that—as Elaine Dougall said, if you accompany a worker with a case for flexible working, the employer will still come up with a business reason why it cannot be done.

15:15

The Convener: Thanks very much for that.

Just before we move on—three other people have indicated that they would like to speak—when you say that women cannot go forward, do women put themselves forward and they are not selected, or do they just not bother, because they know that it will not happen?

Margaret Boyd: It is mostly the case that they put themselves forward and are then not selected.

Annabel Goldie: What kind of job would they put themselves forward for?

Margaret Boyd: A job such as a training instructor. We are talking about starting from the bottom. Women who work in factories become quite creative. Even in their own little area, they are quite proud of what they do and have ideas for improving productivity and quality. They might put themselves forward for a committee on lean production. It does not happen very often that a woman is chosen.

The Convener: Thank you for that clarification. As I said, three more people would like to speak. I will bring in those three people and then we will move on and cover some more of the topics in the paper. There is a lot to get through, and I would like us to cover as much ground as we can.

Stuart McMillan: Are there any examples of employers that are good on flexible working, as opposed to the negative stories that we have heard? Are there any good examples?

Elaine Dougall: The national health service is very good at accommodating flexible working requests from male and female staff.

Stuart McMillan: Are there any other examples?

Barbra Farmer: I work for the national Government department HM Revenue and Customs. In general, I find that it is quite good on family-friendly working.

Stuart McMillan: I am conscious that those two examples are from the public sector. We have not had any good examples from the private sector.

Pauline Rourke: I think that it would be wrong to suggest that in the company in which I represent members everyone has an issue. The point that I was trying to make is that, although a lot of legislation and policies are in place, the reality is that for every case that is agreed, there are X cases in which there is reluctance to agree to flexible working. No application for flexible working hours is met with the response, "No problem—that will be arranged." Obstacles are put up.

The word "evidence" is essential. If someone wants to work in an industry for 20 hours a week and the employer says, "We do not do attendance schedules for 20 hours on fixed hours," it is necessary to ask why. When a company has a workforce of thousands, it is for us to ask why someone cannot be accommodated. There will be many good examples but, in the job that we do, we do not deal with the good examples; we deal with the people who struggle to be accommodated in that way.

Stuart McMillan: I posed the question for a reason, which is to do with the committee's future work programme.

If there are good examples in the public and the private sectors, would it be feasible for some work to be done to educate employers in the public and private sectors so that they know that flexible working is a good thing and that it will not hamper the business but will make things better, certainly from a human resources perspective?

The Convener: Linda Somerville and Emma Ritch have indicated that they want to speak on the point that Stuart McMillan raised and have promised that they will be brief. Clare Adamson has a question. Is it on the same point?

Clare Adamson: It is really an extension of Stuart McMillan's question. I am interested to know whether there are any examples of workers' co-operatives that do things quite differently. There is an area—I cannot remember where it is, but I think that it is in Spain—where nearly everything is in the workers' co-operative. Do we know how they do it, and is that better?

Emma Ritch: I am sorry, but I do not know the answer to your question.

On Stuart McMillan's point, when we work with private sector employers we find what Linda Somerville talked about—that the decisions are delegated to line managers or possibly business units. We see some excellent practice within some teams and business units but, across the company, because there is so little centralisation on the issue of flexibility, it is hard to say that such-and-such is a great employer with regard to flexibility.

Linda Somerville: My answer is similar to Emma Ritch's. I know the finance sector quite well. It has a lot of large employers with very good policies, and some of them apply those well within, for example, their IT departments. Those departments tend to be more male dominated and there tends to be a bit more standardisation in the policies—maybe the nature of the work lends itself to that. In areas such as back-office processing, however, working patterns are much more rigid and people have to fight for that type of flexibility. It is difficult to identify a single employer, particularly among the larger employers, as they will have different levels of good practice.

We also need to think about small employers. Small and medium-sized enterprises do not always have the same capacity to take on the range of flexible practices. They need to ask, "What is the actual job design?"—that is where they can do something to be more creative. It sometimes suits small employers to have people working part-time, doing only the required amount of work. They need to be a bit more creative about that.

Stuart McMillan: I was going to raise that issue, but I am conscious of the time.

Barbra Farmer: I have generally found the contact centre that I work in at HMRC very good at operating family-friendly policies. We need to have the maximum number of staff in to cover the call peaks during the day but, as a union rep, I get very few cases of people not being able to work the flexible hours that they want. The only minor downside to that is the fact that, because of our opening hours—we are open until 8 o'clock at night and at weekends—we always ask people who want to work flexibly to work a certain number of what are described as unsocial hours. Apparently, that makes the case stronger for their being allowed to work flexibly.

However, there tends to be a different story when it comes to employers being flexible around disability. In 2010, when we had a very bad winter and I could not get in to work for about two weeks, I had fairly major arguments with my manager about whether I would have to take the time out of my holidays or whether I would be allowed to have the time off because of my disability.

The Convener: That is shocking. Ann, would you like to come back in now?

Ann Henderson: I will come back in later. I will let you move on to another topic.

The Convener: We have had a good discussion, and it is good that everybody has been able to comment. A lot of interesting points have been raised. However, it is important that we talk about the impact of the recession on rates of employment among women. The public sector is another huge issue for women, as cuts to local authority budgets have had a huge impact on local services and a lot of women work in the public sector as home helps or carers, sometimes part time. I know, from my local authority, that a lot of pressure is put on the staff to reduce their hours while doing the same job. Where they went out double manned, they are now expected to go out on their own, so there is also a health and safety aspect. The cuts have had a huge impact, so it is important that we broaden out the discussion to include those topics.

Elaine Dougall: That is my area, convener. I work in the not-for-profit sector and, for the past three or four years, the cuts that are being imposed by local authorities have been impacting not only on our Unite members' terms and conditions, but on the people whom they support locally.

I am talking about the most vulnerable people in our society, such as those who have mental health issues, drug addiction, learning disabilities, and people with disabilities—all different types of people. The staff are highly experienced and qualified.

It is estimated that, in the past two years, up to 50 per cent of the budget has been cut from some organisations that I work with. I wish that I could sit here and say that employers are trying to change workers' terms and conditions because they are being bad employers, but I have sympathy for them because they are trying to maintain a standard. They do not want to race to the bottom. They do not want profit-making organisations to come into our communities and support our family members.

The cuts have had a detrimental effect predominantly on women who work in the not-for-profit sector. We have already spoken about people being asked to do more work, visit more service users, and take on bigger caseloads under worse terms and conditions, such as longer working hours, and changes to their schedules at less than 24 hours' notice. Our members do it because it is more than a job; it is part of what they are. They care about the people whom they support in the community.

As the years roll on, the situation will become even more devastating. I have seen the changes that have taken place in the past 18 months and the future is not looking bright. Our members, particularly the women, are concerned about how they can sustain the amount of work that is being asked of them, and work with the changes to their working practices and the services that they need to support them at the local level.

The Convener: I echo every word that you say. From speaking to people who are involved in caring, mostly as home helps, I know that because of the cuts to their hours and the change that is being made to the services that they provide, the duties that they used to have have been taken away. Because they build up a relationship with the people who they care for, they do not look on what they do as a job, as such. They try to do the same job that they did before the changes were made, because they know that people need the services that they provide. A lot of them also go back outwith their working hours to pick up the slack of the job that they could not do earlier because they did not have the time. They do that because they have a deep sense of responsibility and caring.

The cuts to the third sector have had a huge impact on caring, too. It is recognised that the third sector provides the best level of care, but huge cuts have been made to that and it is disadvantaging the people who are being cared for, predominantly by women.

Ann Henderson: We are just beginning to see what impact the recession and the changes that are happening at Westminster with tax credits and benefits will have on the lives of women and their families in Scotland. We are all moving into that context, and from what Elaine Dougall is describing, we know that a lot of the voluntary sector services would have provided an extra pair of hands to a family in the past. I am talking about services such as important advice services, which, if they are well delivered in a local authority area, make a huge difference by ensuring that people get the benefits and support to which they are entitled and which might keep them or their family in employment or allow them to access employment. Those issues will become bound together in a way that will make a lot of families' lives really hard.

Through discussion like this among ourselves, and with the committee and the Parliament, I hope

that we can begin to explore with the Scottish Government what can be done right now—as well as talking about the bigger picture for the future—to alleviate some of the pressures, and begin to speak up for the people who are working in these sectors and trying to deliver the same quality of service when it cannot be done.

15:30

When the tax credit changes kick in, families will lose significant income in their houses. They are already trying to work under pressure to deliver a job. The STUC is quite worried. We have heard very difficult stories at our annual conferences over the past three or four years. Women are really struggling to hold their families together, and we need to get hold of many issues.

In all the work that we do, we should remember the most vulnerable women. Elaine Dougall mentioned some of those groups. The STUC has been particularly interested in working with refugees, asylum seekers and their families. It must be recognised that women in those families have a huge amount to contribute to Scotland's economy. It is not about being a drain; it is about what is brought. It is also about not taking away little services such as community drop-in services, community centres, libraries that are open on Sundays, and the extra language tuition that is necessary to support children in a completely new city and a new school. All those things are being picked away at, but that does not always show up in the headline figures. Perhaps we need to think about asking different questions when we are looking at Government policies or decisions about budgets.

I know that the Scottish Refugee Council has mentioned that its women's strategy group recently produced a report that focuses on how much refugee women and asylum-seeking women want to contribute to the society in which they are trying to live and bring up their families. They want to be part of society here. I understand that the committee has a copy of that report, and we are certainly interested in looking at it a bit further. It might be worth looking at ensuring that we pick up and speak for women who will not be around the table. Some of the discussion that we have had has been very much based on us being around the table.

People's lives do not stay constant. Things change: it is the same for everybody. People do not know when illness will come, when something will happen in the family, or when their hours will be cut to a level that means that they will lose their house. The systems that we as a society have in place must recognise that if a person has had a difficulty with drug addiction at one stage in their life, that does not mean that that is it and they are labelled. That is not the society that we want to be part of. If a person has been in a particular job for a period, that does not mean that they will have that job all of their life, as other things will change. We discuss such things in the STUC, and we would be interested in exploring some of them. It is about ensuring that the voices of people who are not always around the table are heard.

The Convener: That is a really good point.

One of the most obvious main disadvantages of the welfare reform stuff that is going through is that we do not know how it will impact, and by the time we do, it will be too late. The Government here intends to monitor the impact of welfare reform, but it is very much a matter of closing the stable door, as we will not know the impact until the cuts take effect. It will be a year down the line before we will really be aware of what has happened. That is not the fault of the Government here. Quantifying what the effect will be is difficult.

Ann Henderson made a really good point about refugee women and asylum-seeking women. It is about the voices of the unheard. It is important that they get a place at this table as well and that their points are raised at it too.

Emma Ritch: I want to pick up on something that Elaine Dougall said earlier about work that we are doing with the STUC women's committee and talk about monitoring and public sector employment. The STUC women's committee submitted freedom of information requests to all 32 local authorities, which asked about the impact that the squeeze on public sector funding had had on a range of employment indicators. Issues such as flexible working, whether redundancies were compulsory or voluntary, overtime allocations and the reduction in contracts following the public sector cuts were looked at. We wanted to consider the immediate position and establish a baseline so that we could monitor the impact as the recovery goes on. What we discovered was incredibly alarming—not so much the impact that the cuts are having on employment, but the fact that local authorities are not keeping that information.

In fact, four local authorities could not even tell us how many women and men they employ, let alone provide us with a finer granularity of information. Moreover, only four local authorities actually knew how many men and women worked for them part time, and the figures are even worse for more detailed matters such as flexible working. If local authorities have no idea who is working for them in what capacity and under what terms and conditions, we will have no chance of monitoring the impact of the recession on women in work.

I am extremely disturbed to find that, five years after the introduction of the gender equality duty, which legally requires public bodies including all

local authorities to keep, analyse and use this information, there seems to have been such a dereliction of duty. Close the Gap would be very keen for the committee to bear in mind the need for gender disaggregated data. I am sure that there is no particular reason to think that the NHS, universities or colleges are in a radically better position than local authorities with regard to employment data, so we might well not know how the recession is impacting on women in the public sector.

Annabel Goldie: Can you share that data with the committee?

Emma Ritch: Yes. Once we have completed the analysis, we will be very happy to share the report with the committee and supply further information.

The Convener: That would be very useful.

Anne-Marie Mackin: Building on my earlier points about the fragility of the registered care workforce—not just the childcare workforce but home care workers and so on—I think that welfare reform might be the straw that breaks the camel's back. As well as the pressure to be qualified, registered and whatever, we need to bear in mind the housing benefit cap, cuts to child tax credits and other issues for lone parents, which many working women are. Indeed, I have just heard today of potential problems with providing real-time earnings data in connection with the introduction of the universal credit. That will act as another pressure particularly on small voluntary sector organisations, which will be required to constantly feed in information about working hours. As anyone who works in care knows, the flexibility in working hours that people need can have a big impact on their earnings, and having to produce such data will have a real impact on the voluntary sector. There is what you might call a spaghetti of issues with regard to the care sector and welfare reform.

John Finnie: Picking up on the points that Anne-Marie Mackin and Elaine Dougall made, I point out that all Scotland's local authorities have statutory obligations that cannot be met without the voluntary sector's active involvement, particularly in care work, and we all know the significant and, indeed, predominant role that women play in the delivery of that care.

I have to say that I am very concerned about some of the approaches that are being taken. For instance, I would be greatly concerned if—and I capitalise, underline and set that word in bold—a large local authority were thinking about taking a per capita approach to dealing with social care issues; after all, it would not do the same for the collection of refuse bins. I am presently dealing with such an issue, and hope that what I have suggested does not turn out to be the case.

We need to change the sort of attitude that leads a local authority to consider cutting cleaning hours as the first step. The welfare reforms are predicated on making a 25 per cent saving as a starting point, not on any assessment of need or whether any savings that might be made might in the end cost us more. If we do not have a situation in which assessed need is being met, we will simply be asking staff, be they from the public, private or voluntary sector, to compromise expected standards. That approach can only take us in a direction we do not want to go, and local authorities need to look long and hard at their statutory obligations.

As for making a uniform cut across departments, the fact is that in these challenging times, no matter who is in control in a local authority, this sum of money cannot be removed from the settlement without there being some impact. Difficult decisions about priorities will have to be made, and the people in this room might well have significantly different priorities from some of those who are making—or, indeed, have recently made—important budgetary decisions. There are challenges ahead, and it is incumbent on the committee to continue to provide a monitoring role.

Linda Somerville: You are talking about the recession and about where it takes us. I am not trying to negate any of its downside for women's employment—we have heard some of the stories—but it sometimes takes an emergency situation to push people into action, or at least to review where we are and to move forward. There is an opportunity just now, in the face of growing unemployment, for the committee and the Government to look beyond our current norms regarding employment for women, particularly in public service and caring and voluntary sector roles. There is an opportunity to ask how women can be utilised in our economy, particularly in the key areas that the Government has set out in its economic strategy.

Earlier I mentioned the skills match, and more work needs to be done through Skills Development Scotland and other agencies to put together a picture of where we need people at work, because we have that slightly askew. The Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies—SEMTA—says that 21 per cent of its members are struggling to fill vacancies, so there is a mismatch. The fastest-growing part of the Scottish economy, where job numbers are concerned, is computing and information technology, but education and employment in IT has one of the slowest uptakes by women.

If we are looking at a digital future and a knowledge-based economy, there is a definite mismatch, and there is a potential role for the financial industries and energy advisory boards. The energy advisory board is particularly key in looking at how the Scottish Government wants to meet its targets for renewables and at who will do the work. There are so few women working in these industries, yet employers have a skills shortage.

Stuart McMillan: I am a member of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, and this morning we had a session on the economy in which there was a lot of comparative data in a range of areas, predominantly comparing the UK and other European nations. Is there any such comparative information for the IT industry, which could be used to encourage females in Scotland to go into training in the field, including at university, and to consider IT as a future job?

Linda Somerville: There is a lot of data throughout Europe. In eastern European countries the numbers of women in the science, engineering and technology sector are very high, and Latvia probably has the highest number of female engineers in employment. There are models that we can look at, and probably other ways in which we can structure things.

However, as I said earlier, there is a wider issue in Scotland because of our culture and our societal norms. We have to look at a pipeline that comes all the way from the early years. Dennis Robertson talked about that earlier. We must look at how girls play, and at what we do in primary schools. Unfortunately, it is perhaps the committee's job to look at the whole pipeline—other committees can look at just the education or employment sides—to consider why women do not move into or drop out of these areas. I can probably provide you with other examples.

Stuart McMillan: That information would be useful. I asked the question because I was not aware that the data was already there. I whole-heartedly accept the cultural and societal arguments within Scotland—I dare say they exist across the whole UK—with men going to this and women to that, and boys doing this and girls doing that.

However, if there are good positive examples from elsewhere, we need to talk about those and ensure that the information goes into schools so that young people are better informed at an earlier age and when they pick their subjects and make potential career choices.

The Convener: I will bring in Emma Ritch and Annabel Goldie, who have promised to give a brief response to Stuart McMillan. We will then move on, because time is short.

15:45

Emma Ritch: On learning from Europe, Linda Somerville and I have just participated in a pan-European initiative to share good practice in relation to occupational segregation. Scotland is considered to have some good practice, such as the initiatives that Linda and I are here to represent. However, it is difficult to share good practice because of the different labour market regulations, education systems and other things.

One factor that definitely influences women's labour market participation across Europe is childcare. Countries that have universal childcare provision have almost no part-time work. For example, in Finland, part-time work does not exist because everyone has access to childcare that is free or cheap at the point of use, which allows them to participate fully in the labour market. On learning from Europe, it might be worth while for the committee to consider some of the choices that other European states have made, particularly on childcare.

Annabel Goldie: There might be examples of good practice nearer to home, in Scotland. I was at school with a girl who decided to study engineering. She was one of two female engineering students at the University of Glasgow and she now runs her own state-of-the-art and successful engineering company. There are good examples, although I do not know how we find them. Perhaps we need more proactive engagement with membership business organisations to find out who is doing what. I believe that there are some pretty impressive women out there who perhaps do not even realise that there is a cause to rally to, yet that is what we are identifying.

The Convener: Before I draw the discussion to a close, we will turn to the glass ceiling, which follows on from the issue that we have just discussed. I ask the participants to give a brief summary of their opinion on the glass ceiling. Annabel Goldie made the interesting point that some successful women perhaps do not realise that they have a story to trumpet. However, I still do not think that there are enough of those women to allow us to rest on our laurels and say, "Haven't we done well?"

Emma Ritch: You have set us a challenge, because we could talk about the glass ceiling for hours.

There are usually two glass ceilings in the companies with which we work. It is important for all companies to consider their individual circumstances and culture because, although the broad reasons for the glass ceiling are the same throughout the labour market, it plays out differently in different organisations. The Scottish

resource centre helps science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—companies to examine the issue, and we help companies in other sectors to do that. The trade unions provide a wealth of evidence and information to companies on how they might tackle their glass ceilings.

A lot of attention has been diverted to the issue of women in the boardroom. It is important that we consider who is round the table and involved in corporate governance. There are definitely trickle-down effects from having women serving as non-executive and executive directors, through role modelling and the aspirations that that encourages in women who work in the companies concerned. However, that is not the whole story. We want women to be able to move out of the pink-collar ghetto of administration functions, where, sadly, there is often little progression into other roles.

There is still a huge amount of work to be done on the glass ceiling. The issue has been well researched, but there is a frustrating lack of progress in many quarters. An individual company approach is absolutely necessary, because what works for one organisation will not necessarily read across to others. Examples of good practice are important, but they are not the whole picture, as they might allow companies to abdicate slightly their responsibility to consider what they need to do for their women. The women in an organisation will be able to tell the owner of the business what the barriers are, because they see and experience them every day. Many of the barriers will be the subtle things that Margaret Boyd talked about—women just do not get picked for things however much they put themselves forward.

Sorry—that was not very brief.

The Convener: I invite others to speak. If you do not have a contribution to make, please do not feel that you need to make one. However, as I am sure that you all do, I ask you to be brief.

Linda Somerville: With regard to science, engineering and technology in general, rather than private companies in particular—as we pointed out earlier, although some local authorities have issues with keeping gender-disaggregated figures, the private sector has no obligation to do so, and any companies that do so will probably not tell us what they are—we can say that 9 per cent of professorships in the area are held by women. That means that, even in areas in which there is a critical mass of women, such as biological sciences, they are still not filtering up to the top levels. A lot of the work around women and leadership looks at the human deficit. It says that, if only women had more confidence and put themselves forward more, things would change for them. However, when you compare that to the reality—as I just did with the example of higher education—you can see that there is something structural going on.

We need women at the level that I am talking about because they are good role models for people and influence good decision making. That applies to all decision-making bodies in the private and public sectors.

Although it is good that people are paying attention to the issue of women in boardrooms, on which there have been lots of column inches recently, we have to remember that the only time that most women in Britain will see the inside of a boardroom is when they clean it or take in the coffee, and that the real issues that we face are those that affect the bulk of the women in employment.

Kirsty Connell: We now have a generation of women coming through who are highly educated: they have had a lot of investment in their education at every level and are outperforming boys at school and university. There is a drop-off once women take on family or caring responsibilities and have to take career breaks and so on—that is a real problem in relation to the glass ceiling. Again, the main issue is not really about directors in the boardroom, although people have spoken about that issue; it is to do with women having access to career support throughout their working life in terms of going for promotion, and to softer skills, such as networking, mentoring and working with more senior women and men in the workplace, which is crucial.

Annabel Goldie: May I ask a tiny point by way of cross-examination?

The Convener: No.

Annabel Goldie: It is tiny.

The Convener: How tiny? Tiny, tiny, tiny?

Annabel Goldie: It is minute.

The Convener: Okay, a minute point.

Annabel Goldie: I understand where the witnesses are coming from when they say that the issue is not about women in the boardroom. However, in relation to how we increase the influence of females in organisations, is it not extremely important to try to get women into the boardroom?

Kirsty Connell: Yes. Both issues are important.

Linda Somerville: What Annabel Goldie says is important, but we need a balance.

Annabel Goldie: Thank you for indulging me, convener.

The Convener: You are welcome.

Pauline Rourke: In the industry that I am involved in, there is no difficulty with women being successful and holding and sustaining senior positions. However, the women's committee of the STUC is conscious that there is a need to encourage women to raise their voices in public and political life, and that goes back to encouraging and supporting women and giving them confidence. We hold successful schools, to which women from all industries and walks of life are invited.

Although I recognise that the issue is not a problem in my industry, it remains a problem for society in general. However, there is a quote that goes: "Women who seek equality with men have no ambition."

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Barbra Farmer: In the civil service, there is not such a problem with the glass ceiling—certainly, the current chief executive officer of my department, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, is a woman, as was the previous one. However, I recognise that there is a bigger problem in society.

The Convener: Clare Adamson has a point that she promises is a tiny, tiny, tiny one.

Clare Adamson: It is more of an observation, which I made when we discussed quotas at conference last year. I find even the language that is used in relation to this issue infinitely frustrating. A Government minister talked about examining the idea of having quotas set at about 25 per cent. If that is the quota, you are accepting that 75 per cent will be men. The whole premise is wrong. It is not tenable or defendable and it has to be challenged.

The Convener: I ask Elaine Dougall, Anne-Marie Mackin and Margaret Boyd to comment. I will bring in Ann Henderson at the end, if that is all right.

Elaine Dougall: A lot has been said on the issue already, but my final comment is a plea for women who reach positions of influence in organisations not to pull the ladder up behind them but to encourage other women to take the same step. This is about encouraging, mentoring, supporting and educating other women. We may have women in the boardroom, but sometimes they do not do us the best of favours when they say that there is no discrimination in the workplace.

Anne-Marie Mackin: The committee will not be surprised to hear me say that the glass ceiling is not an issue in childcare. There is something that I have really wanted to say all afternoon and this is my first chance to say it: there is a massive need for men in childcare. As support workers and practitioners, we need positive images for children and vulnerable adults of men as carers. That issue links well with some of the things that were said earlier about attitudes to and perceptions of care, the role of care and the role of carers. It is a massive issue for all sorts of reasons. We are discussing women in work, but in my sector we need more men.

The Convener: Thanks for that. I have saved the best for last: McVitie's biscuits. Margaret, tell us about that.

Margaret Boyd: We are talking about the east end of Glasgow here, where quite a lot of women are ambitious as things stand, without even having a job. They push themselves very hard.

Companies should be encouraged to provide more training for even the most menial job and to keep people's training going. Education is key for young women coming out of schools and colleges. For the science and technology industries, the issue is how they can be made attractive to young people so that that is what they go for. Do not get me wrong—there might be another Marie Curie out there, which would be good. However, the issue is to make those industries really attractive to everybody, and I think that education and training are key.

The Convener: That is a good point.

Margaret Boyd: In the workforce, it does not matter what age you are, because you do not stop learning until you die.

The Convener: Before I bring the discussion to a close, I will bring Ann Henderson back in to summarise some of the points that have been raised this afternoon.

Ann Henderson: Thank you. I begin by saying on behalf of the STUC that we really appreciate the opportunity and space that the committee has given this discussion today. It is taking place during trade union week, which has become an opportunity—we have had such an opportunity perhaps five times in the past few years—for the STUC, affiliated unions and organisations that we work with to come into Parliament and discuss different topics with different parliamentary committees.

This is the first time that the Equal Opportunities Committee has participated in this way. I hope that I speak on behalf of everybody when I say that it has been a really interesting afternoon. The discussion has undoubtedly touched the surface of a number of issues, which I know was partly the point. Certainly, we will all read the transcript of the discussion in the *Official Report* and I will encourage our members who are not here today and other organisations to do the same. Part of the fantastic strength of the Scottish Parliament is the willingness of its members to bring people in to

discuss and drill down into matters and not just to rely on one report or one heading. I have been encouraged by such discussions and we certainly welcome them.

I also encourage people to look at the report of this morning's Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee seminar, at which there were interesting presentations analysing what is happening in the economy and different solutions for getting us out of the difficulties. There is an overlap with the discussion that we have had this afternoon.

A lot of issues that we have been speaking about, including childcare, are economy issues. Equality issues are not in a separate box. They are huge issues for the fair and just society that we all envisage and how the economy that we work in will deliver that. I am looking forward to us all looking at what we can get into in a bit more detail over the next couple of years. I hope that we can work with the committee on that.

16:00

Committee members can get in touch with us if anything occurs to them on which they feel they want additional information. Likewise, they may find that things turn up in their mail on the back of what we might feel when we read the *Official Report*. If we want to add to anything that has been said, we will certainly do that. I hope that organisations that are listening to today's discussion or which read the *Official Report* will also take that opportunity.

I was interested to see that a member of the public—Allison Johnstone—has provided a written submission to the committee, which a number of us read and found interesting. Again, it is fantastic that the Parliament allows any citizen in Scotland to contribute to a discussion and that the committee will consider that contribution on an equal basis. Certainly, such facilities are important to women who are always very busy and may not have much time or the chance to come to a meeting, and we will encourage their use.

It is important that we in the trade union movement try to find the examples that Annabel Goldie and others spoke about. Obviously, a lot of the people whom we have been talking about, who do different jobs, are members of trade unions. As Pauline Rourke said, we encourage them to speak up. This is the first year in the history of the STUC in which there are more women than men on the general council. There is an issue around challenging people's image of the trade union movement—those who work in the workplaces that Margaret Boyd and others have described, speaking up for and working with members on a day-to-day basis.

I appreciate the committee giving us the space to air all of that—thank you very much. I look forward to working with you in the future.

The Convener: Thank you. It has been a really interesting afternoon. We have had a good discussion around a number of subjects, and I am sure that the committee will come back to them—issues such as flexibility, apprenticeships for women, equal pay, which will not go away, and welfare reform, which we will revisit. We look forward to the input that the STUC and its affiliates can give us.

Thank you all very much for coming along. I understand that we have tea and coffee, so please stay for that. Some members will be able to stay a bit longer for a chat.

Meeting closed at 16:02.

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