



WOMEN'S SURVEY 2024

Navigating increasing costs and debt



Work supported by



Scottish
Women's
Budget
Group

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This survey report shares the findings and policy recommendations from our Women's Survey 2024. It aims to provide a picture of the different ways in which the recent inflationary period has impacted on women, what the short-term and long-term consequences of this could be for them and the overall economy, and what measures could be taken to improve women's economic resilience in Scotland.

The cost-of-living crisis is impacting women's ability to afford the costs of essentials, increasing their likelihood of falling into debt. The current inflationary period is also impacting women's physical and mental health, which might have important consequences in the long-term, including the risk of widening health inequalities.

“
The fuel bill sky rocketed and I could not afford to keep up payments. My hourly pay increased but my hours have been cut for one of my jobs to balance the increase.
”

Respondent, ethnic minority background, Women's Survey 2024



UK Government

Recommendation 1. Enhance Statutory Maternity Pay.

Recommendation 2. Implement the New Economic Foundation's proposal on a National Energy Guarantee¹. In the long-term, work towards nationalising energy distribution and review how the energy markets work to ensure more equitable charges.

Recommendation 3. Provide an adequate safety net by reviewing Universal Credit basic rate, ending the two-child limit policy and the benefit cap, and reform carer's allowance.

Recommendation 4. Regulate Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) without further delay.

Scottish Government

Recommendation 1. Introduce 30-hour funding Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) with immediate effect after paid maternity leave, ensure free childcare provision for those groups experiencing poverty and outline a plan towards universal access to 50 hours per week including affordable wraparound care for over 5-year-olds.

Recommendation 2. Ensure adequate funding for the Scottish Welfare Fund.

Recommendation 3. Provide an urgent cash injection to support social care. Drive investment towards the implementation of a transformative adult social care model as set out in our report on social care².

Recommendation 4. Fulfil commitments to end non-residential social care charges.

Recommendation 5. Work with the UK Government to end punitive social security conditions including the young parent penalty, the two-child limit and the benefit cap.

Local Authorities

Recommendation 1. Ensure that quality gender analysis is used to inform budget decision making, enhancing transparency and showing how local budgets support the priorities set out by the Scottish Government and local needs.

Recommendation 2. Ensure that local services are designed for and by service users, increasing efficiency while meeting demand for services.

INTRODUCTION

The cost-of-living crisis has severely impacted women's economic resilience in Scotland. The increased likelihood of women being in part-time work and having caring responsibilities explains why they have lower levels of savings and wealth compared to men³, making them more vulnerable to economic shocks. This is particularly true for women from Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black ethnic groups, disabled women, single parents (of which at least 90% are women)⁴, survivors of abuse, unpaid carers, and women with no recourse to public funds⁵.

Our previous Women's Surveys in 2022 and 2023 exposed the extent to which women were being affected by rising costs and some of the strategies that they were using to cope with these. Of the 871 women who took the survey in 2023, 70% said they did not put the heating on in the previous winter to reduce costs; 68% were cutting back on food expenditure by limiting the type of food they buy and 23% stated that they are taking on more debt. This figure rises to 40% for single parents. In addition, 28% said they were struggling to manage transport costs, rising to 41% for disabled women and 54% for single parents. The annual SWBG surveys provide a snapshot, but the findings are consistent with further evidence and research carried out by other organisations. For example, as part of last year's State of the Nation report, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) found that just over 10% of workers in Scotland are locked in persistent low pay and 72% of them are women⁶. In their latest research published in November, StepChange highlighted the gender dimensions of debt⁷.

Figures from UK Finance revealed that between June and December 2023 about 800,000 fixed rate mortgages expired, with a further 1.6m ending in 2024. This would translate in sharp mortgage increases for homeowners, with knock-on effects on renters as landlords try to pass on the costs of higher interest rates. At the time we launched the 2024 survey these still sat at 5.25%⁸.

Given the impact of higher interest rates, and following on from the evidence gathered in 2023, we used this year's Women's Survey to deepen our understanding of women's experiences of the current inflationary period. We were particularly interested in finding out whether women feel they are better off, same or worse compared to last year. Additionally, with the UK having tipped into technical recession at the time we produced the survey because of household incomes declining, we decided to explore the topic of debt and savings. From previous surveys we know that women have been using savings or credit cards to manage regular monthly expenditure and that they are worried about the impact this will have on their retirement. We wanted to delve into the potential longer-term consequences of this and the current crisis for women.

Additionally, this year's survey looked at public sector reform and women's priorities for the UK General Election. Information on these last two topics is published separately.



About the survey

SWBG launched the Women's Survey 2024 on 1st March 2024 and was available for just over a month as it was undertaken during a holiday period, until the end of the Easter holidays (Tuesday 2nd April).

The survey included questions from last year along with new ones. For example, the survey included questions about people's employment sector to help identify any commonalities or underlying issues amongst people working in the public, private and non-profit sectors. In addition, it provided more response options to questions about the cost-of living crisis. For instance, we asked women whether they have opted out their pension contributions to make ends meet. This year our final theme of questions focused on debt and savings.

In total, 1026 women from 32 local authorities in Scotland took part in the survey. To better capture their views, the survey included quantitative and open-text questions to give participants the opportunity to elaborate on their answers.



DEMOGRAPHICS

29%

two adult household
without children



24%

two adult
household with
children



23%

single adult household
without children



8%

single adult household
with children



21%

of respondents' household
income is lower than
£20,000 per year



42%

respondents worked full-time

17%

work part-time



18%

permanently retired
from work

5%

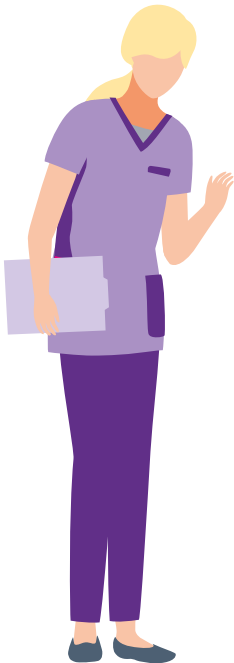
self-employed

6%

unable to work as
permanently sick or
disabled

>1%

were unemployed



18%

were in the
age bracket
of **23-34**



21%

were **35-44**



21%

were **45-54**



19%

were **55-64**



17%

were **65-74**



3%

were **74** or older



34%
of respondents work
in the public sector

14%
private



23%
Third sector

29%
Not applicable

30% British **55%** Scottish

3% women from black & minority ethnic communities

and **2%** mixed or multiple ethnic groups

2% Eastern Europeans



29%
of respondents have
a disability



Note on demographics:

The differences in respondents' demographics have not allowed us to make comparisons using last year's data. For instance, 16% of those who took our Women's Survey 2023 were single parents, 9% of respondents were retired and the household income of 54% of women was lower than £30,000 per year. The same figures for this year's survey are 8%, 18% and 35% respectively. The respondents' profiles therefore differ but most importantly, the household income of those who took the survey this year is on average higher, which explains why comparing results could be misleading. However, this year's survey asked the question "Compared to this time last year how do you feel financially?", the responses of which have allowed us to assess whether women feel worse off, better off or same compared to last year.

THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

“ I charge my devices in public places or a workplace to save on electricity. At home, I wear multiple layers and hardly use the heating. 3-4 days a week I look for reduced food labels. ”

Respondent,
Women's Survey 2024

Key findings

69% of respondents told us that they feel worse off financially compared to the same time last year, with only 7% reporting feeling better off.

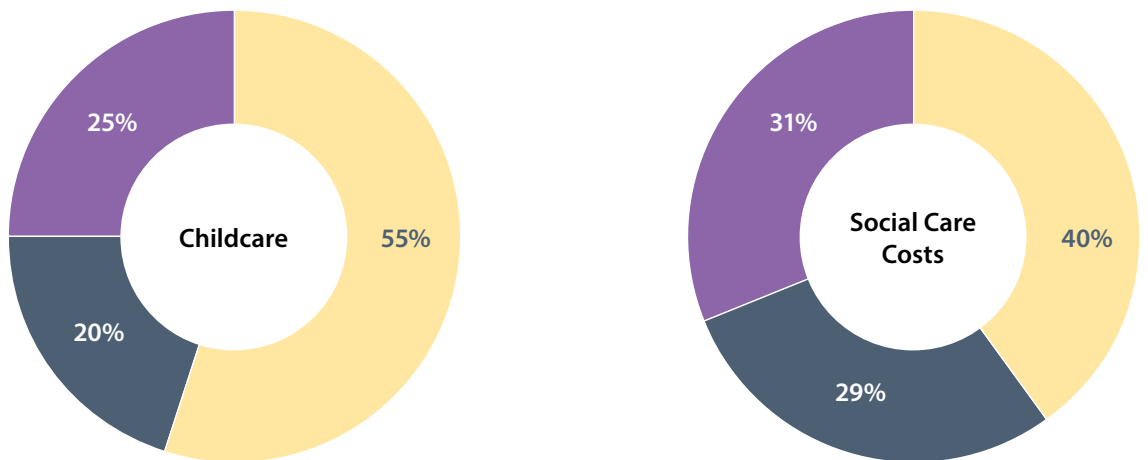
Increases in energy and food costs stood out as the areas having the greatest impact on women's ability to manage household costs, with 40% of women telling us that they are struggling with energy costs and 32% struggling with food costs. These figures worsen for single mothers, women from minority ethnic communities and disabled women:

- ▶ 58% of single mothers struggle with energy bills and 51% with food costs;
- ▶ 56% of women from minority ethnic communities struggle with energy bills and 47% with food costs;
- ▶ 52% of disabled women struggle with energy bills and 42% with food costs.

Those with an annual household income under £20,000 struggle the most with energy bills, with 61% of respondents telling us they have difficulties managing this cost while 46% told us that they struggle managing food costs. Of this group, 46% are single households without children, 22% live in a two-adult household without children and 14% are single adult households with children.

For those with caring costs, the majority told us that they struggle to manage these costs and that increases in these areas impacted on their ability to meet other household costs:

Image 1. Pie chart showing the percentage of respondents with caring costs being able to manage increasing expenses in childcare and social care.

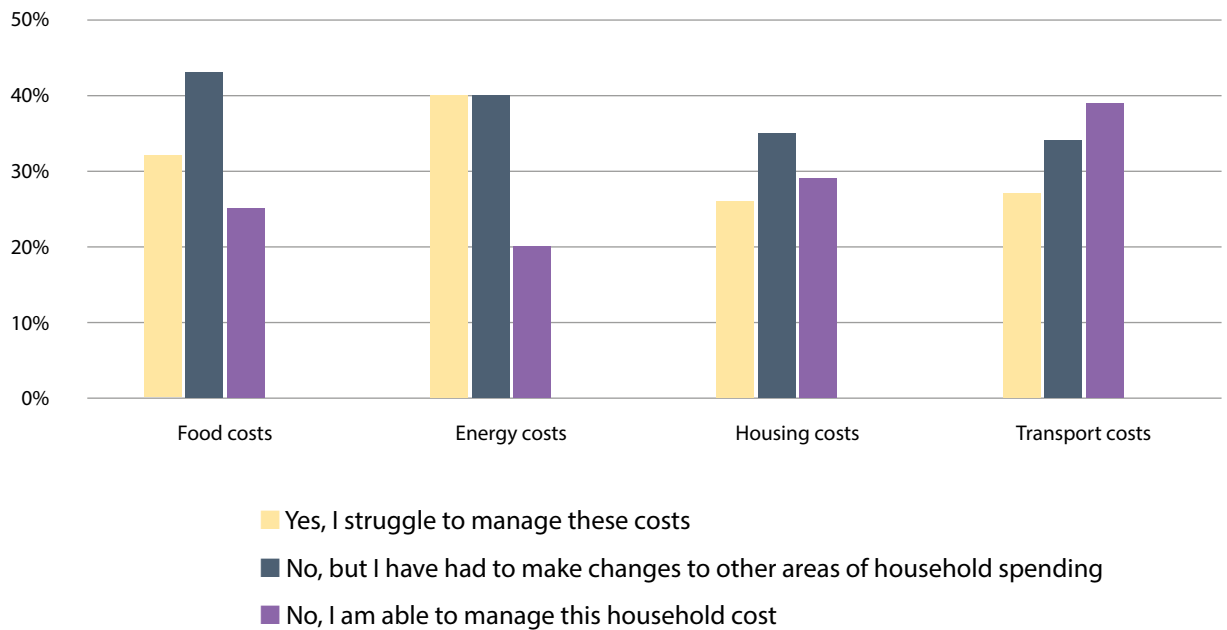


- Yes, I struggle to manage these costs
- No, but I have had to make changes to other areas of household spending
- No, I am able to manage this household cost

The survey asked questions about housing and transport costs, with 26% of women reporting having difficulties managing these costs. Looking at these findings in more detail:

- ▶ 42% of women from minority ethnic communities struggle with housing costs and 35% with transport costs;
- ▶ 39% of single mothers struggle with housing costs and 46% with transport costs;
- ▶ 35% of disabled women struggle with household costs and 39% with transport costs;
- ▶ 40% of respondents with a household income under £20,000 struggle with housing costs and 48% with transport costs.

Image 2. Graph showing total percentage of women struggling, managing and/or making changes to meet increased energy, food, transport and housing costs.



The strategies used by women to cope with increased costs are varied. Most respondents have cut down on activities such as eating out, while trying to decrease the costs of essentials, for instance food and energy bills. Overall, we learnt from women that:

- ▶ 71% are cutting back on eating out and 47% are cutting back on things like haircuts;
- ▶ 69% of respondents are cutting back on food expenditure by limiting the types of food they buy, including buying unbranded products;
- ▶ 63% are not putting the heating on;
- ▶ 50% are not replacing clothes or shoes for themselves.

THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

Intersectional analysis

An intersectional analysis of these figures shows that the need of some women is more acute depending on circumstances such as having caring responsibilities, race, disability, income or location. The survey reveals that single mothers and women from minority ethnic communities have been particularly hit by increasing costs and are having to manage these by cutting back on the type of foods they consume or on the use of heating in greater numbers compared to the average for the survey.

The following tables show the top four strategies used by different groups of women to manage increasing costs.

Single mothers

88%

cutting back on food expenditure by limiting the types of food I buy, including buying unbranded products

83%

cutting back on eating out

72%

not the putting heating on

66%

not replacing clothes/shoes for themselves



Women from minority ethnic communities

80%

cutting back on food expenditure by limiting the types of food I buy, including buying unbranded products

76%

not putting the heating on

73%

cutting back on eating out

60%

not replacing clothes/shoes for themselves



Disabled women

72%
cutting back on eating out

69%
cutting back on food expenditure by limiting the types of food I buy, including buying unbranded products

69%
not putting the heating on

57%
cutting back on haircuts etc.



Under £20k per year

72%
cutting back on food expenditure by limiting the types of food I buy, including buying unbranded products

72%
not putting the heating on

67%
cutting back on eating out

59%
not replacing clothes/shoes for themselves



Rural

72%
cutting back on eating out

69%
cutting back on food expenditure by limiting the types of food I buy, including buying unbranded products

64%
not putting the heating on

51%
not replacing clothes for themselves





“I now vacuum my flat fortnightly rather than weekly. I batch cook food so that I only use the oven 2 or 3 times a week then I eat the food cold for the other days. I used to eat porridge for breakfast but now eat cereal so I don't use the hob in the morning. I only have the heating on for 3 x 1 hour periods a day. I wear more jumpers and use blankets when it's very cold. I try not to use lights unless absolutely necessary. I shower 5x a week and have a wash on 2 days to reduce use of shower.”

Woman on less than £20k per year, Women's Survey 2024

“There are no areas to cut further, I was already very careful with money before the cost of living crisis and we already lived in fuel poverty because of living in Orkney. I wasn't spending on many of the things above already e.g. eating out so I haven't ticked them.”

Single mother, Women's Survey 2024

On top of making changes to their shopping list, including the purchase of unbranded products, the survey revealed that to help with the cost of essentials, 6% of respondents are using food banks and 15% are skipping meals. These figures increase as follows:

- ▶ 13% of women from minority ethnic communities use food banks and 22% are skipping meals;
- ▶ 16% of single mothers use food banks and 29% are skipping meals;
- ▶ 13% of disabled women use food banks and 26% are skipping meals and;
- ▶ 19% of women with an annual household income under £20,000 use food banks and 26% are skipping meals.

“

Going to bed early sitting in the dark, not watching tv, turning heating down, as my disability causes extra washing daily.

Disabled woman,
Women's Survey 2024

”

“I lost my job, and last year I also had to give up my car as I could no longer afford to run it. I live in an isolated village, with nearest town 10 miles away, and a return bus journey costs £10, and is very sporadic. I went on long-term sick, but did not have enough money and ended up in rent arrears – something that has never happened to me before I also have had to rely on food banks, and energy vouchers. I concluded that I am too poor to be ill – I simply cannot afford not to work.”

Rural respondent, Women's Survey 2024

CASE STUDY



The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on single households with no children

23% of women who responded to our survey live in a single household with no children. The majority of these respondents have an annual income of less than £20,000 per year, and 29% are permanently retired from work. 40% indicated having a disability.

Household annual income:

- ▶ 43% reported a household income of less than £20,000;
- ▶ 36% reported a household income of between £20,000 and £39,999;
- ▶ 14% reported a household income of over £40,000.

The areas where these households struggle the most are food and energy, with 33% and 47% of respondents indicating that they are having difficulties managing these costs. While some women in this group qualify for some financial support, many do not. In fact, 36% of respondents told us that they do not qualify for any benefits beyond council tax reduction. The additional challenge for these women is the impossibility of splitting costs or bills, making it more difficult to save money: 32% of respondents reported having no savings.

“I am single and while it is certainly challenging for families, I feel that there is the lack of support for single households. I am a migrant woman, and I feel that I have to manage EVERYTHING by myself. The increased costs across the board made me more anxious about financial risks and not having anyone to seek support from.”

Employment Status:

- ▶ 37% employed full-time;
- ▶ 11% employed part-time;
- ▶ 29% permanently retired from work, however only 4% receive pension credits;
- ▶ 10% unable to work as permanently sick or disabled.

Women between 55 and 74 years of age are more likely to live in a single household without children. Gender budgeting approaches should look at the impact of policies across the lifetime to understand how inequalities affect women through different stages of life.



THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS

Intersectional analysis

Spending changes in other household areas

Women are making changes to other budget areas to make ends meet. 39% of respondents told us they are not seeing family or friends while 39% have cancelled TV subscriptions or broadband, and 23% are cutting back on gym membership for them or their families. These figures again increase for some groups of women, with single mothers and minority ethnic women being more likely to make changes to these and other budget areas.

Respondents telling us they are not seeing family and friends

47%

minority ethnic women

57%

single mothers

45%

disabled women

44%

women with household income lower £20,000 per annum



Respondents who cancelled TV subscriptions/broadband

44%

minority ethnic women

53%

single mothers

43%

disabled women

44%

women with household income lower £20,000 per annum



Respondents who told us they have cut back on gym membership

27%

minority ethnic women

31%

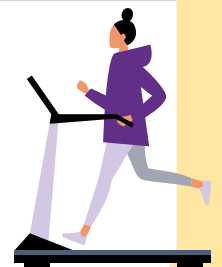
single mothers

19%

disabled women

13%

women with household income lower £20,000 per annum



ANALYSIS OF COST-OF-LIVING

Survey findings

“

Mortgage and energy bills has increased a lot due to fixed rate ending and how high rates are in comparison now.

Respondent,
Women's Survey 2024

”

Why are women feeling worse off?

While inflationary pressures are the main reason why women find themselves in an ever more precarious economic position, a closer look at the reasons why they feel financially worse off compared to last year highlights the gendered aspects of this crisis. Women told us about the impact Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) had on them, with some respondents stating how SMP's low rate at times made it impossible to meet overall household costs. Women also pointed the cost of childcare as a barrier to their ability to increase paid work and/or as a drain to their finances.

“Everything is more expensive. Leisure pursuits/fun days out/meals out are costly which means we can't do them often. I work part time as putting my child in full time childcare would make me worse off financially. I worry about the impact of this on my pension as I don't think I'll be able to return to full time work any time soon.”

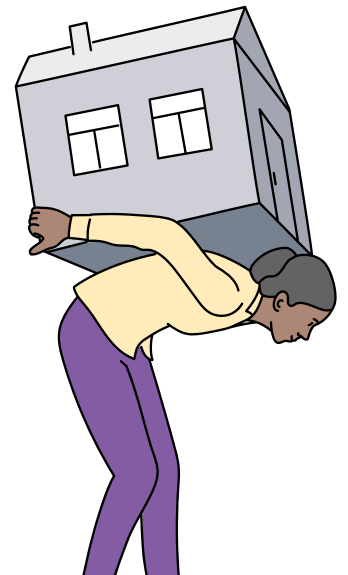
Respondent, Women's Survey 2024

“Spiralling food costs. Increase in childcare costs. Increase in commuting costs. Lack of pay increases in employment to reflect inflation. Shocking statutory maternity pay levels from the government.”

Respondent, Women's Survey 2024

Other reasons for feeling worse off include lack of savings, or savings being used up, stagnating wages or pay increases not keeping in line with inflation, fixed rate mortgage deals ending, wage increases reducing Universal Credit (UC), moving to UC from legacy benefits, helping adult children and health impacting on their ability to work. These reasons might also be applicable to men, particularly marginalised men, however, women's likelihood to work part time and/or to work in low-paid jobs or to report a disability increases the risk of entrenching gender inequalities.

Women feeling better off spoke about higher income coming into the household due to them (sometimes their partners) receiving pay rises, being able to apply for better jobs, coming off maternity leave, accessing state pension, or their children qualifying for funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) offer.



ANALYSIS OF COST-OF-LIVING

Survey findings

What does this mean for women now and in the future?

These findings not only show how the cost-of-living crisis is currently affecting women who responded to the survey but provide a glimpse into the potential long-term consequences of the cost-of-living crisis on women and the economy. For example, the inability to exercise indoors due to women cutting back on their gym memberships could arguably result in a lack of physical activity⁹, which in combination with poor diets is a key factor for non-communicable diseases¹⁰, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (i.e. stroke). When asked about the impact of the cost-of-living crisis:

- ▶ 29% stated that it has affected their physical health. This increases to 40% for minority ethnic women, 42% for women with an annual income under £20k, 50% for disabled women and 44% for single mothers;
- ▶ 13% told us they had to see the doctor for their physical health. This increases to 15% for single mothers, 21% for women with an annual income under £20k, 22% for women from minority ethnic communities, and 28% for disabled women.

“I don’t spend any money on myself in terms gym membership or activities outside the home because it feels like a luxury. This has subsequently had a negative impact on my physical wellbeing and feeling isolated.”

Respondent, ethnic minority background, Women’s Survey 2024

“Cost of living is increasing so much that I can’t afford my preference for more nutritional quality foods. My budget does not allow for any ‘extras’ and this is affecting my mood, motivation having a worrying and negative outlook for things to improve.”

Respondent, Women’s Survey 2024

“

I have quite a few items I need to charge as I’m partially sighted and I have quite a few serious health issues, my diabetes has deteriorated as I can’t afford to eat a good diet.

Disabled woman, Women’s Survey 2024

”



Not putting the heating on can increase people's likelihood of developing respiratory infections and other conditions such as asthma. Developing any such conditions can limit women's lives but also become a barrier to accessing employment¹¹, which in turn can impact women's earnings, contributing to the risk of falling into poverty. Furthermore, there is a growing interest in understanding the links between poor health and the current rise in economic inactivity, as poor health is the main reason behind the rise in economic inactivity among 50–69-year-olds in Q2 2022 (200,000)¹². In Scotland, the inactivity rate increased following the start of the coronavirus pandemic, before decreasing through 2022. However, it increased again in 2023¹³. Most interestingly, the inactivity rate for women in Scotland, which typically has been below the UK's rate, was higher in the period between April to June 2023 at 25.2% versus 24.8% for the UK. While more data and research are required to understand the reasons for this, attention should be paid to health inequalities driven by socioeconomic factors, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis, and how this affects women. With Scotland's population projected to age, the consequences of the current inflationary period could have implications for women, but also for the state as the NHS and the social security system try to tackle ever more complex problems, while the labour market fails to grow its workforce.

“I have issues with Asthma & my back/hips. The cold weather aggravated these conditions but I scarcely have the heating on for long because the thought of collection officers coming to the door it's terrifying.”

Respondent, Women's Survey 2024

**“
I have become
isolated and
depressed from
family and friends.
”**

Single mother,
Women's Survey 2024



The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on women's ability to socialise with family and friends, or to pay for the TV license or broadband is not to be underestimated. Evidence shows that the cost-of-living crisis is one of the drivers behind the increase in TV license evasion, which rose from 5.50% in 2012/13 to 10.31% in 2022/23. Of the 40,654 convicted in 2022, 74% were women¹⁴. Additionally, women's inability to regularly visit their families and friends can contribute to feelings of loneliness, which can be linked to poor physical health, mental health, and poor personal wellbeing¹⁵, exacerbating the issues examined above. In relation to this point, our survey showed that:

- ▶ 27% of respondents are feeling more isolated. This increases to 38% for minority ethnic women, 45% for disabled women, 45% for single mothers and 46% for women with an annual income under £20k;
- ▶ 51% of respondents told us increasing costs have impacted their mental health. This increases to 60% for minority ethnic women, 64% for women with an annual income under £20k and 70% for disabled and single mothers;
- ▶ 17% of respondents said they have accessed help for their mental health. This figure is 24% for minority ethnic women, 24% for single mothers, 27% for women with an annual income under £20k and 30% for disabled women.

“
Just generally not spending money on any treats, coffees etc. it's a bit miserable.
”

Respondent,
 Women's Survey 2024

The knock-on effect of increasing poverty and health conditions will be significant for the state. Yet, with 69% of respondents reporting feeling worse off financially compared to the same time last year, the loss of revenue from leisure activities such as eating out and others, will translate into falling tax revenues, impacting on the UK and Scottish governments' ability to develop and implement solutions to intersecting crises.

DEBT AND SAVINGS

What women told us

Of the 992 women responding to questions relating to debt in the survey, 55% told us they have some type of debt. Regarding savings, 35% said they have none and 14% said they have one month's income worth of savings. 25% of women reported having the equivalent to three months' income in savings.

When asked about whether they were behind on their rent/mortgage payments, 95% of respondents said no. Regarding local taxes, 8% of respondents had council tax arrears and 6% reported having deductions made to their benefits.

An intersectional analysis of these figures shines a light on the challenges faced by single mothers, minority ethnic women, disabled women and women with an annual household income under £20,000.

No savings

42%

minority ethnic women

53%

single mothers

44%

disabled women

45%

women with household income lower £20,000 per annum



Behind their rent/mortgage payments

2%

minority ethnic women

7%

single mothers

4%

disabled women

6%

women with household income lower £20,000 per annum



Deductions made to their benefits

9%

minority ethnic women

18%

single mothers

11%

disabled women

13%

women with household income lower £20,000 per annum



Finally, 52% of respondents stated having credit card debt, a figure that increases to 58% for single mothers, and decreases for women with a household income lower than £20,000 per year (46%)

Regarding council tax, we found that of those who responded to the survey, single mothers, women with a household income under £20,000 per year, and disabled women are more likely to be in arrears:

- ▶ 19% of single mothers;
- ▶ 11% disabled women;
- ▶ 14% women with an annual household income under £20,000.

Deduction to benefit practices further erodes women's economic resilience at a time when they are most vulnerable due to inflationary pressures¹⁶. In relation to this point, women told us about the difficulties they experience when dealing with the Department of Work and Pensions, for example, how processes in place to rectify overpayments and debt related to these have caused harm and/or unnecessary stress, as recently highlighted by the National Audit Office¹⁷:

“I had 2 weeks of my carer allowance deducted due to an over payment and it was hell, as I rely on this pittance every week. Yes they took it back over 2 weeks but when a carer only gets about £70 per week for a full time job, people rely on that money desperately.”

Respondent, Women's Survey 2024

“Due entirely to dwp overpayments – their system's inability to deal with real life – so mostly, universal credit to pip is not actually paid to me but to reduce these overpayments debt. Even my MP was unable to prevent them recurring ... eventually I learned to submit my SE figures each month AFTER I was sure my PAYE figs would be confirmed (ie a week late every month) ... When overpaid, things were so uncertain I bought shoes, jacket, stockpiled food & topped up (prepayment) meters extra ... (direct link to previous experience of poverty & hardship when children younger & still at home).”

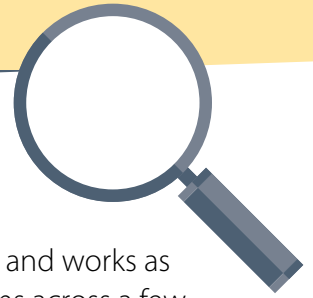
Respondent, Women's Survey 2024

The lack of savings reported by 35% of survey respondents is an important finding, one that highlights the precariousness of households in times of economic crisis, particularly if they were faced with a higher or unexpected bill. 27% of respondents told us that an unexpected expenditure on the household (for example, due to flooding or care breakdown) had contributed to these women getting into debt.

Additionally, it is worth noting that 45% of those reporting having no savings have a household income of less than £30,000 per year, 21% live in a single household without children while 13% are single mothers, and 36% reported having a disability. Unsurprisingly, when asked about the type of factors contributing to their inability to save money or to accumulating debt, higher food and energy costs topped the list of options given by 87% and 85% of respondents respectively, which highlights the deep impact that the increasing cost of essentials has had on women.



CASE STUDY



The risks of buy-now pay-later schemes

'Buy-now pay-later' (BNPL) is a popular method for buying products online and works as a type of short-term financing where customers can spread the cost of items across a few weeks or months¹⁸. Theoretically, these products help make purchases more affordable and/or manageable, however, they can also create a wide range of challenges for customers.

The Women's Survey 2024 found that for 18% of women who responded 'buy-now pay-later' payment options were one of the reasons contributing to them having debt and/or not being able to save money. Of those who responded 55% of households with an income of less than £40,000 per year told us that the use of BNPL products is contributing to them having debt. 41% of women with an annual household income of between £40,000 and over £100,000 indicated that BNPL contributes to them having debt or a lack of savings.

This is an issue affecting women in all age groups, although women over 65 years of age were less likely to use BNPL. In terms of household composition, BNPL seems to be used by women with and without children both in two adult and single households.

However, the danger of these products is that they could put those most vulnerable at further financial risk.



27% of women in two adult households with children reported having no savings. Over 50% of these respondents have a household income above £50,000 per year, meaning they should not be at risk of poverty. However, this assumes that household income is evenly split, something that does not always hold true. The following quote is a good example of this:

“I went on Maternity leave with no savings. I accumulated debt because I used credit cards to pay my bills because I was receiving Statutory Mat pay. My partner contributed his share towards our housing bills and it was expected that I should do the same.”

Respondent, Women's Survey 2024

Other factors contributing to women having debt or not being able to save are:

- ▶ Higher transport costs: 39%
- ▶ Higher rent/mortgage repayments: 29%
- ▶ Debt repayments such as credit cards or 'Buy-now pay-later' payment options: 18%
- ▶ Low wages: 17%

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been informed by the women who responded to our survey, as well as by previous evidence and work carried out by the Scottish Women's Budget Group.

UK Government

Recommendation 1. Enhance Statutory Maternity Pay.

Recommendation 2. Agree to implement the New Economic Foundation's proposal on a National Energy Guarantee which lowers and fixes the price paid by households on their essential energy needs¹⁹. In the long-term, work towards nationalising energy distribution and review how the energy markets work to ensure more equitable charges.

Recommendation 3. Provide an adequate safety net. Increase Universal Credit basic rate to cover the cost of essentials (food, household bills and travel) in line with calls made by the Trussell Trust and Joseph Rowntree Foundation and end the 5-week period from the day you make the claim until you receive the support. End the two-child limit policy and the benefit cap. Increase carer's allowance and scrap the income levels related to this benefit and extend it to those over pensionable age²⁰.

Recommendation 4. Regulate Buy Now Pay Later products without further delay.

Scottish Government

Recommendation 1. Introduce 30-hour funding Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) with immediate effect after paid maternity leave and ensure free childcare provision for those groups experiencing poverty. Work towards an entitlement of 50 hours per week of funded, good quality, flexible education and childcare for all children between six months and five years and develop affordable wraparound care for over 5-year-olds.

Recommendation 2. Ensure adequate funding for the Scottish Welfare Fund so there are sufficient resources to meet the demand and increase funding for promotion of the fund.

Recommendation 3. Provide an urgent cash injection to support social care. Drive investment towards the implementation of a transformative adult social care model as set out in our report on social care²¹.

Recommendation 4. Fulfil commitments to end non-residential social care charges.

Recommendation 5. Work with the UK Government to end punitive social security conditions including the young parent penalty, the two-child limit and the benefit cap.

Local Authorities

Recommendation 1. Ensure that quality gender analysis is used to inform budget decision making, enhancing transparency and showing how local budgets support the priorities set out by the Scottish Government and local needs.

Recommendation 2. Ensure that local services are designed for and by service users, increasing efficiency while meeting demand for services.

Finally, as an overall recommendation we are calling on the UK Government, the Scottish Government and Local Authorities to review thresholds for access to means tested support which often have not risen in line with inflation.

We recognise that these recommendations will require additional resources. We encourage the use of gender budgeting approaches to help identify the best use of government resources across all levels of government.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/NEG-rollout.pdf>
- ² <https://www.swbg.org.uk/content/publications/Towards-a-transformative-universal-adult-social-care-support-service-for-Scotland.pdf>
- ³ <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>
- ⁴ https://opfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/OPFS-briefing-on-single-parents-lived-experience-july2020_edited.pdf
- ⁵ <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>
- ⁶ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-scotland-2023>
- ⁷ <https://www.stepchange.org/Portals/0/23/policy/burden/Unravelling-Womens-Debt-Dilemma-Report-Nov-23-StepChange.pdf>
- ⁸ <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy-summary-and-minutes/2024/march-2024#:~:text=Monetary%20Policy%20Summary%2C%20March%202024,maintain%20Bank%20Rate%20at%205.25%25>
- ⁹ <https://healthandcare.scot/stories/3885/physical-activity-research-public-health>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases#:~:text=Unhealthy%20diets%20and%20a%20lack,in%20terms%20of%20premature%20deaths>
- ¹¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/economicinactivity/articles/risingillhealthandeconomicinactivitybecauseoflongtermsicknessuk/2019to2023>
- ¹² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-labour-market-overview-december-2023/pages/economic-inactivity/>
- ¹³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-labour-market-overview-december-2023/pages/economic-inactivity/>
- ¹⁴ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8101/CBP-8101.pdf#page=11>
- ¹⁵ <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/category/loneliness/>
- ¹⁶ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754488/IPOL_STU\(2024\)754488_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/754488/IPOL_STU(2024)754488_EN.pdf)
- ¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/23/national-audit-office-to-investigate-growing-scandal-over-carers-allowance> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/may/23/national-audit-office-to-investigate-growing-scandal-over-carers-allowance>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.lloydsbank.com/understanding-credit/buy-now-pay-later.html>
- ¹⁹ <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/NEG-rollout.pdf>
- ²⁰ SWBG are members of the End Child Poverty coalition: <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/>
- ²¹ <https://www.swbg.org.uk/content/publications/Towards-a-transformative-universal-adult-social-care-support-service-for-Scotland.pdf>

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) is an independent analysis and campaign group that aims to promote gender analysis in public policy and public finance decisions through budgetary processes. SWBG brings together a wide range of women from across Scotland who have an interest in women's equality and want to achieve better gender equality in our society. SWBG has focused on encouraging active gender analysis in the Scottish Budget process since 2000.