The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 25 April 2013

Session 4

Thursday 25 April 2013

CONTENTS

	Col.
WOMEN AND WORK	1203

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
13th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)
*Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)
*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Eileen Dinning (Unison Scotland)
Gavin MacGregor (North Ayrshire Council)
Lynn McDowall (Royal College of Nursing Scotland)
Emma Ritch (Close the Gap)
Jill Wood (Engender)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 25 April 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:30*]

Women and Work

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's 13th meeting of 2013. I remind everyone to set any electronic devices to flight mode or switch them off completely.

I will start with some introductions. At the table we have our clerking and research team together with official reporters, and around the room we are supported by broadcasting services and the security office. I welcome the observers in the public gallery. My name is Mary Fee and I am the committee's convener. I invite members and witnesses to introduce themselves in turn, starting on my right.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am the MSP for Edinburgh Central and the deputy convener of the committee.

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

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I am an MSP for North East Scotland.

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

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

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): I am the MSP for Glasgow Shettleston.

Jill Wood (Engender): I am a policy analyst with Engender.

Emma Ritch (Close the Gap): I am a project manager with Close the Gap.

Lynn McDowall (Royal College of Nursing Scotland): I am a professional officer for the Royal College of Nursing Scotland.

Gavin MacGregor (North Ayrshire Council): I am head of human resources and organisational development at North Ayrshire Council.

Eileen Dinning (Unison Scotland): I am an equalities officer for Unison Scotland.

The Convener: The only agenda item today is an evidence session on women and work, with a focus on flexible working. Members have a number of questions for our panel of witnesses. Dennis Robertson will start with some questions about home working. Marco Biagi will then ask about the cultural presumptions around part-time working.

Dennis Robertson: There has been an increase in the number of people having the opportunity to do some home working. What are the barriers to home working and what are the advantages and opportunities of home working, especially for women?

Jill Wood: I will kick off with some anecdotal evidence. In my position as policy analyst at Engender, I get to work from home. We are not the national health service providing front-line services; we are a non-governmental organisation that conducts policy analysis, and that enables me to do that. My colleagues also get to work remotely and we operate other forms of flexible working, such as term-time working and part-time working, to fit our hours around our needs. From that, I see clearly that home working definitely boosts morale and psychological wellbeing as well as loyalty to the organisation. That is an anecdotal point to start with.

Dennis Robertson: Does the flexibility that you have enable things such as childcare to be catered for in a much wider context?

Jill Wood: That is certainly the case for my colleagues. There are term-time workers who can fit their hours around school hours, childcare or whatever their needs are. One of my colleagues who cares for a disabled son has specific needs and would not be able to do her job at all if it was not for Engender's flexible working policies.

Dennis Robertson: Do you feel that employers in general are comfortable in seeking to provide opportunities for more people to work from home?

Jill Wood: A lack of knowledge is one of the main barriers to that. At the Scottish Trades Union Congress women's employment summit, I was struck by an intervention on the assumptions about a lack of career prospects and on people being afraid to ask for those opportunities and to put in requests for flexible working because of the stigma attached to it.

Emma Ritch: Some employers are still wary of home working, and I think that it was quite unhelpful for the new chief executive of Yahoo, Marissa Mayer, to weigh in by saying that one of her first staffing decisions was to remove completely from employees at Yahoo the option of home working.

There are other barriers to working from home, one of which is a lack of management confidence. There is a belief that, without line-of-sight scrutiny of what employees are doing, it will be difficult to manage the delivery of tasks. A number of

organisations have surmounted those barriers and discovered that placing trust in employees is rewarded with increased productivity. BT is one such success story. It has quite a number of call centre operatives who work from home. Among the workers who use such patterns, that has increased productivity and reduced absenteeism by 20 per cent.

In addition, there are issues with procurement. I recently talked to a human resources director at a non-departmental public body who said that he would love to enable more colleagues to work from home, but that the way in which the organisation had procured its information technology systems meant that the system that recorded all the information that was necessary for the delivery of its business was such that it was not possible to access it remotely, and that it was impossible to make it secure on that basis. If the organisation had considered flexible working and home working when it was procuring, a different system might have been bought.

As Jill Wood set out, the benefit of home working for women, who have a greater level of responsibility for caring for children, sick people and older people, is that it offers flexibility. It is obviously not possible for someone to do their job while simultaneously caring for a toddler, but home working would enable them to select nursery provision near their home, which would avoid the difficult challenge of taking their child to a nursery facility and then having to go on to their place of employment, which might not offer a flexible start time.

Gavin MacGregor: Flexible or agile working is a key priority for our organisation. As far as barriers are concerned, I agree with Emma Ritch. The technology is there and we have the policy and procedures, but there are cultural barriers. I was interested in last month's report by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which picked up on that and said that line manager attitudes to flexible working were an issue.

A shift in organisational culture towards outcomes and trust working is required, whereas a lot of managers are more interested in and used to having people in the office, managing their presence and having that control over them.

Dennis Robertson: Are you talking about middle management, such as line managers, supervisors and so on?

Gavin MacGregor: It varies. It helps if senior management provide role models. In our organisation, 11 of our 16 most senior managers are female. Their acting as role models in breaking down barriers can have a significant effect on the people who see that—it cascades down.

The Convener: Would anyone else like to answer the question?

Eileen Dinning: I have a couple of points. I back up Emma Ritch's point that the attitude of employers is still a serious cultural problem. They want a direct line of control, and their attitude to such employees is, "Why are they not here?" That must be addressed.

A big problem with the flexible working regulations, which I mentioned in our submission, is that there are so many opt-outs for employers that it is extremely difficult for people, particularly women, to find an option that suits them. I also make the point that we should not see home working as a substitute for childcare. We need to reinforce our view that childcare is partly a societal responsibility and is not solely for women to deal with.

Home working could offer advantages—provided that health and safety and other factors are dealt with appropriately—for women who live in rural areas, particularly in areas where there have been big cuts in childcare services. There are obvious problems with remote working in such areas.

Home working should be part of a balanced programme of flexible working.

Dennis Robertson: I am interested in rural and remote areas, given the constituency that I represent. Poor connectivity is obviously a barrier to home working. Basically, my thoughts are about whether the connectivity is there and the opportunities exist, although I take your point that home working is no substitute for childcare. I am not suggesting for one moment that it is, but it provides a higher degree of flexibility around the working day—even if children are going to bed at a reasonable time.

Last week, we heard from a witness from the Law Society of Scotland who said that, if people do not finish what they are doing in the office, they have the opportunity to take laptops home and work for a couple of hours in the evening. There is a great deal of flexibility there. If we can get round some of the cultural issues, fear aspects and perhaps lack of trust from middle management, can home working give more women the opportunity to be in work with that degree of flexibility?

Eileen Dinning: I certainly agree that it can, but it has to be just one of a number of available options.

Another point that I want to make is that we should not underestimate the importance of people having a social and personal connection with work colleagues, so that they do not always have the remoteness of working solely from home.

Dennis Robertson: So you would promote a mix and match approach with office-based working plus flexibility for home working.

Eileen Dinning: Yes.

Dennis Robertson: I think that that happens a lot.

Eileen Dinning: I also recognise that probably not all jobs are suitable for home working.

Dennis Robertson: Somebody cannot work from home if they work on the checkout at Tesco, for instance.

Eileen Dinning: I do not know; we do not know what the future holds.

Dennis Robertson: Of course, a lot more people are doing online shopping, but there you go.

The Convener: Marco Biagi has questions on cultural attitudes and then John Mason wants to talk about part-time working in schools.

Marco Biagi: For a starter, I ask the panel whether there is a cultural problem with how we perceive the value of part-time work. Anybody who wants to start should go right ahead.

Lynn McDowall: Part-time working features highly for nurses, because 89 per cent of the NHS nursing workforce are women. Part-time working is important in dealing with a number of issues, such as health issues. Nursing is a heavy job, and people can work if they work part time.

The cultural issues around part-time working are difficult to overcome. It is much easier to employ people on a whole-time basis than on a part-time basis. With part-time workers, it is harder to work in rosters or to arrange in-house training. There are a number of issues. Particularly in the independent sector, employers would much prefer people to work full time rather than part time, and to overcome that is sometimes quite a battle.

Marco Biagi: Very often, the statistics that are quoted are that women are more likely than men to be in part-time work, and that some women are more likely than men to be in certain professions. It is hard to disentangle that.

I come back to the particular experience in nursing. Is a female nurse as likely as a male nurse to be part time, or are female nurses more likely than their male equivalents to be part time?

Lynn McDowall: There is a shift now, because nurses often marry nurses, and we quite often have job shares with partners who work in the organisation—it is a very big organisation. However, I think that part-time workers in the NHS are predominantly women.

Marco Biagi: Is there any difficulty when it comes to promotion in the NHS? If someone who is part time is seeking career advancement, do they appear less attractive than somebody who is whole time?

09:45

Lynn McDowall: Absolutely. Part-time charge nurses or clinical managers or part-time posts further up the line are as rare as hen's teeth. Part-time staff are usually at staff nurse grade and it is very difficult for people to get promotion unless they work full time.

Marco Biagi: If people have been working part time, does that count against them when they seek promotion, even if they are willing to switch to full time?

Lynn McDowall: On paper, I would say no. An employer would say, "You've been working part time. Why? What would working full time mean? Wouldn't it be a big shift?" On paper, that would go against someone seeking promotion. They would be more likely to move into full-time employment and then seek promotion.

Marco Biagi: Do other panel members have any views on that?

Eileen Dinning: I want to pick up on the recent Fawcett Society report. In yesterday's *Scotsman* there was a piece saying that the rates of unemployment among women are higher now than they have been for about a quarter of a century. A lot of the STUC's research over the past couple of years shows that the situation in Scotland is probably marginally better but an increasing number of jobs are part time. Moreover, we cannot discount the increasing number of women on zero-hours contracts. Speaking not just with my Unison hat on but from an STUC perspective, I must say that we have serious concerns about what we see as the increasing casualisation of the workforce and the fact that the bulk of that workforce is women.

We are also concerned about the number of public sector contracts that are moving into the private sector, where many employers are employing people, particularly women, on zero-hours contracts. As UK Government figures will back up, there has been quite a significant increase in that respect over the past year.

The Convener: I know from my previous life that zero-hours contracts were increasingly being used across the retail sector. Are such contracts chosen by employers as an option with regard to applications for flexible working? Employers' response to such a request is, "I'll give you a zero-hours contract", which means that it is the

employers, not the employees, who have the flexibility.

Eileen Dinning: I do not accept that at all. Flexible working is not about—if I can use the word—exploitation, which is, frankly, what I think zero-hours contracts are about. Women are seen as a cheap option. No matter what type of flexible working someone is doing, they should not only have a proper contract of employment and be paid a living wage but have the other opportunities that go along with that, including the ability to progress, get promotion and receive training.

The Convener: Interestingly, Unison's briefing refers to zero-hours contracts for home carers, who are predominantly women and work antisocial or lots of different hours. Do home care workers want such contracts or are they simply offered them?

Eileen Dinning: A proper contract of employment comes with a lot of protections. I do not have with me as much evidence as I could have on home care issues—I am more than happy to submit further evidence to the committee on that matter, because a colleague of mine is doing a lot of work on it at the moment—but we are certainly finding that part of the problem is that home carers are being told that they can spend only so much time with clients. They find that difficult, because they do not know what kind of cases they will have to deal with; moreover, there is the emotional impact on them as a carer, albeit a professional one.

Another problem is that, when carers move from one client to another, they are not being paid. When they worked in local authorities, they had protection from the trade union. We need to remember that, if someone is being paid by the hour on the national minimum wage, that is barely enough to live on. That means that they have to work more and more hours just to get a basic living wage. That cannot be good for anybody and it is certainly not good for the economy. There are also potential problems for the very vulnerable clientele whom those people are paid to look after.

Dennis Robertson: Do we know what percentage of people on zero-hours contracts work the equivalent of full time rather than part time? Do you see zero-hours contracts as a total lack of commitment from employers?

Eileen Dinning: I do not have those figures with me.

Sorry, but what was the second part of the question?

Dennis Robertson: Do you see zero-hours contracts as a total lack of commitment from employers?

Eileen Dinning: Yes, I do.

Dennis Robertson: I thought that you might, but that was just for the record.

Lynn McDowall: I would support that. In the NHS, we are very much against zero-hours contracts, because they are about cost cutting rather than filling substantive posts. For instance, there is a predictability about accident and emergency departments. We know how many people will come into them, so we do not need people on zero-hours contracts to plug the gaps. There are other alternatives, such as flexible working and the use of bank staff. Zero-hours contracts are a cop-out. I support Eileen Dinning's comments on that. They are not an option for flexible working.

Marco Biagi: As we are on zero-hours contracts, I take it that the idea of such a contract for someone in a promoted position is patently ridiculous and would never happen, because it is only the front-line workers who get that kind of treatment. Is that the case?

Eileen Dinning: That is certainly what Unison has found. The Office for National Statistics produced a report on the way in which public sector contracts were being handed to private sector companies. I think that it found that, throughout the United Kingdom, more than 200,000 people were on such contracts, and 52 per cent of them were women. It is a big problem and it is increasing. I do not know whether that answers your question.

Marco Biagi: It will do. Do the other panel members want to comment on the initial subject, which was the status of part-time work?

Jill Wood: Your initial comment was about cultural assumptions on part-time work. I do not know where to start on that, because it cuts to the nub of everything that Engender is about, as an organisation working to tackle systemic gender inequality issues and sexist discrimination. Basically, our work is all about that.

To an extent, part-time work exists so that women can accommodate their unpaid caring responsibilities and so prop up the so-called real economy. Emma Ritch can talk expertly about the specifics on the pay gap that goes along with that and can probably say a lot more about the horizontal occupational segregation that we see as a result. Basically, the short answer to your question on whether there are cultural assumptions around part-time work is yes.

Marco Biagi: Can you suggest ways to address that?

Jill Wood: The big one that people point to immediately is childcare. The Scottish Government has made a lot of references to childcare as infrastructure and the need to move

towards the Scandinavian models that we know relieve the pressure to provide flexible or part-time working at lower rates. We see that as an underpinning issue that would address many of the issues.

Marco Biagi: So it is your view that the best way of dealing with the issue of part-time working, or the first battle to fight on that, is to enable more women to work full time.

Jill Wood: It is about widening the suite of options that people have on access to paid work and the terms of that work. Again, Emma Ritch can speak much more expertly on this, but a strategy to tackle horizontal occupational segregation would need to be joined up across those policy areas. They do not exist in isolation from one another. Eileen Dinning said at the beginning that there should be more options for home working but that those have to come alongside other options. I would go as far as to say that there has to be a joined-up package. There must be a strategy that includes a suite of options rather than options that are isolated from one another.

Marco Biagi: On bringing up the status of part-time working and its being in the suite of options, how do we deal with the status problem? I do not necessarily expect an answer to that question, as it is a difficult one. If there was an easy answer to it, somebody would have done it already. Has that question yet to be answered?

Jill Wood: Yes. As you say, that is part of the culture of the undervaluation of female-dominated sectors. As I said, that comes down to the core issue that, in our society, economy and politics, we do not value women's unpaid work or the social reproductive economies. I am cribbing again from Close the Gap, but there should be a strategy that ties in all sorts of stakeholders, including career advisers and people in the education system. Basically, there should be a national action plan more or less to tackle undervaluation and occupational segregation.

Emma Ritch: Some things could also be done immediately at the workplace level. When we go out to speak to employers and work with them on issues in their workforces, we certainly see an enormous amount of cultural hostility to the idea of part-time working. It is seen as an accommodation arrangement that might be made with an individual to retain them or as something that happens in the typing pool because women need to go off and do reproductive and domestic labour. The idea of having a senior person working on a part-time basis is often very much against grain of how things go.

There is a lack of management confidence even in how to go about recruiting someone to work on a part-time basis, in how to manage a team of people who all work on a part-time basis and in whether such a team could deliver the coverage to clients, customers or the recipients of services in the public sector. There needs to be an increase in people's understanding that having a whole team of people working on a part-time basis does not necessarily have any negative impact on services or clients.

There are really good examples of organisations and companies in the private sector that have managed to make part-time working work, even in organisational and industrial sectors in which there is a presumption against that. Even in commercial legal services, there are law firms that operate very flexible working arrangements, have a number of part-time workers and do not have people available at all hours for clients but still deliver a high-quality service. There are good examples from which other organisations could learn a great deal.

Marco Biagi: I would like to press you on that. It is always good to have positive examples to highlight, as we often search around for them. Can you suggest some such examples? You mentioned law firms. Are there any other services or sectors that provide positive examples?

Emma Ritch: Yes, there are. There are even companies that work in sectors such as manufacturing that have managed to make flexibility work extremely well for them in delivering their business. In 2010, the Equality and Human Rights Commission produced guidance for managers on how to deal with flexible working, including part-time working, and it has a whole range of case studies of the different kinds of employers that I have mentioned. I would be happy to send that to the clerk to circulate to the committee. It is quite short and very accessible. Many employers find it quite useful to know how others have succeeded.

Marco Biagi: They clearly deserve recognition as well.

Emma Ritch: Absolutely.

Gavin MacGregor: There is a bit of a difference between the public sector and the private sector. Local government and the rest of the public sector have started to get better at the issue. I agree that it is a matter of having options. It is not just about part-time working; it is about having various options, such as term-time working and compressed hours, so that we can find a balance that meets service needs and the work-life balance needs of employees. It is important to have a suite of options, but it is not simply about having that; it is also about making things happen. Senior management modelling is important. That is a key issue. If there is a policy that people do

not take up or are scared to take up, it is important to implement it.

Eileen Dinning: I agree with everything that Emma Ritch said. We must ensure that we do not regard the increase in part-time work as a substitute for full-time employment. In addition, we must define what is meant by part time. My view is that part time means 16 to 20 hours a week, but there are employers out there who think that it means 32 to 35 hours a week and who will pay part-time wages accordingly. We therefore need to be careful about the balance between part-time and full-time work. We must ensure that if people are offered the option of part-time work and want it, either as a permanent deal or as something that they can change in the future, it is under the protection of employment rights legislation and other relevant legislation.

10:00

Siobhan McMahon: We have talked about legislation on flexible working, and a few of your written submissions stated that there is a right to ask for flexible working patterns but not a right to have requests granted. Do you think that new legislation is the key and that it would be helpful? Some of the suggestions about what was flexible working surprised me. For example, the RCN suggested that swapping hours was a flexible working practice, but I would not have thought that that was necessarily the case. The RCN submission also gave the example of a district nurse who worked part time and required additional help, but her request for flexible working was declined. I think that that example would have surprised a lot of us. Do you think that legislation would be the answer to that kind of problem?

Lynn McDowall: Absolutely. The legislation defines a right to ask for flexible working. Sadly, the example of the district nurse is a real one. The nurse's request was not an onerous one; it was an issue around having to work alternate weekends. Such issues are not impossible to overcome, but it is the culture and the right of the employer to say no. Rather than work around what are sometimes quite simple options, the employer chooses just to say no. Another example that we gave in our submission is that of a nurse in her latter years of employment, having been employed for 30-odd years with the same employer, who asked to reduce her hours as she worked up to retirement. Again, that request was declined, although it was not an unreasonable request. There was no insurmountable problem in that case that could not be overcome. As a charge nurse many years ago, I would have been amenable to working around that request. I cannot see why such requests cannot be met on quite a simple basis. Legislation would help.

Eileen Dinning: UK legislation in this area needs an overhaul. I have been saying for a long time that there are way too many opt-outs for employers to refuse requests. There has been huge improvement in so far as a lot of women are now being given the kind of flexible working that they want, but still far too many such requests are rejected. The implications for the women, not just for their salary but for their childcare responsibilities, can be massive.

Either the Government overhauls the existing regulations or it beefs them up so that it makes it more difficult for employers to refuse requests. We legislate because the voluntary approach does not work.

The Convener: John Mason has questions on part-time working. Then John Finnie will ask more questions on flexible working and the right to apply for it.

John Mason: I want to continue in the same direction on the issue. The definition of part time has already been raised; I am interested in definitions of flexibility. We received a very upbeat submission from North Ayrshire Council, which states:

"Currently 5% of Managers and 22% of Teachers have moved to flexible working hours arrangements."

That sounds quite positive, but the Educational Institute of Scotland submission stated on flexible working that

"within education there are, in practice, only two models that can be used – permanent job share or permanent part-time work. This acts as an immediate disadvantage to women".

The submission also states:

"In essence, the predominant issue is not to do with the availability of flexible working practices, which is a by-product of teacher workforce re-organisation, but a lack of full-time permanent contracts with a degree of real flexibility built in."

Is the word "flexibility" being used in different ways? It would appear that, on the one hand, it means anything that is not a normal full-time contract; whereas for most of us flexibility means that, for example, someone could play around with the hours that they would do next week.

Gavin MacGregor: In that instance, and taking the figures into account, it relates to part-time working, although the wording suggests that it goes wider than that. Across the whole of our council workforce, only about 48 per cent of our female employees have a full-time contract. Teaching is part time and full time, and we have a wide array of different arrangements—term time, compressed hours and part time—and agile working is a key part of that. The council views such flexibility as a key priority. It is included in our equalities action plan this year, and it is a key area

where we are trying to push things. Not only is our workforce asking for it; we think that there are a lot of business and organisational benefits to it. We want to support it wherever we can as a win-win.

We find from looking back over the applications that have been made for various forms of flexible working, our default—which comes from our chief executive—is that, wherever it is operationally possible, we go with the employee's flexible working request. Something like 90 per cent of those requests are approved. We are trying to encourage that.

John Mason: Let us stick with the example of teachers. Would you, as a council, have the ability to give a bit more flexibility if you wanted to, or is it all nationally decided?

Gavin MacGregor: I think that it is determined more on a national basis. It is based on service needs, and teaching obviously comes with constraints around it, but our default is to be operationally flexible. Teachers are in a different situation.

John Mason: I can understand that, from a headteacher's point of view, it is tidier if one person is in every morning and the other is in every afternoon if it is a job share, for instance. I do not know whether there is flexibility for the individual headteacher or members of staff in practice. Can they switch around between themselves? Is there much flexibility in that sense?

Gavin MacGregor: To be honest, I do not know how much flexibility there is at that level. I imagine that there are informal and formal arrangements. We will deal with contractual changes and so on. We hear about more informal arrangements on the ground, but I cannot definitively describe them.

John Mason: What do the other witnesses think? Is the word "flexibility" being interpreted in different ways in different places?

Eileen Dinning: It is hard to say. I work full time for Unison, and many of the cases that come my way from other colleagues involve instances where women have been denied a request under the legislation.

There is a cultural problem—there is a certain mindset. Much of the time, the thinking is, "I don't think I'll be able to manage this. It's going to cause me lots of problems." In fact—and I suspect that Gavin MacGregor will probably back me and the others up on this—it is about people getting the flexibility that they need. As an organisation and an employer, Unison has introduced a flexible work policy. It is no longer just about job sharing.

For example, a colleague of mine had responsibility, along with her family, for looking after her mum, who had dementia for quite a long period. They were providing that care almost in shifts. She had the option of starting work at half past 7 in the morning and leaving at half past 2 in the afternoon. That was a perfect arrangement for her. That was not going to be a permanent arrangement—although it would have been if she had wanted it to be. I think that she has now moved back to different hours.

That is the sort of flexibility that I am thinking about for specific sets of circumstances. My colleague was able to reorganise and remanage her life. We might not want to start work at half past 7 in the morning—although I know that you probably do, as MSPs—but the arrangement to work from half 7 until half 2 was perfect for her. When the worst part of the situation was over, she was able to move back to starting at about half past 8 again.

That is where I am coming from. It is a matter of what suits people best. I do not see any reason why employers cannot be a wee bit more imaginative about going along with that—even if it is difficult, in which case we can pilot a solution and see where the problems are, what the pros and cons are and then learn from that process.

Lynn McDowall: Flexibility does not necessarily mean part-time work. If I have a 37.5-hour contract, which is classed as full time, there are a number of ways in which I can fulfil that. However, if I happen to work in an area that has 12.5-hour shifts and I want to work only a core shift of 9 to 5, we would hope that that would be accommodated. A lot of areas have 12.5-hour shifts, but that is quite a big ask for someone if it means that they have to have childcare that starts at 7 in the morning and goes on until after 7 at night, particularly if their job involves heavy work in the ward, for example, caring for the elderly. However, working the same hours over more days would be completely doable. I am not saying that that is easier for managers, as they would prefer to have people all working the same kind of shifts, because that makes it easier to roster people and manage the service.

Such options are available and there are some really good areas of good practice, with people self-rostering to cover the service. However, there are still a number of areas that are not flexible enough with regard to shift patterns. If people thought outside the box more often, they would see that, by being more flexible in that way, they could help the big push that is going on in the NHS to reduce sickness absence, because people would be less likely to go off sick as a result of the fact that they were so tired after the 12.5-hour shifts. They would also be less likely to take carers leave to care for children or elderly relatives, which is another onerous burden on managers.

John Mason: Do you think that the situation and people's thinking will change over time?

Lynn McDowall: It is a full-time job for us to try to persuade people to change their thinking. There needs to be a cultural shift. At the moment, flexible working is looked on as being some kind of luxury, but it needs to be seen as the norm. Nursing has an ageing workforce and there are lots of vacancies and areas that are not covered adequately. If there were more flexible working patterns, people would be more inclined to come back to work. That is the culture that we need to change.

Emma Ritch: We are slightly in the danger zone with regard to employers' assessment of their own flexibility. More than 95 per cent of employers in the public sector and 66 per cent in the private sector have what they think of as a flexible working arrangement, but that has not translated very well into real flexibility for real people.

It is good that employers think that they are flexible and that there is a range of options that are included under the rubric of flexibility, such as a formal flexitime system and part-time working—although I am slightly uneasy about part-time working being seen as part of flexibility. Whatever the system is, there should be something that fits all kinds of employers and can be adapted to the needs of the business. However, we are seeing a big gap between the welcome policies that employers have introduced and the practices inside many organisations.

We did a piece of work with the STUC women's committee on a range of employment practices in local authorities. We were struck by the small number of local authorities that seemed to be gathering data on flexible working, and we were particularly concerned about that because, anecdotally, in going out to employers during the recession and the recovery period, we have been hearing stories of informal flexible arrangements being withdrawn under the pressure of work, because reducing budgets have meant that there is a smaller number of people in some teams, whether in private sector companies or in public organisations, who are left to do the work that needs to be done. We are extremely concerned that this time of economic downturn and recovery will have quite a profound impact on flexibility and on people's ability to manage flexibility, which, as Lynn McDowall said, is seen as a luxury that can be afforded in good times but not in less good times.

John Finnie: I am interested in the language that is used in this area, and particularly in the term "part time" and its negative associations. None of us works 24 hours a day, so we all work part time.

The Unison submission—like others—contains a list of the grounds on which an employer could refuse to offer flexible working. To what extent, if any, have those grounds been challenged legally?

10:15

Eileen Dinning: I am trying to remember. There is not a lot of case law on that. Before the Equality Act 2006, the case law was based on the sex discrimination legislation, on the grounds that it is largely women who ask for flexible working and because the courts in Europe and in this country recognise that women still undertake the majority of the responsibility for childcare. It was not easy; one or two cases held up, but it is very difficult for anybody to go to court in the first place, and it is not something that we would actively encourage. That is why we encourage employers through negotiating with them.

The reality is that there are I do not know how many reports out there by the Work Foundation and small businesses that make a coherent case as to why flexible working works. Emma Ritch talked about sickness absence, which costs many organisations, companies and businesses a huge amount of money, and the huge reductions that flexible working can lead to, but we still struggle with the knee-jerk reactions, with people saying, without looking at the longer-term picture, that it will not work.

John Finnie: I agree that resolution is better than legal proceedings, and evidence might be the key to that. I want to ask the panel about the dearth of data, which is mentioned in a few of the submissions. I think that it was Mr MacGregor who said that 95 per cent of requests were approved. Does the council retain centrally the reasons why requests are turned down?

Gavin MacGregor: Yes. We monitor applications for flexible working and I think that 90 per cent of applications were approved over the past five years. I agree with Eileen Dinning about requests for flexible working. The law is such that if an employer wants to avoid granting flexible working, they can challenge a request on a procedural basis. If an employer wants to hide behind that and refuse requests, they have the ability to do that. The question is whether an employer genuinely wants to encourage and foster flexible working.

Even in more challenging financial times, flexible working is key to engaging our workforce and encouraging high performance. As well as the reduction in sickness absence, there are huge benefits to flexible working and having that balance between individual employees' needs and the service's needs. Flexible working and having solutions that suit people's lives are actually more

important when finances are tight and we have fewer people.

John Finnie: Before the other panel members come in, I want to follow up on the compelling figures—albeit that the numbers involved are relatively small—in North Ayrshire Council's submission regarding its corporate management team and, indeed, its extended corporate management team. How many of those staff work on a flexible or part-time basis at the moment, or did so prior to getting their elevated positions?

Gavin MacGregor: I do not think that any of the senior management team works part time, but all or most of them do some form of home working on various days of the week, including our chief executive. They are leading examples—we want to ensure that they are out of the office sometimes because we are actively trying to shift away from presenteeism. It does not help the organisation if people see the most senior leaders there for fixed, long hours. It is about shifting to outcomes and success rather than people just being at their desks. My own director, the finance director, often works from home, and people in the organisation see that.

John Finnie: What about the data aspect?

Emma Ritch: At Close the Gap, we are excited about the specifics of the public sector equality duty, which will require public authorities to publish a whole range of employment data at the end of this month. With colleagues across the equality sector and the EHRC, we will be looking at that information. We hope and expect that employers will publish information about part-time and other forms of flexible working. We will have a clearer picture of what data there is after publication.

Obviously, there is no requirement on the public sector to publish any information whatsoever, so anything that we know is entirely down to individual private sector companies. The information often pops up in things such as an annual equality report, if such things are produced.

John Finnie: I recently asked a parliamentary question about the conditions that would be applied to those who benefit from public sector contracts. Is it correct for the public sector to make such demands of companies if it is not doing things entirely correctly itself? Should we get our own house in order first?

Emma Ritch: I have no comment on that, except to say that the public sector duty requires public authorities to consider the need to include such a clause in contracts with the private sector when they tender for services. Of course, that is very unlikely to mean that private sector companies will need to publish that data. I cannot imagine a circumstance in which that would be a requirement in a contract.

Marco Biagi: Is it a problem that we still have gender roles—for example, that the woman will be the carer and the man will not, and that the woman will just have to work around that? Is that fundamentally still the problem? Should we take our eyes off it?

Eileen Dinning: We should never take our eyes off that. I said in our submission that, in a good modern society, flexible working has to be there for everybody whether or not they work part time. I am talking about part-time work as defined by employment legislation and the courts. Such a society would actively encourage men to take up that option, too, so that they could play a greater role with their children and make a greater contribution to their children's lives or the lives of other family members. It is about how they balance being happy and productive in their work with their quality of life outside work. There is absolutely no doubt that good flexible working policies, however people want to work them, are invaluable in achieving that.

However, we need to get away from the idea that flexible working is a substitute for childcare—it should never, ever be seen in that way. The line that Unison, the STUC and the STUC women's committee have all consistently taken on the issue is that we have to start considering state-funded childcare as an investment in the workforce. That is our position.

Marco Biagi: Do any of the other witnesses have a view on gender roles?

Jill Wood: Can you clarify the question? Are you asking whether it is a problem that women bear the brunt of domestic caring responsibilities in this country?

Marco Biagi: In all the talk about flexible and part-time working and childcare, are we getting away from the core problem, which is that one set of expectations is put on women and a different set is put on men?

Jill Wood: Right—you are saying that that is a smokescreen to get away from the core issue. To reiterate the point that I made earlier, I fully agree that that is a problem. The debate around flexible working cannot be understood in isolation. Eileen Dinning talked about childcare and the reasons why women apply for flexible working in the first place. Fundamentally, we do not value women's work, whether it is unpaid or paid.

Emma Ritch: The issues around women and work are a wicked problem, in that we cannot exactly work out what the causes are and we do not know what the impact of change in one bit of the system will be on other bits of the system. The issues are all interrelated with other things. I agree entirely that the root cause is the assumption that women will do domestic and reproductive labour

and men will go out into the formal labour market and do the so-called real work, as Jill Wood put it.

What do we do with the knowledge that this is fundamentally about gender-role stereotyping and assumptions about women and men? As policy makers, employers and other citizens of Scotland, we cannot afford to decide to do nothing. I come back to the point that, when we talk to employers, the question is the scope of what they can do. Can they offer their staff training on unintended bias to ensure that managers' decisions about work patterns are not based on assumptions about what women and men should be doing? Are there systems and arrangements that can ensure that the real-life experiences of staff are reflected in some of those decisions?

We are where we are at the moment. Ideally, we would not necessarily want women to take the majority of the responsibility for childcare, although that is for families to decide. We want men to be enabled to take up some flexible working arrangements. Frequently, there is a cultural assumption that men will not want to work part time or do flexible working and that any man who asks for such opportunities is quite strange. We want to sweep away some of those barriers but at the moment we have to deal with the reality right now that women have the majority of the responsibility for care. If we as employers do not take action to acknowledge that in our practices, we will be waiting for a revolution that might never come.

Lynn McDowall: I have represented men who have asked for a flexible working pattern, predominantly because of childcare issues. One situation involved a couple who worked in the national health service, with the man's wife having a more senior role. The male's manager was quite incredulous at the flexible working request, saying, "What's his wife doing about this? Why is he asking for this flexible working?" There was a huge assumption that the female—the person with the more senior role and higher salary—should be the one looking for flexible working rather than the male. All the barriers that could have been put in that particular gentleman's way were put in his way, and it was quite a hard task to get people to think around the issue.

Although I absolutely agree that flexible working should not be a substitute for childcare, we should also recognise that quite a lot of people want to look after their own children for part of the time. I would like to think that cases such as the one that I described were in a minority, but that sort of thing is still out there.

Jill Wood: On the question whether it is a smokescreen for fundamental systemic issues, I think that we can begin to address that by making the links explicit. In our submission, we recommend that a strategy to address flexible working issues be explored and developed through a gender lens and a gendered perspective because a lot of the time gender-blind and gender-neutral language sweeps institutional sexism and cultural assumptions under the carpet so that we do not really know what we are talking about anymore. As flexible working is a gender issue, we should name it as such and make those vertical links.

Dennis Robertson: Might the legislation on parental leave that is coming afford an opportunity to shift some of the current stereotypical, cultural assumptions that we make? Might it slightly shift the gender balance? For a start, it will probably extend the right to take unpaid parental leave until the child is 18.

Lynn McDowall: The difficulties in granting parental leave are the same as those in granting flexible working. Indeed, all the points that are made about flexible working are also made about parental leave, with people saying that the needs of the service must come first, highlighting the provision of care or whatever. I know that in some areas, NHS boards have fully implemented the measure, while others have not, and it is proving difficult to shift things.

Dennis Robertson: Will it give men more of an opportunity to take on a caring role?

Lynn McDowall: To be honest, I think that that remains to be seen.

Emma Ritch: Changes to maternity leave whereby the leave can be shared between parents—whether they are a man and a woman or a same-sex couple—can be quite helpful. The learning from the rest of Europe—particularly the Scandinavian countries—is that men have found it very hard to take up paternity leave or their share of the leave that is available immediately after the birth of a child. Men find it hard to take up not just two weeks' leave but a longer commitment because of the cultural assumptions, even in Scandinavian workplaces, that women will provide the primary care of young children. Sweden introduced what were called "daddy months", which were two months of paternity leave, on a use-it-or-lose-it basis—if the father did not use it, the whole family would lose that paid leave—but take-up even of that was still at a much lower level than anticipated. The cultural presumptions against men being involved in the care of very young children are really quite rigid.

Therefore, it is extremely welcome that the Government has introduced an arrangement whereby some part of that early care can be shared. Hopefully, that will lead to the sense that it should not always be mummy who is called at work to come and deal with sick children, issues at

school or any of the other things that regularly crop up in the life of young children, as fathers will also feel skilled and empowered in dealing with those issues.

10:30

The Convener: The definition that Eileen Dinning gave is very much what I understand flexible working to mean. It should be a meaningful career choice rather than a substitute for something else. I suspect that all the witnesses would agree that the issue that we need to solve is childcare. If we solved that, the issue of part-time or flexible working would automatically resolve itself—although perhaps not completely. Childcare is the issue that we need to solve. Do you agree?

Eileen Dinning: That is absolutely crucial. My point may relate to the Education and Culture Committee's remit rather than the Equal Opportunities Committee's remit. I know that previous Administrations have tried to address the issue of childcare. However, our view is that we need to provide the whole hog of state-funded provision. If people still want to send their children to a private sector provider, that is fine, but they need the same protection and advantages that they currently get from primary and secondary education. I do not see why this area should be any different. All sorts of benefits come—as all the research that has been done shows—from wraparound care, which is provided in many educational institutions in Scotland. That is certainly our view.

The Convener: I will allow supplementary questions from Dennis Robertson and John Mason before I let Emma Ritch respond.

Dennis Robertson: Obviously, childcare is a significant factor, but is the issue not more to do with care in the round? Significant numbers of people need part-time or flexible working because they have caring responsibilities for older relatives, for instance. Therefore, the issue is not just childcare but care in the round.

Eileen Dinning: Yes, I agree with that. You are probably right, and we will probably find that the number of such people will increase—Lynn McDowall may be able to back me up on this—if our increasingly ageing population means that more people need to get involved in providing that level of care. However, that brings us back to the need to look at the entire care system in Scottish society. For many people, the issue is not just childcare but care of the elderly and care of people with special needs—it can be another specific challenge for people who have relatives with special needs or disabilities.

John Mason: On free childcare, I was intrigued by one sentence in Unison's submission, which states:

> "This long-standing UNISON policy could pay for itself through the increased tax income from more mothers working."

I think that a mother would have to be on a very high salary to pay enough tax for it to pay for childcare, or am I misunderstanding that?

Eileen Dinning: Why do you think that?

John Mason: For example, someone who has a job with a salary of £15,000 will pay tax on about £5,000 of that, which would be about £1,000 in tax.

Eileen Dinning: The policy is about having a fair, transparent and progressive taxation system. If women drop out of the employment market, the Government will lose out on receiving income tax receipts, irrespective of what they are paid. The issue is about how to work out a policy. We know that there are women who pay more for private childcare than they pay in mortgage payments, which simply cannot be right. Political parties must have the courage to bite the bullet and say, "Actually, we will have to raise income tax, but here's what you'll get in return." That is not such a bad option to put to people.

John Mason: That has clarified the matter for me. I was trying to work out how the figures add up. If you are saying that, if we increased income tax, for example—

Eileen Dinning: Do not ask me for figures.

John Mason: No—I will not go into any more detail. If tax is increased, obviously there will be more money, which we could put into childcare. I am comfortable with that.

Eileen Dinning: It is not about tax cuts; it is about how we revisit the taxation system in this country.

John Mason: The whole thing—okay. I understand that better now.

The Convener: Does Emma Ritch want to come in on that issue?

Emma Ritch: Yes, but not to explain Eileen Dinning's figures for her.

When families are working out whether a woman should return to work, they often make the kind of calculation that Mr Mason has talked about. They offset the cost of childcare against the wage that would come into the household. Most people do not forecast their family economy much into the future, of course, but the long-term scarring effect for women of taking time out of the labour market is immense. Even after 15 years, one year of part-time working still shows up as a

10 per cent reduction in their wage compared with that of a man who has taken the same part-time working arrangement, which is usually to develop his human capital by undergoing education or training. Therefore, there is a long-term impact. I can see that, if women return to the labour market, the tax take could be significant because of their long-term earnings potential.

I will make a point about Finland. Close the Gap was involved in a piece of transnational work with Finland, where there is universal provision of childcare. When we compared data that related to different labour markets, the Finnish people were quite struck that there is such a lot of part-time working in Scotland. Part-time working in Finland is done only by students and people who are retiring from the labour market and are consequently reducing their hours to ease the transition. The Finnish people were quite astonished that women would work part time in the middle of their careers as, of course, that is not at all necessary with Finland's childcare provision.

Part-time work is often seen as a bit of a failure in the context of European policy. It is seen as a bit of a failure that economies cannot get women working full time because they do not provide the services—including care and transport changes—that would enable women's participation in the labour market. I echo the points that Eileen Dinning and other colleagues have made on that.

John Mason: I appreciate that. You are probably preaching to the converted when you say that we would all see the benefit in the long term, but some of us are struggling with the question of where the money will come from in the short term.

Emma Ritch: Absolutely. After world war two, Finland decided not to have a national health service; it put the money into childcare instead. It needed pro-natal policies to get the number of citizens up after the losses during the war, so it took a deliberate policy decision to increase the birth rate, which is what it did. You have made a good point about how to invest in that and the hard decisions that have to be made.

Alex Johnstone: The international exemplars that have been given are interesting. There are interesting graphs on part-time labour in Close the Gap's submission. The country that jumps out as having a high proportion of part-time workers is the Netherlands. Are there any examples that we can take from it? Is the Netherlands doing something different or more positive with part-time working?

Emma Ritch: The Netherlands has a system in which a person can work for four days a week until their child is quite old. Both people in a couple therefore frequently work for four days and access childcare for the rest of the time.

However, the Netherlands also has quite an unfortunate system from the perspective of working parents. Schools there have a really long lunch break in the middle of the day. People have to collect their children and take them back to school after two hours have passed. Nursery provision has not met that gap, which places an enormous pressure on the whole childcare system. We should be cautious about learning lessons from the Netherlands on that.

Alex Johnstone: So there might be something to learn, but the peculiarities in that country cause issues.

Emma Ritch: Yes—the country has quite a quirky system. The guaranteed access to four-day-a-week working, whether or not on a compressed hours basis, is highly esteemed by working parents in the Netherlands. That might come back to my colleagues' points about slight amendments to the law that would enable access to a type of flexible working.

The Convener: Much has been done over the years to tackle the thorny issue of equal pay in the public sector, and a huge amount of progress has been made. However, there is still a huge pay gap between women and men across the sectors. Given the rise in flexible and part-time working and the lack of promotion prospects for women who work flexibly and part time, where do you see the pay gap going?

Emma Ritch: The part-time pay gap has been stagnant since the introduction of the minimum wage, which was the last thing that had an impact on it. The gap is still sitting at about 34 per cent, which is astounding. That is explained almost entirely by the fact that part-time work for women tends to be in what are, from the perspective of employers and perhaps the wider world, low-paid and low-status occupations.

The full-time pay gap in Scotland has nudged down ever so slightly and now sits at 12 per cent, compared with 20 per cent 11 years ago. However, although that is good news, we have had a slight change in the calculation, so the news is not quite as good as the figures suggest. You are absolutely right to identify that many issues persist across the labour market and contribute to the figure.

We are likely to see a few shocks to the figure because of the situation in the wider Scottish economy and the labour shedding in the public sector as a result of pressures on budgets. When I pulled together the figures for our submission, I was struck by the fact that the proportion of women working part time has not really changed and nor has the part-time pay gap. That suggests that, although a number of employers are doing good work, that has not spread across the labour

market sufficiently. We are not seeing an increase in quality part-time work or sufficient flexibility to enable more women to work part time now than did so 10 years ago. The figures are staying the same.

We welcome the committee's scrutiny of the issue as well as the Scottish Government's women's employment summit and all the work that other colleagues are doing to try to shine a light on the fact that, although things have changed to a degree, the changes are not having the impact that we would hope for.

Eileen Dinning: Obviously, we welcomed the Scottish Government's decision to introduce amended specific public sector duties, which public authorities are now starting to produce equal pay statements in line with. However, we would like the Scottish Government to amend the legislation to introduce equal pay audits, which would allow us to follow the progress or otherwise on what Emma Ritch just talked about. A body can have a statement that says that it is committed to equal pay and will ensure that it works towards that but, unless there is a proper equal pay audit, we will not be able to monitor changes. Depending on the size of the organisation, that is a big piece of work initially, although it is not difficult—I think that Gavin MacGregor would back me up on that.

Once we have that system in place we can monitor progress, quickly address where problems might arise in the future and look at how problems would be resolved, because the last thing that we want is any more litigation at employment tribunals. That has cost the public purse millions of pounds. If we want to save those millions in the long term—we could put them into childcare and do something useful with them—we must get audits in place as part of the specific duties.

10:45

Lynn McDowall: The implementation of the agenda for change in NHS boards has almost negated equal pay claims but, if there was any meddling with the agenda for change, it would almost definitely impact on equal pay claims, because of the high proportion of women in the agenda for change pay scales.

Siobhan McMahon: I have a question on the RCN submission. Lynn McDowall touched on the agenda for change. The submission refers to the impact of the two-year pay freeze and gives the stark figure that the majority of staff are

"experiencing a 9% cut in living standards over those two years."

What barriers does that introduce in the profession in relation to retaining the workforce as people get older, introducing people to the workforce and bringing in males, which we want to happen as we get more equal?

Lynn McDowall: We see the situation as a constant battle. The average age of a student nurse is assumed to be 18 or 19, but the average is actually in the late 20s or early 30s. We must get people into the profession, because we are an ageing workforce, as I said. The pay freeze and, for a number of people, the incremental freeze are a huge barrier to overcome.

We have shortages in a number of areas and there are no incentives for people to go after posts—even some of the promoted posts—because of the loss of unsocial hours rates and weekend rates, which people rely on because of the pay freeze. The pay freeze is a huge barrier to increasing recruitment in a number of areas.

Siobhan McMahon: On the pay gap, Engender used quite stark language when it said that the Scottish Government's approach

"paid plentiful lip service to the need for faster progress on the pay gap".

Will you expand on why you think that that is the case and what you would like to see from the Scottish Government?

Jill Wood: There is a small typo in how that has been picked up. I was referring to lip service in a couple of other strategy policy documents, such as the child poverty strategy, which says that the Scottish Government is addressing the pay gap and occupational segregation. In speeches and so on, the pay gap is heralded as an area in which a lot is being done, but the figures speak for themselves.

Siobhan McMahon: So you would like to see a more practical approach rather than just words.

Jill Wood: I would like what is said to be substantiated instead of having just a reference to tackling the pay gap in strategy documents elsewhere. I would like more specifics. Engender plays a role in joining up the disparate policy agendas and looking at the issue systematically so that there is policy coherence across the piece.

Siobhan McMahon: You suggested that the committee should look at equal investment across modern apprenticeships in the inquiry, which I have spoken about as the inquiry has progressed. Occupational segregation is a barrier. Should the Government consider equal investment to ensure that those starting out in modern apprenticeships are retained?

Jill Wood: Yes. We discussed how modern apprenticeships are part of a cross-cutting strategy on occupational segregation, along with tools in the educational system, such as careers advice

and the multi-stakeholder action plan that Close the Gap recommended.

John Mason: Following the mention of equal pay claims, I would like to get some idea about where we are with the historical ones. Are we catching up? The RCN submission says that there are 10,000 live equal pay claims in the NHS. I assume that some of them go back some time. Do they?

Lynn McDowall: They go back a number of years.

John Mason: Are we anywhere near resolving them?

Lynn McDowall: The process has been extremely long. Unfortunately, I do not have the figures for how many claims are still in the process. A number of claims were withdrawn latterly. I do not know how many of them are live now, but I can certainly get that information for you.

John Mason: As a whole, it is still a step-by-step battle.

Lynn McDowall: Yes, it is.

John Mason: No big breakthrough is happening.

Lynn McDowall: There is no breakthrough.

John Mason: Is that generally true with local authorities as well?

Gavin MacGregor: The process is very much case-law driven and it varies across the local authorities that have experience of it. Many of the claims are settled on the basis of case law and we hope that we are near the end of them.

John Mason: Could some local authorities simply not afford to meet all the claims that have been made?

Gavin MacGregor: Not that I am aware of. Most have provision for equal pay liabilities. The settlements are based on the case-law position across various councils. Sometimes, there is a ripple effect when a piece of case law has an impact on claims and there is a round of settlements. It seems to be a long, drawn-out process.

Dennis Robertson: Do women have a role to play in trying to move away from some of the gender-stereotyped opportunities for employment and getting into areas that are generally not deemed to be ones in which we see them, such as engineering, the oil and gas sector and construction? There are vast opportunities and a significant shortage of skills in those sectors. Why are women not taking up those opportunities?

Eileen Dinning: It would do the committee no harm to talk to a specialist group of women—the science, engineering and technology network that was set up to promote the cause of women in those sectors.

The reality is that we must deal with the first two issues about which we spoke. We must address childcare, because women still give birth to children. Unless it becomes biologically impossible in the future or there is a change, that is the reality. We have to deal with how we understand flexible working and with childcare, particularly if we are asking women to go into traditionally male-dominated industries, which might lack the empathy and flexibility that might be found in other areas of work.

I thought about that when I drove through this morning. We will never solve occupational segregation until we get the other stuff right.

Emma Ritch: Any woman who ends up working in a non-traditional, male-dominated occupation has been swimming against the tide for her entire life. That would need to have started in primary school or, certainly, by the time that she selects her subjects in secondary school.

That is difficult to do and there is not a lot of formal encouragement for it. Eileen Dinning mentioned the Scottish resource centre for women in science, engineering and technology, which does great work with female university students who are studying and working in non-traditional areas. However, until the Scottish Government's announcement of the careerwise programme, there was no concerted push across the public provision in schools to try to encourage that.

I highlight Jill Wood's point about the modern apprenticeship programme. By and large, the access point to some of the non-traditional occupations is that programme, in which we still see incredible patterns of segregation. I think that 1 per cent of construction apprentices are female. If that is the portal through which people enter the construction industry, that door is pretty much closed to girls at the moment, for a variety of reasons.

We can do more to build up girls' resilience in relation to the idea of studying and working in a male-dominated environment, but there are also things that other actors in the process can do to try to shift some of the figures. Everywhere that I go, someone from the engineering sector says, "No one understands engineering. It's not all being covered in oil from head to foot every day. It involves being in an office and using computers quite a lot." The sector recognises that it has a different story to tell. I am not for a second suggesting that girls do not enjoy being covered in oil every day, but I think that the engineering

sector recognises that it has a bit of a sales pitch to offer. More needs to be done.

Jill Wood: The question was whether there should be an onus on women to put themselves forward for jobs in such sectors and whether they should have some sense of responsibility for doing that. We cannot lose sight of the fact that women make choices within the existing sexist structures of discrimination that they face, which do not provide them with a real choice.

Emma Ritch referred to women swimming against the tide from primary school. I would go a step further and say that they are swimming against the tide right from the start. The committee knows about the gender-stereotyped toys that people play with, what they are given and what they are told. That is all part of the cultural assumptions that feed into occupational segregation right the way through.

The Convener: As no committee members have further questions for our witnesses, I thank the witnesses for coming along and giving us their evidence. It will help as we continue our scrutiny of women and work.

That concludes today's meeting. Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 2 May and will include further oral evidence on women and work.

Meeting closed at 10:56.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice to SPICe.

Available in e-format only. Printed Scottish Parliament documentation is published in Edinburgh by APS Group Scotland.

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.scottish.parliament.uk

For details of documents available to
order in hard copy format, please contact:
APS Scottish Parliament Publications on 0131 629 9941.

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

e-format first available
ISBN 978-1-78307-864-6

Revised e-format available
ISBN 978-1-78307-876-9

Printed in Scotland by APS Group Scotland