

1. Introduction

Oxfam works with others to overcome poverty in three ways:

- by developing projects with people living in poverty that improve their lives and show others how things can change;
- by raising public awareness of poverty to create pressure for change; and
- by working with policymakers to tackle the causes of poverty.

For further details about Oxfam's work, see www.oxfam.org.uk/.

We believe our programming work in Wales provides a unique practice-based perspective on the childcare agenda. This response is based on the outcomes of our Skills for Life¹ programme.

2. Key messages

- Women experiencing poverty in Wales must feel they have power over their lives and choices, and are able to move into decent work and out of poverty – the right childcare offer is central to this.
- The Welsh Government must recognise the extent to which access to childcare impacts on women's ability to access the labour market.
- Flexible childcare should be available for the diversity of working patterns in a 24-hour economy and in order to take up training and development opportunities.

3. Skills for Life – setting the scene

Established in 2017, Oxfam Cymru's Skills for Life project delivers a tailored and supportive programme of workshops, training, professional coaching and voluntary work placements. The Skills for Life project received funding from the Communities for Work Innovation fund, funded by the Welsh Government and European Social Fund. The project is an integral part of Oxfam's work in Wales and across the UK to address the causes of poverty. Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, and particularly women, are some of the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups and suffer disproportionate levels of poverty and social exclusion. Women are still paid less for the work they do - the gender pay gap means women earn 18% less than men for doing the same job - and of women working part-time in Wales, 40% are paid less than the Living

¹ Skills for Life – giving women a hand on their journey to employment, Oxfam Cymru, June 2017
<https://www.oxfam.org.uk/cymru/blog/2017/06/skills-for-life>

Wage². Women often lack a voice in decision-making processes and are under-represented in leadership roles too - which is why Oxfam and our partners are working to make a change.

4. Barrier to work

The most common barrier reported by the Skills for Life women to accessing work was childcare, and specifically the lack of affordable childcare available when women needed it to be able to work. The programme's interim evaluation has recorded examples of participants who had been forced to turn down jobs by a lack of suitable care (such as care to cover evening shifts). Participants said:

"A lot of entry level jobs are like that, retail, cleaning, hospitality and so on. For example, with cleaning you either work very early or very late – it's not family compatible, especially if you're a single parent with no networks in the UK." (participant)

"Doing the [Skills for Life] project was a real eye-opener. The most significant change for me was meeting other women in the group who were in the same position. I realised I was not alone. They understood why I was not working. Creches are too expensive, this keeps mothers at home". (participant)

5. A manifesto for universal childcare

Whilst the Skills for Life participants felt that the lack of suitable childcare is the primary barrier which keeps women out of the workplace, they felt it also: hinders women's development; affects family relationships; keeps women isolated; and impacts on their mental health. As a result, the women felt disadvantaged when compared to men and that their labour was not valued. Women felt that childcare is expected of them – *'It's just what you do'*.

The key issues identified by the participants were:

- In the absence of public funding, childcare has become a business with expensive rates.
- When discussing childcare (at a policy making level), the focus is often on very young (pre-school) children but lack of suitable childcare remains a barrier even when children are in school. Many schools do not offer breakfast or afterschool clubs, which limits women in the hours that they can work. In addition, older children also require support and supervision particularly during sensitive teenage years.
- There are not enough childcare staff trained and child-staff ratios are too high.
- There is no childcare available for women whilst they are job seeking (for example, to attend job interviews).
- The current childcare system and provision is too complicated to understand.
- The current system of tax credits only covers a proportion of childcare costs, which does not leave women with enough money to have a decent life.

It is crucial that the Welsh Governments' childcare offer be developed in a way which does not accidentally exclude women who work outside the traditional 9-5 weekday environment. Any future assessment of the offer should review the policy on this basis. Childcare provision to help women access training and development should be equally easy to access as that for work.

6. Policy development

Oxfam Cymru is willing to meet with CYPE members or officials to discuss this response in more detail, and provide further information if required.

OXFAM CYMRU

² We want a Wales where everyone is paid at least the Living Wage, Oxfam Cymru, 2017
<https://www.oxfam.org.uk/cymru/blog/2017/03/blueprint-for-change-three>