

Feminist analysis of Sheffield's plans to build back better

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Introduction

This report is a feminist policy analysis of Sheffield City Region's (SCR) Renewal Action Plan, aimed at changing Sheffield City Region's approach to its plans for economic recovery from the pandemic. It uses local data on the economic profile of Sheffield as well as research on the overall impact the pandemic has had on women in the UK, to show why SCR should focus on building a care-led recovery. By showing how the SCR Renewal Action Plan fails to tackle the barriers women have faced since the start of the pandemic, we can see how a care-led recovery would address the issues of unemployment and economic stagnation and create a fairer economy. By adopting a care-led recovery, SCR would also improve the wellbeing and general health of Sheffield's population in a sustainable and green way.

Overview of the Pandemic's Effect on Women in the UK

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on our economy, livelihoods and daily life, leaving many unemployed, struggling to keep their businesses afloat or left without vital health services. Whilst local councils and the UK government have plans to "build back better" and create "shovel-ready jobs", women, who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, have been left behind in these plans. A construction-led recovery puts jobs typically performed by men at the forefront of plans to "build back better", leaving behind women who predominantly work in retail, hospitality or the care sectors, or those who carry out unpaid childcare.

Data shows that:

- During the pandemic, women in the UK were more likely to be furloughed and less likely to work from home, while still absorbing most of the extra unpaid housework tasks and childcare during lockdown.¹
- As of June 2021 furlough trends had reverted, and there were 885,000 women on furlough compared to 973,000 men, which dropped to 734,000 women and 817,000 men on 31 July 2021.² The number of women on furlough was lower than that of men as the former predominate occupations deemed 'key workers' like social and child care, health, essential retail and education.
- During September and October 2020, women spent 64% more time on unpaid housework than men and 99% more time on unpaid childcare, meaning women spent double the time men do on unpaid childcare.³

¹ ONS (2021) Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the different effects on men and women in the UK, March 2020 to February 2021 (<https://bit.ly/2YhgpkJ>)

² HM Revenue and Customs (2021) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: 9 September 2021 (<https://bit.ly/3ac6zKp>)

³ ONS (2020) A "new normal"? How people spent their time after the March 2020 coronavirus lockdown (<https://bit.ly/3leJxZy>)

- When schools closed, homeschooling and childcare weren't taken up equally by men and women, as 67% of women compared to 52% of men homeschooled school-aged children. Women absorbed the extra unpaid housework tasks and childcare during lockdown.⁴
- 1 in 3 women reported that their mental health had been negatively impacted by homeschooling school-aged children compared to 1 in 5 men.⁵
- Women reported higher anxiety than men almost consistently between March 2020 and February 2021. Women's health was disproportionately impacted during the pandemic, due to picking up unpaid housework and childcare, as well as working in the key sectors where they were more at risk of catching COVID-19.⁶
- 46% of mothers that have been made redundant during the pandemic cite lack of adequate childcare as the cause.⁷
- 70% of women with caring responsibilities who asked to be furloughed had their request denied.⁸
- 48% of mothers have been worried about negative treatment by an employer because of their childcare responsibilities.⁹
- Falling employment among women during the pandemic was driven by part-time workers.¹⁰

Sheffield's Economic Profile

According to Sheffield City Region (SCR) Renewal Action Plan:¹¹

- Over 20% of SCR employment is in the most impacted sectors of retail, hospitality, the arts, leisure and recreation and 17% of people in SCR are employed by the retail and hospitality sectors. Women are the majority of these workers, so likely to be disproportionately impacted by job losses.
- Footfall in urban centres fell by 80% over the course of the pandemic.
- 1 in 3 workers in Sheffield worked in low-wage jobs before the pandemic.
- All local authorities in Sheffield have seen a 10-15% fall in job postings.
- A drop of 75% is expected in the number of people undertaking apprenticeships and a drop of 50% has been seen in people accessing higher or further education. This will impact young people's career prospects in the long-term and risks deepen inequality.
- Retail and hospitality sectors employ 17% of people in SCR which is expecting one of the worst contractions.

⁴ ONS (2020) Coronavirus and Homeschooling in Great Britain: April to June 2020 (<https://bit.ly/3D8asfU>)

⁵ ONS (2021) Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the different effects on men and women in the UK, March 2020 to February 2021 (<https://bit.ly/2YhqpkJ>)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ House of Lords Library (2021) COVID-19: Empowering women in the recovery from the impact of the pandemic (<https://bit.ly/3Dgyu8C>)

⁸ Women's Budget Group (2021) Women and employment during 2019 (<https://bit.ly/2YmaVMu>)

⁹ Women's Budget Group (2021) Spring Budget 2021: Women and Employment During COVID-19 (<https://bit.ly/3oKQdRq>)

¹⁰ House of Commons Library (2021) How has the coronavirus pandemic affected women in work (<https://bit.ly/2WUbtYw>)

¹¹ Sheffield City Region (2021) Renewal Action Plan (<https://bit.ly/3uUNLsL>)

Nomis statistics for the Sheffield labour market show that:¹²

- Between April 2020 and March 2021, 154,000 men were economically active compared to 133,000 women.
- 9,200 men were unemployed compared to 7,000 women.
- After being a student, most people were economically inactive due to family responsibilities or long-term sickness.
- By place of residence in 2020, full-time gross weekly pay for men was £574.9 compared to women who earned £465.4.
- Hourly pay for men, excluding overtime, was £14.37 compared to £12.44 for women.
- In 2017, 57% of carers in Sheffield were women and 12% of women were carers- representing a 3% equality gap.
- In 2017, 89% of lone parent families were headed by a woman, whereas only 11% of lone parent families were headed by men.
- In 2017, 35% of managers, directors and senior officials were women.

Overview of the Sheffield Renewal Action Plan

The Sheffield Renewal Action Plan is a green, COVID-19 recovery plan created by the Sheffield City Region. It is separated into three sections: *People*, *Employers* and *Places*.

The *People* section includes *South Yorkshire Works*, a jobs programme that aims to:

- Give anybody that needs education or training in Sheffield the ability to do so
- Subsidise wages to incentivise employment
- Allow education and training organisations to use partnerships with employers to improve targeting
- Work with mental health providers to provide individuals with wider support
- Find employment opportunities for people out of work
- Support newly employed people to remain in work
- Combat stigma around employment services.

The *Young People's Skills Guarantee* plans sets out plans to:

- Enhance careers guidance and advice
- Subsidise digital, technical and applied education
- Bridge the gap between education and employment, focusing on technical and applied skills
- Match up cohorts of students through a mentorship and training scheme.

The *People plan to Overcome Barriers* outlines how SCR will:

- Grant a basic income to the most disadvantaged members of the community

¹² NOMIS (2021) Labour Market Profile Sheffield (<https://bit.ly/2YyIpYY>)

- Help 15,000 people enter the labour market, focusing on the most vulnerable parts of the population.

Under *Employers*, the *Renewal Action Plan* describes how it will:

- Provide employers with digital upskilling
- Provide employers with business support to adapt to COVID-19
- Provide business loans and grants to support growth plans
- Support strategic growth sectors towards the net-zero transition
- Provide businesses with leadership, strategic and operational support
- Support investment in technology, low-carbon transition, employee health and social responsibility.

Place sets out plans for 'shovel-ready' infrastructure opportunities which create jobs, whilst moving Sheffield City Region towards their strategic goals.

A feminist analysis of the plans

Issue 1: Failure to examine the reasons why women are out of work

The Sheffield City Region's *Renewal Action Plan* outlines Sheffield's plans for a green economic recovery from the impact of COVID-19 on the city. It outlines how a zero-carbon initiative, skills training for those currently unemployed and support for employers who have been impacted by lockdown will be put in place.

South Yorkshire Works, SCR's new job programme, incorporates a range of initiatives to encourage and enable people to enter and remain in work. The *Train to Work* scheme, for instance, will allow any individual who needs training or education the ability to do so, will "subsidise wages to incentivise employment" and work with mental health services to provide individuals with support.

Furthermore, the *Back to Work* scheme will help unemployed people find work opportunities, facilitate a matching up scheme between job openings and unemployed people and support newly employed individuals to remain and progress in the workplace.

Although the scheme will target disadvantaged groups, including women, the Action Plan doesn't describe or detail how it will do so, ignoring the barriers many women face in employment, in particular their caring responsibilities. Barriers to going into work such as childcare costs or long-term sickness are the main reasons why many women remain out of the labour market.

Schemes such as *South Yorkshire Works*, do not sufficiently support women who are unable to enter paid work. SCR plans should include support for women with childcare responsibilities, particularly by making sure that childcare provision in Sheffield is affordable and meets the needs of families. SCR should also invest in the creation of well-paid part-time jobs that allow both women and men to better combine paid work with raising a family.

The Sheffield *Renewal Action Plan* sets out how, over the next 12-18 months, SCR will get 55,000 people into work or training, including 3,000 into apprenticeships. However there is nothing in the report that sets out how it will support women with caring or childcare responsibilities, who cannot work, financially. Additionally, apprenticeships are gender-segregated, with women mainly going into apprenticeships that lead to low-paid careers, such as in child and social care, while men predominate in higher-paid apprenticeships like construction and IT. SCR should target apprenticeships in green job sectors to women too, so new opportunities for well-paid jobs are well distributed.

Sheffield City Region's plan for a South Yorkshire jobs programme, focusing on training and apprenticeships disregards the gap that needs to be addressed in the hours men and women work, as only 52% of women in Sheffield work full-time compared to 81% of men.¹³ The plan identifies barriers to employment, such as a lack of digital assets at home, childcare commitments, a lack of affordable housing and a lack of transport, and proposes a basic income to tackle these issues.

In Sheffield in 2017, 57% of carers were women and 12% of women were carers, representing an equality gap of 3 percentage points.¹⁴ Furthermore 89% of lone families in Sheffield were headed by a woman and only 11% were headed by men.¹⁵ Caring responsibilities are at the core of women's, particularly mothers', challenges to enter and remain in the labour market. That is why, in order for SCR's job plans to be successful, there must be investment in city-wide affordable and adequate childcare which would enable lone-parent families to access employment or allow women in couples to pursue better-paid careers. Investing in high quality universal childcare would give children a better start in life, and would free up women's time to pursue better careers, lowering the rate of unemployment and economic inactivity, and leaving families with more money in their pockets.

Issue 2: Focus on male-dominated sectors

The "shovel-ready" jobs programme is important for recovery from the pandemic and for a transition to a net-zero economy. However, investing in care jobs and the care sectors is just as important and shows a gap in the kind of jobs SCR is willing to invest in.

Whilst focusing on job creation and skills training, the plan leaves behind the caring, leisure and service industries and the sales and customer service industries where 80% and 63% of people working in these industries are female.¹⁶ A focus on job creation in technical and construction industries also fails to support the financial needs of women who are unable to work.

¹³ Sheffield Community Knowledge Profiles (2017) Women in Sheffield (<https://bit.ly/2YxyEJw>)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ NOMIS (2021) Labour Market Profile Sheffield (<https://bit.ly/2YyIpYY>)

Issue 3: Failure to address the gender pay gap

In Sheffield, the gender pay gap is 23.2% compared to 15.5% in the UK overall.¹⁷ Whereas in other parts of the country the gap is narrowing, closing the gender pay gap in Sheffield is taking longer. According to ASHE data from 2014, it will take another 27 years for men and women to be paid the same.¹⁸ SCR's renewal action plan, fails to mention this, instead focusing on kickstarting the economy and getting people back into work. Kickstarting the economy and creating jobs should have a focus on good quality and well-paid jobs, particularly in low-paid sectors where women predominate, like retail, social and childcare sectors, which were also hard hit by the pandemic.

In its plans to invest in local businesses and infrastructure projects, the report notes how aerospace and automotive industries have been impacted and identifies lack of technological investment as a key aspect of low levels of investment. The programme aims to back employers "to adapt and survive" by helping them adapt to COVID-19, carrying out digital upskilling and creating and safeguarding new jobs.

This "jobs-led recovery" however, puts no pressure on employers to close their gender pay gaps, to prevent the discrimination of pregnant women or women with childcare commitments and focuses on jobs in technology, construction and aerospace industries rather than the work women have been doing disproportionately as key workers in the care sector, retail and hospitality. This jobs-led recovery must create *good* jobs, where women are paid equally to men, flexible working is an option for everyone, and women are not laid off due to childcare commitments or pregnancy.

To put pressure on employers that refuse to provide a living wage (according to the Renewal Action Plan, a third of people in Sheffield were in low-wage work before the pandemic), Sheffield should make any financial support to companies conditional on them paying at least the living wage to workers. Measures should be put in place to stop employers from using pay secrecy clauses, supporting local unions in negotiating for better pay, setting targets for ensuring women are on shortlists for recruitment and promotions and requiring large employers to have diversity targets and action plans.

Issue 4: Failure to address barriers for the most marginalised women

Women's Budget Group data shows that:¹⁹

- In 2020, 42.9% of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women were more worried about being in debt due to the pandemic (37.1% of white women).
- In 2020, 23.7% of BME mothers said they were struggling to feed their children.

¹⁷ Sheffield Community Knowledge Profiles (2017) Women in Sheffield (<https://bit.ly/2YxyEJw>)

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Women's Budget Group (2020) BAME Women and COVID-19- Research Evidence (<https://bit.ly/3lz4L4F>)

- As a result of working from home, 41% of BME women reported they did more work (29.2% of white women).
- BME women are more likely to be key workers than BME men or white women.
- BME women were more likely to report losing financial support at the start of the COVID-19 crisis.

The Renewal Action Plan, whilst focusing on recovering businesses from the pandemic and getting people back into employment, will not address the financial impact the pandemic has had on BME women, who have been straddled with debt, more childcare commitments and a lack of safety in their disproportionate roles as key workers.

Of the 1 in 3 low-paid workers the action plan mentions, many of these workers are likely to be BME women as they are overrepresented in key sectors, which tend to be lower-paid than average. It is vital that SCR ensures these environments are fit for safe working and that they are paid the living wage, as well as ensuring BME women who are not in employment have adequate financial support.

Work-related anxiety was highest amongst BME women, with 65.1% of these women reporting anxiety about going back to work.²⁰ A programme that focuses on getting the people who are out of work into work at all costs will ignore the anxiety the most marginalised women face. Ensuring workplaces have adequate PPE and ventilation, could be more effective at getting people back into work than a programme tackling unemployment, which doesn't look at its causes and barriers.

SCR could directly support BME women and their families by targeting financial support, particularly to families impacted by the two-child limit on benefit payments, alleviating anxiety by ensuring workplaces have adequate PPE and sick pay, and ensuring local employers and mental health services have an understanding of and address the needs of BME women going back to work after the pandemic.

Disabled women have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic:²¹

- Around a third of disabled people were more likely to say their household had run out of money in 2020 compared to 24.4% of non-disabled families.
- 68% of disabled women said they were responsible for housework.
- 37.7% of disabled mothers said they were struggling to feed their children compared to 16.7% of non-disabled mothers.
- 1 in 5 disabled women reported losing support from the government and 2 in 5 reported losing support from other people.
- A third of disabled women said they were not sure where to turn for support at the start of the crisis.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Women's Budget Group (2020) Disabled Women and COVID-19- Research Evidence (<https://bit.ly/30j4z1k>)

What is stark about the action plan is the lack of acknowledgement of the anxiety and fear disabled people feel about going back to work, especially as many could be extremely vulnerable to COVID-19. A plan that focuses on getting people back into workplaces that are potentially dangerous makes clear that the Renewal Action Plan has non-disabled people as its priority. Many disabled women may still be shielding, and adequate financial support must be delivered to them, as well as investment into making workplaces safer, before putting disabled women back into unsafe work environments.

Conclusion

The Sheffield Renewal Action Plan sets out a detailed plan to create jobs in Sheffield and it acknowledges that low pay was an issue in Sheffield before the pandemic. Shovel-ready jobs are necessary for a green transition and economic recovery, but they are insufficient; SCR should set out plans for a care-led recovery which would help tackle the care and climate crisis, benefitting everyone and women in particular. Without careful targeting of these job creation plans, women will be left behind, particularly the most marginalised women, including BME and disabled women. SCR also doesn't propose any plans to remove barriers for women who would like to go into employment, such as childcare commitments.

Investing in care is crucial; it creates 2.7 times as many jobs as investing in the construction industries, it results in a better cared-for and healthier population and reduces the gender employment and pay gaps.

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