

STATE OF THE NATION 2026



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INTRODUCTION

This report marks the eighth iteration in the State of the Nation series. Finalised in the immediate aftermath of the 2026 Senedd elections, it comes at a moment of significant political change in Wales, ending 27 years of Labour rule. As part of this edition, we looked back to the first report in 2018 to assess how key measures of gender equality have shifted over time. The short answer, detailed throughout the report narrative, is not enough. Despite important commitments and initiatives, the daily lives of women across Wales have seen only limited improvements.

Women are now looking to a new Welsh Government to respond to the scale of the challenge. An unfolding polycrisis marked by global instability and economic pressures continues to affect communities across Wales, with rising costs and growing inequality shaping everyday life. At the same time, increasing polarisation means that discussions of equality and human rights are becoming a political football. As always, women – particularly those from marginalised communities – remain disproportionately affected, whether through financial hardship, caring responsibilities, or exposure to hostility and discrimination. In this context, Wales must do all it can to push back and renew its ambition to be a world leader on gender equality.

State of the Nation was originally developed by Chwarae Teg in response to the Welsh Government's ambition for Wales to become a world leader on gender equality, expressed on International Women's Day 2018. The first report was launched in January 2019 to answer one simple question – how equal is Wales? Each year, the report brought together key indicators of gender equality, providing an authoritative benchmark of progress, or lack thereof, towards this ambition.

Following Chwarae Teg's closure in 2023, WEN Wales has been honoured to carry on this work, but it has not been an easy journey. The loss of Chwarae Teg continues to be felt sharply. The third sector in Wales has been facing severe and compounding cost pressures, necessitating service reductions – and, sometimes, closures – amidst rising demand. Within this landscape, a small number of women's organisations are forced to make difficult choices about how to target their limited resources in order to stand their ground on gender equality and women's rights in Wales.

It is at this critical moment that we publish the 2026 edition of State of the Nation, providing an up-to-date benchmark for the work of the newly elected Welsh Government. As we look back on yet another year without clear and consistent progress on gender equality, a step change is urgently needed. The new Welsh Government –

alongside public bodies, employers and civil society – must not only double down on pledges for a gender equal Wales, but also commit the resources required to match the scale of this ambition. WEN Wales, with the support of our vibrant coalition of members across Wales, will continue to work towards our shared vision of a Wales free from gender discrimination.

KEY FINDINGS

Our analysis of recent data shows that, while we have seen some improvements, there is still a long way to go.

Looking at the economy, the gender pay gap in Wales increased slightly from 9% to 9.7%, compared to 12.8% across the UK. Gender disparities in economic activity and, more markedly, employment rates widened in 2025 compared to the previous year. Both rates remain higher for men. Economic activity and employment rates for women decreased in 2025 and have seen limited progress overall since the start of the series in 2018. Despite some reductions in 2025, women remain over three times more likely to be economically inactive due to caring (or domestic) responsibilities, and almost three times more likely than men to work part-time.

Intersectionally disaggregated data on economic activity and employment did not present a clear picture for disabled

women or ethnic minority women. Employment and unemployment rates increased for both demographics, while economic inactivity rates declined. Interpreting year-on-year changes, particularly for ethnic minority populations, remains difficult due to small sample sizes and data volatility. However, compared to overall figures for women in Wales, significant disability and ethnicity gaps remain, highlighting the need to double down on Wales' commitment to addressing multiple disadvantage and intersecting discrimination.

Occupational segregation remained a mixed picture in 2025, with small year-on-year increases to women's representation in some higher-paying, male-dominated industries such as construction, and reductions in others like information and communication. The proportion of women-led small and medium-sized businesses in Wales fell to 14%, while women's representation in senior positions slightly increased compared to 2024.

As women now make up 46% of Senedd members, the 2026 elections brought Wales a small step closer to gender parity – but progress relied on voluntary party initiatives and is fragile. At local government level, there was a welcome increase in the percentage of women leaders to 23% (5 out of 22) but figures remain a long way off parity.

No new data on the proportion of women councillors has been published since the 2022 elections and data on women's representation in local government cabinets is unavailable.

Finding robust data on gender-based violence, harassment and abuse remains a challenge. Police records, with their obvious limitation, suggest that the proportion of female victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse-related crimes has slightly reduced in recent years. But overall levels remained shockingly high, with almost three quarters of domestic abuse-related offences and over 80% of sexual assault cases being committed against women. Compounding pressures on specialist services have led to a steady increase in the proportion of survivors turned away in recent years, with 2024/25 marking the first year in which more new refuge referrals were refused than could be admitted.

Across Wales, poverty levels continued to increase. The risk of relative income poverty rose for all household types except pensioner couples and single men, with single parent households seeing the most significant increase from 39% to 45%. This makes single parent households – the vast majority of which are headed by women – over twice as likely to experience poverty compared to the average for all households in Wales. It also illustrates clearly that child poverty

cannot be addressed without tackling the root causes of women's poverty.

Despite a slight reduction in the proportion of women claimants, women continued to make up almost 60% of Universal Credit claimants and remained more likely than men to rely on Universal Credit while in work.

INTERSECTIONALITY

At WEN Wales, our vision is of a Wales free from gender discrimination for all women. This cannot be achieved without recognising that the experiences of women in Wales often differ significantly depending on other identities and social positions they occupy. This idea is commonly referred to as intersectionality.

The term was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as a framework to understand how Black women's experience of discrimination differs from the experiences of both White women and Black men and is often erased in both feminist and antiracist analysis.¹

In theory, intersectionality describes the way in which power structures associated with gender, race, sexuality, gender identity, disability, class, age, faith and other characteristics interact. These structures create, multiply and modify experiences of privilege and oppression.

In practice, individuals who experience intersecting discrimination tend to face additional challenges and poorer outcomes. This can often be seen in data – if that data is collected and published. This remains a challenge, especially in Wales where sample sizes are small. But it is not insurmountable, and a lack of robust data cannot be an excuse for failure to take meaningful action.

For disabled women, compared to the previous year, economic inactivity decreased by 3.4 percentage points to 44.2%, while the unemployment rate more than doubled from 2.5% to 5.5%. Both remain significantly higher than the 27.5% economic inactivity rate and 3.9% unemployment rate for all women. The gender gaps in economic inactivity and employment rates among disabled people remain smaller than in the general population.

For ethnic minority women, economic inactivity also decreased by 2.5 percentage points to 36.5%, while the unemployment rate increased by 1.7 percentage points to 8.2%. Ethnic minority women continue to fall behind both White women and ethnic minority men in these labour market statistics, apart from the unemployment rate. Following an increase to 15.1%, ethnic minority men's unemployment rate was almost double the rate of ethnic minority women. Again, this comes with the caveat that small sample sizes and data

volatility for ethnic minority populations make interpreting year-on-year changes difficult.

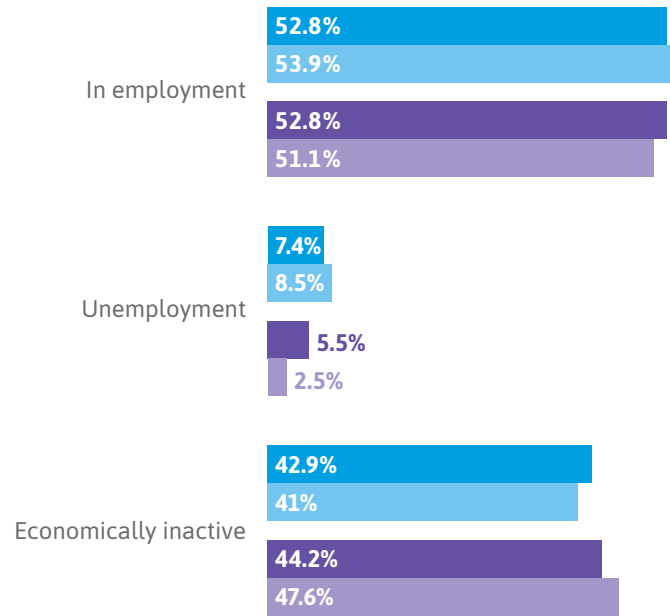
The overall trend for ethnic minority women and disabled women since the start of the series is somewhat encouraging, with employment rates going up and economic inactivity and unemployment rates reducing. This is most notable for ethnic minority women, while the trend is reversed for ethnic minority men.

While the 'all-women' data used throughout the rest of the report powerfully illustrates the overall impact of gender inequality, it tells us very little about how this impact may differ for women with different intersecting identities. As we review structure and content of State of the Nation for future iterations, we are committed to exploring what further data from an evolving statistical landscape can be used to build a fuller picture of the experience of women in Wales.

DISABILITY AND ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2023 - June 2024 and July 2024 - June 2025

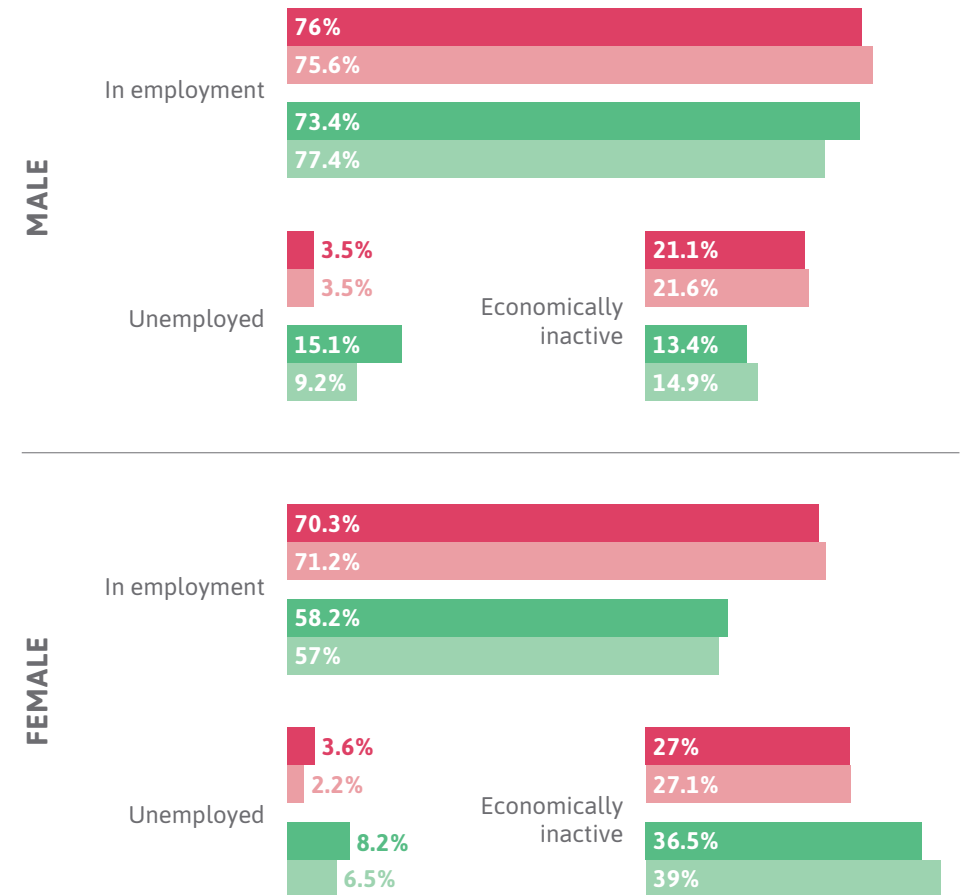
● Male 2025 ● Male 2024 ● Female 2025 ● Female 2024



EMPLOYMENT STATUS BY GENDER AND ETHNICITY

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2023 - June 2024 and July 2024 - June 2025

● White 2025 ● White 2024 ● Ethnic minority 2025 ● Ethnic minority 2024



WOMEN IN THE ECONOMY

Women's unequal position in Wales' economy remains largely unchanged. They are more likely than men to be economically inactive or to be working part-time, and they tend to be employed in different roles, sectors, occupations and job types. These differences reflect gender stereotypes and unequal caring responsibilities. The resulting financial inequalities accumulate over women's lifetimes. Across the UK, they culminate in a gender pension gap of 37%, the second largest in all OECD countries.¹

After a period of recovery, consumer price inflation rates were back on the rise in 2025, compounding existing cost pressures that impact women more acutely than men.

The gender pay gap in Wales increased from 9% in 2024 to 9.7% in 2025, while the UK-wide figure decreased from 13.1% to 12.8%. Gender pay gap figures in Wales are historically lower than those in the UK, and both figures have been on a downward trend since the start of the series in 2018. There remains significant variation across Wales, from a negative gender pay gap of -6% in Gwynedd to 26% in Flintshire.

Across Wales, the gaps in economic activity rates (79.4% for men and 72.5% for women) and employment rates (75.8% for men and 69.6% for women) widened. Overall, economic activity rates for

women have seen almost no movement from their base level of 72.2% in 2018. Worryingly, earlier progress on increasing women's employment rates, which peaked at 71.2% in 2023, continued to be undone in 2025. This was accompanied by a sharp increase in women's unemployment rate from 2.4% to 3.9%, the single biggest movement since the start of the series.

Despite slight reductions in 2025, women remain over three times more likely to be economically inactive due to caring (or domestic) responsibilities, and almost three times more likely than men to be working part-time. These gaps have slightly narrowed since 2018, but they remain significant. The percentage of women who are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities has seen a notable downward trend (down by 7.5 percentage points since the start of the series), alongside a reduction in the percentage of women working part-time (down by 4.6 percentage points since the start of the series). It is possible that these trends were driven by the expansion of funded childcare from 2018 onwards, together with an increase in flexible working since the pandemic. While this could demonstrate the enormous potential of affordable childcare and flexible working for the advancement of gender equality, it is important to note that women on the lowest incomes are currently unlikely to benefit from either.²

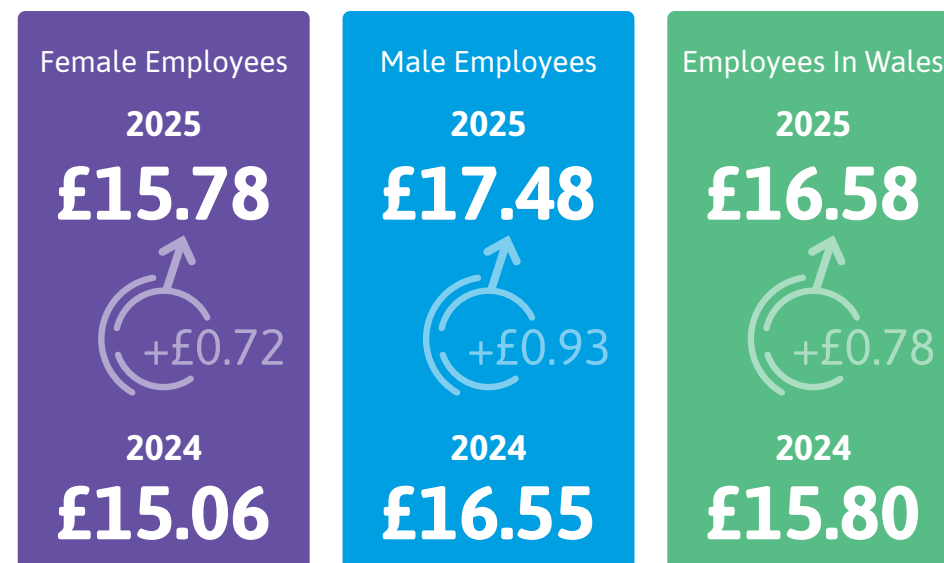
At the same time, recent years saw a worrying increase in the percentage of women who are economically inactive due to long-term sickness. While overall percentages remain lower for women compared to men, they have risen almost twice as fast since 2018 (a 6.6 percentage point increase for women compared to a 3.8 percentage point increase for men).

This may reflect differences in how health outcomes and access to care are experienced by women and men and underscores the importance of progressing Wales' Women's Health Plan to ensure people can access timely, high-quality care regardless of their gender. Further analysis of sex-disaggregated health data is needed to fully understand these dynamics.

HOURLY PAY

Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), 2024-25, Work Geography, Table 7.6a

MEDIAN HOURLY PAY BY GENDER²



GENDER PAY GAP BY LOCAL AUTHORITY

Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), 2024 - 25, Work Geography, Table 7.12

UK	12.8%
Wales	9.7%
Flintshire	26.3%
Pembrokeshire	16%
Vale of Glamorgan	12.4%
Conwy	11.5%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	11.4%
Neath Port Talbot	10.8%
Bridgend	10.1%
Blaenau Gwent	9.9%
Torfaen	9.5%
Merthyr Tydfil	9.1%
Denbighshire	9%
Monmouthshire	9%
Cardiff	8.9%
Newport	8.8%
Isle of Anglesey	8.4%
Caerphilly	7.7%
Wrexham	5.9%
Swansea	3%
Powys	0%
Carmarthenshire	-2.2%
Ceredigion	-2.6%
Gwynedd	-6%

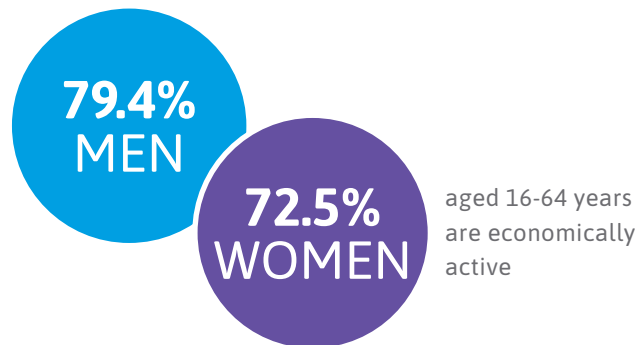
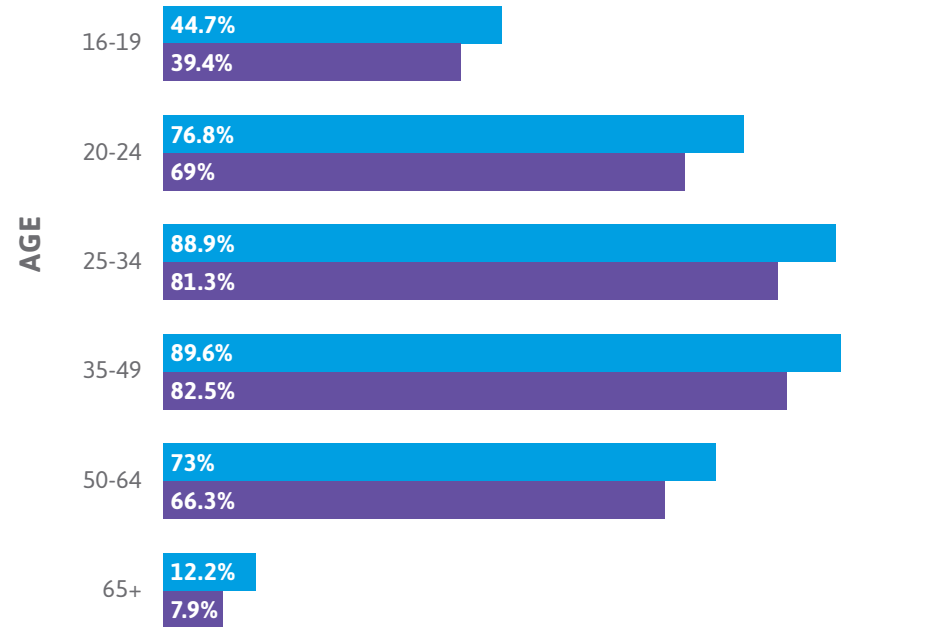
GENDER PAY GAP COMPARISON 2024 - 2025

Local Authority	2024	2025 ⁴	Difference
UK	13.1%	12.8%	-0.3%
Wales	9.0%	9.7%	0.7%
Blaenau Gwent	12.4%	9.9%	-2.5%
Bridgend	3.3%	10.1%	6.8%
Caerphilly	11.0%	7.7%	-3.3%
Cardiff	6.3%	8.9%	2.6%
Carmarthenshire	-6.4%	-2.2%	4.2%
Ceredigion	-3.4%	-2.6%	0.8%
Conwy	14.9%	11.5%	-3.4%
Denbighshire	2.6%	9.0%	6.4%
Flintshire	27.7%	26.3%	-1.4%
Gwynedd	-1.5%	-6.0%	-4.5%
Isle of Anglesey	14.2%	8.4%	-5.8%
Merthyr Tydfil	2.1%	9.1%	7.0%
Monmouthshire	12.2%	9.0%	-3.2%
Neath Port Talbot	14.8%	10.8%	-4.0%
Newport	6.0%	8.8%	2.8%
Pembrokeshire	21.4%	16.0%	-5.4%
Powys	2.2%	0.0%	-2.2%
Rhondda Cynon Taf	8.8%	11.4%	2.6%
Swansea	6.5%	3.0%	-3.5%
Torfaen	18.7%	9.5%	-9.2%
Vale of Glamorgan	13.3%	12.4%	-0.9%
Wrexham	1.1%	5.9%	4.8%

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY BY GENDER AND AGE

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2024 - June 2025

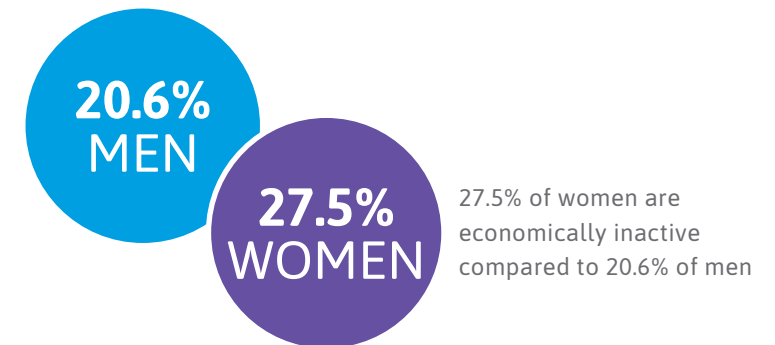
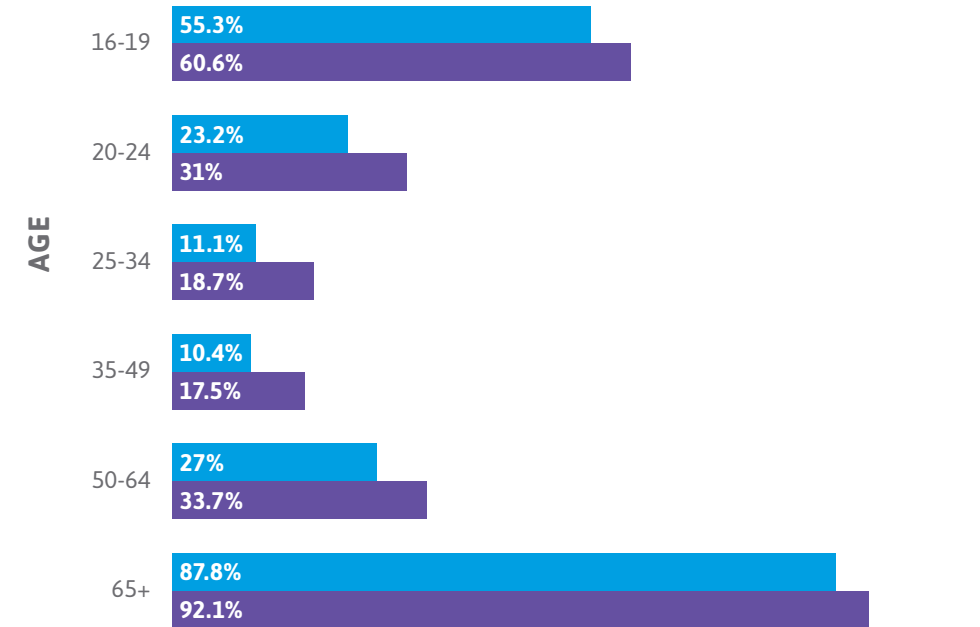
● Male ● Female



ECONOMIC INACTIVITY BY GENDER AND AGE

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2024 - June 2025

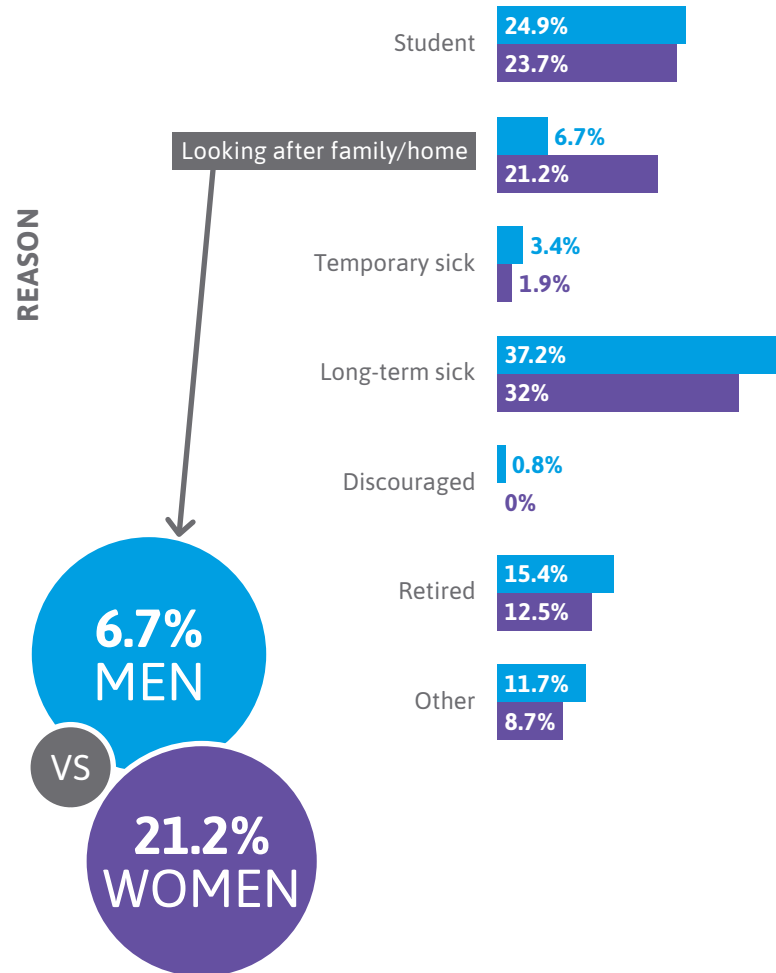
● Male ● Female



REASONS FOR ECONOMIC INACTIVITY BY GENDER

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2024-June 2025

● Male ● Female

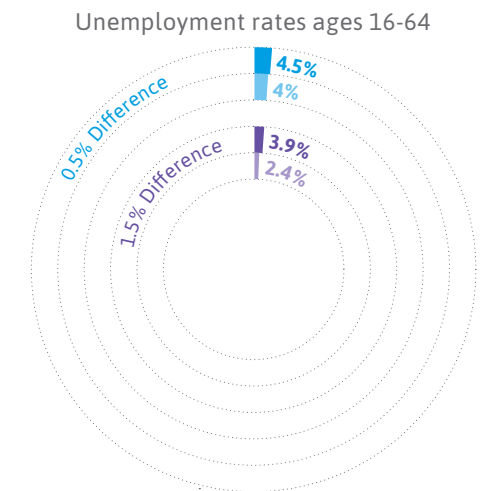
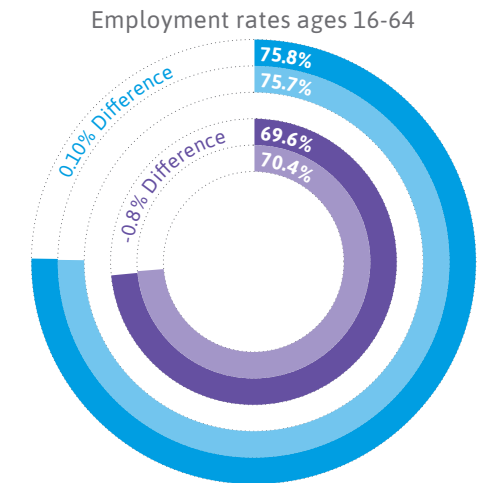
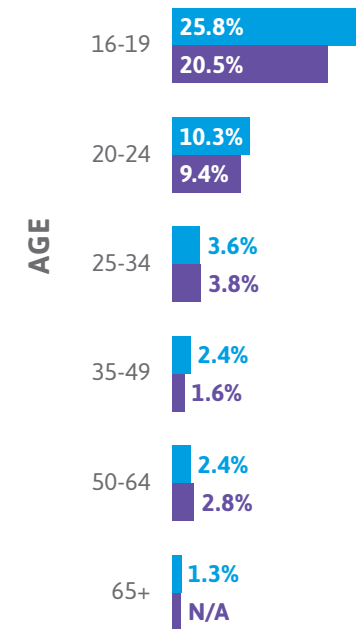


EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY GENDER AND AGE

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2024-June 2025

● Male 2025 ● Male 2024 ● Female 2025 ● Female 2024



SELF-EMPLOYMENT

PROPORTION OF WOMEN AND MEN AGED 16-64 WHO ARE SELF-EMPLOYED

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2023 - June 2024 and July 2024 - June 2025

Male employed Male self-employed Female employed Female self-employed



WORKING PATTERNS

PROPORTION OF WOMEN AND MEN AGED 16-64 WHO ARE WORKING PART-TIME

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2023-June 2024 and July 2024-June 2025

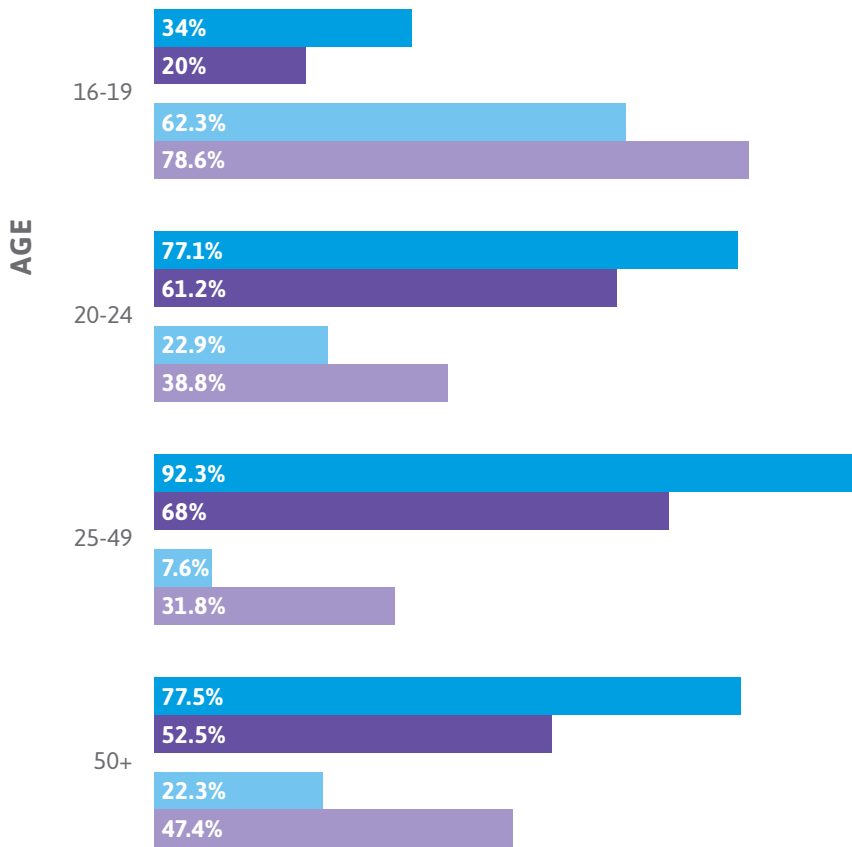
Male full-time Male part-time Female full-time Female part-time



WORKING PATTERNS BY AGE

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2024-June 2025

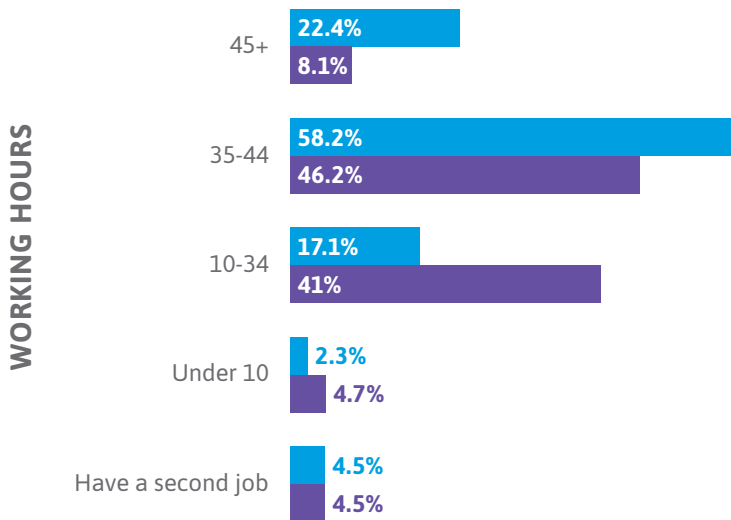
● Male full-time ● Female full-time ● Male part-time ● Female part-time



WORKING PATTERNS BY HOURS

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2024-June 2025

● Male ● Female



WOMEN REPRESENTED

In a healthy democracy, decision-makers need to reflect the full diversity of the population they serve. Diverse and equal representation helps ensure that policy and legislation meet the needs of all people, including those from marginalised communities.

In 2003, Wales was the first legislature in the world to achieve 50% representation for women. But this has not been sustained in any election since, and representation of women who experience intersecting discrimination has remained extremely limited.

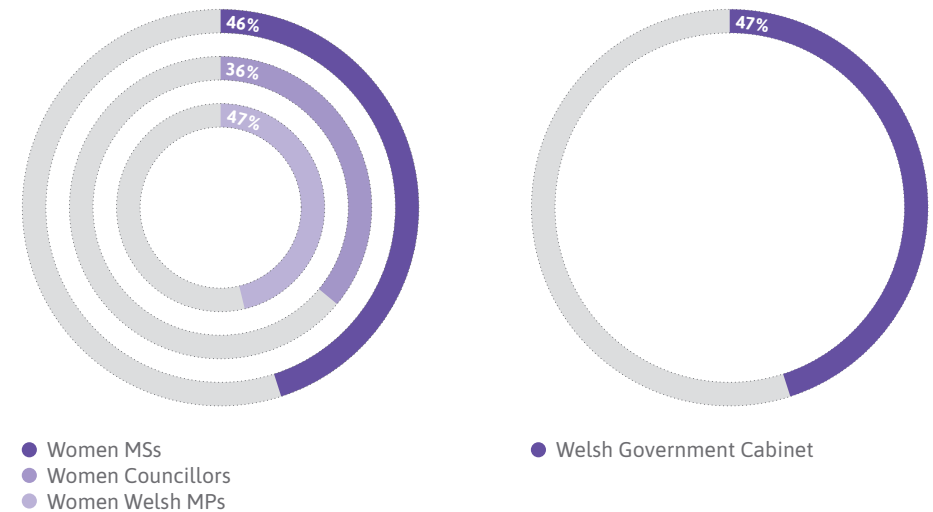
The 2026 Senedd elections brought Wales a small step closer to gender parity, with women securing 46% of seats in the expanded Senedd. While this is a small increase from the 43% achieved in 2021, progress relied on the voluntary initiatives of some parties and is therefore fragile.³ The proportion of women in the new Welsh Government cabinet reduced to 47% from 64% in the previous cabinet. At the time of writing this report, data on the wider diversity of the new Senedd was not yet available.

As there are no up-to-date figures on women's representation among local government councillors, we have published the results from the 2022 election (36%), which provide the most recent available benchmark.

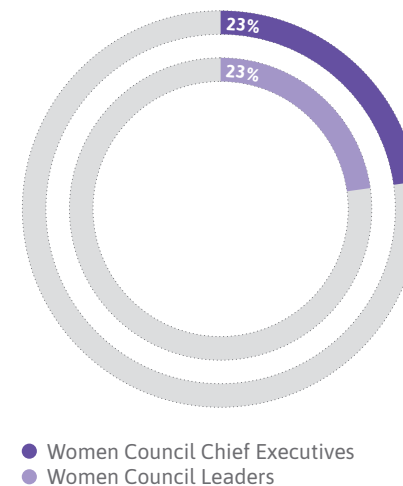
According to the Local Government Candidates Survey 2022, 3% of elected candidates were from an ethnic minority background and 8% identified as LGBTQ+, but due to varying and low response rates, actual figures could differ substantially.⁴ In terms of leadership, the proportion of female local government leaders and chief executives both stood at 23% in April 2026. While this is an increase from 2025, figures remain far below parity.

In 2024-25, the Welsh Government appointed 60% women to public appointments, compared to 50% in the previous year, with ethnic minority representation at 19% and an increasing appointment of disabled people at 15%.⁵ While this suggests a positive trend in new appointments, it is an incomplete picture as figures for all public appointments including reappointments are unavailable.

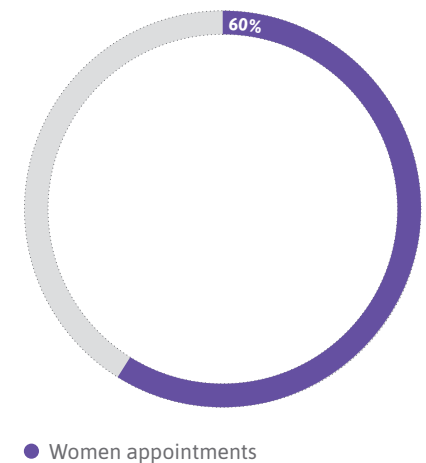
REPRESENTATION IN WELSH POLITICS



LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT



PUBLIC LIFE



BUSINESS AND THE WORKPLACE

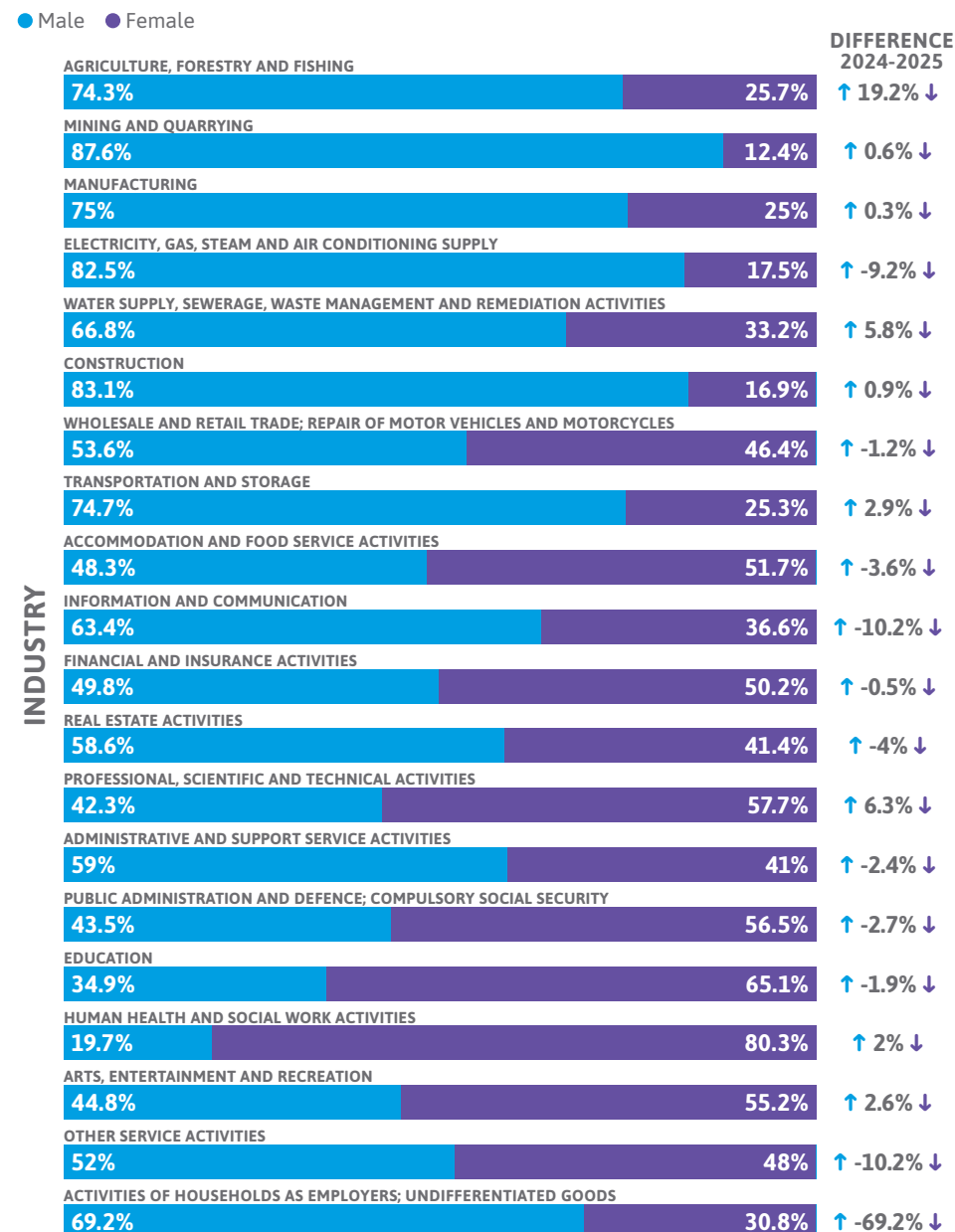
Gender segregation across different sectors and occupations remains an important facet of women's economic inequality. Some higher-paying, male-dominated industries saw a small increase in women's representation, such as construction where figures rose from 16% in 2024 to 17% in 2025. This came alongside reductions in other higher-paying sectors, such as information and communication, where women's representation decreased by 10 percentage points, from 47% to 37%.

Women's representation in health, a traditionally lower-paying, female-dominated sector, increased from 78% to 80%, while their representation in education decreased from 67% to 65%. Since the beginning of the series in 2018, women's representation in male-dominated fields like manufacturing and construction has slightly increased, although it remains far below that of men, while women's overrepresentation in health, education and public administration has remained largely unchanged. Given the major transition that is well underway within Wales' economy and labour market, this lack of progress is alarming. Without immediate and decisive action by governments, businesses and educators, gender segregation is set to deepen, and women will be left behind.

The proportion of women-led small and medium-sized businesses in Wales again reduced and now stands at 14%, the same as across the UK. Both Wales and the UK have seen a steady decline in women-led SMEs since 2021. While women's representation in senior positions slightly increased in 2025 compared to 2024 (from 36.5% to 37.4%), there has been no visible long-term improvement since 2018.

GENDER BALANCE IN WELSH SECTORS

Source: Workforce jobs by industry (SIC 2007) and sex, June 2025



PROPORTION OF WOMEN AND MEN WORKING IN DIFFERENT OCCUPATIONS

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2024-June 2025

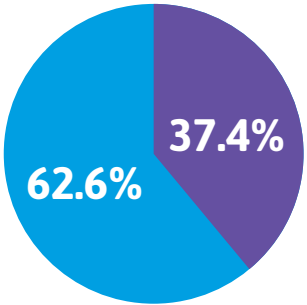
● Male ● Female

OCCUPATIONS		DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 2024-2025
Managers, directors and senior officials	12.4%	↑ 1.3%
	8.1%	↑ 1.2%
Professional occupations	21.7%	↑ 0.3%
	25.8%	↑ 0.8%
Associate prof & tech occupations	14.6%	↑ 0.3%
	15.6%	↑ 0.5%
Administrative and secretarial occupations	5.7%	↑ 0.5%
	14.5%	↑ 0.0%
Skilled trades occupations	16.7%	↑ 1.0%
	2.7%	↑ 0.4%
Caring, leisure and other service occupations	3.9%	↓ -0.4%
	14.3%	↓ -1.6%
Sales and customer service occupations	5.5%	↓ -0.7%
	8.7%	↑ 0.4%
Process, plant and machine operatives	9.3%	↓ -1.9%
	1.6%	↓ -0.3%
Elementary occupations	9.7%	↓ -0.6%
	8.5%	↓ -1.2%

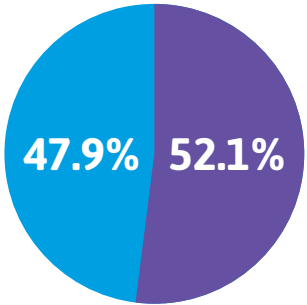
PROPORTION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN SENIOR AND PROFESSIONAL ROLES

Source: Annual Population Survey, July 2024-June 2025

● Male ● Female



Managers, directors and senior officials



Professional occupations

BUSINESS LEADERS

Source: Longitudinal Small Business Survey 2024



WOMEN AT RISK

Women's unequal social and economic position puts them at an increased risk of poverty and financial hardship, as well as gender-based abuse, harassment and violence.

Robust data on the extent of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) in Wales is very limited. Most available data is based on police records. Police-recorded crimes only capture some aspects of the abuse, harassment and violence that women are subjected to. Due to the scale of under-reporting – according to Rape Crisis England and Wales, five out of six women who are raped do not report it to the police – this data also only ever shows a fraction of the actual scale of VAWDASV.⁶ Police-recorded data is also not generally published separately for Wales, meaning figures are on an England and Wales basis only. At present, State of the Nation continues to rely on this information as being the best available, but we fully recognise its limitations and the need for better data.

Within the caveats mentioned above, the previous year saw a slight reduction in the proportion of reported sexual violence and domestic abuse-related crimes committed against women in England and Wales. Between 2024 and 2025, the proportion of sexual violence offences against women decreased from 83% to 82.1% and the proportion of

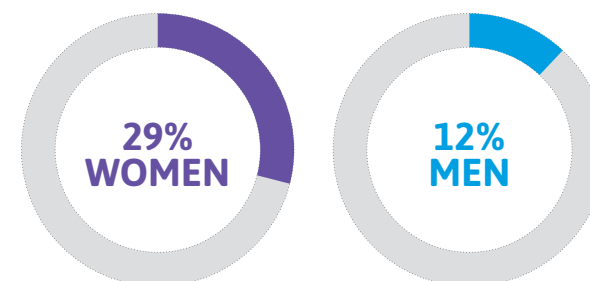
domestic abuse related crimes reduced from 72.5% to 72.1%.

There has been little change to these figures over the years. When first published in 2019 and 2020 respectively, the proportion of domestic abuse-related crimes against women was 75% and the proportion of sexual violence offences against women was 85%.

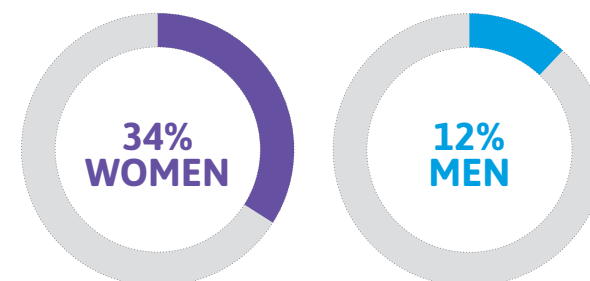
Over the same period, compounding pressures on specialist services in Wales have led to a steady increase in the proportion of survivors who had to be turned away. According to Welsh Women's Aid, 2024/25 marked a sad turning point as the first year in which more new refuge referrals were refused than could be admitted.⁷ As in previous years, smaller 'by-and-for' services supporting women from marginalised communities were at the sharp end of these developments. Alongside doubling down on commitments to eradicate gender discrimination and misogyny at all levels of society, Wales must urgently implement sustainable funding for the VAWDASV sector.

SAFETY IN PUBLIC PLACES

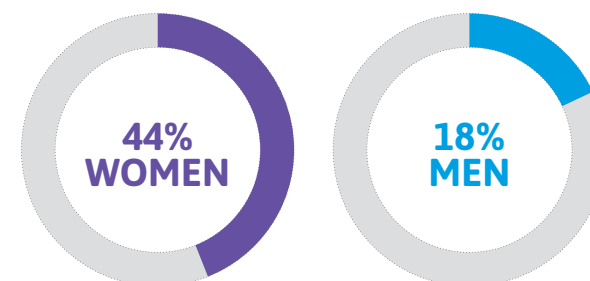
Source: National Survey for Wales, 2025



Feeling unsafe when walking alone in their local area after dark



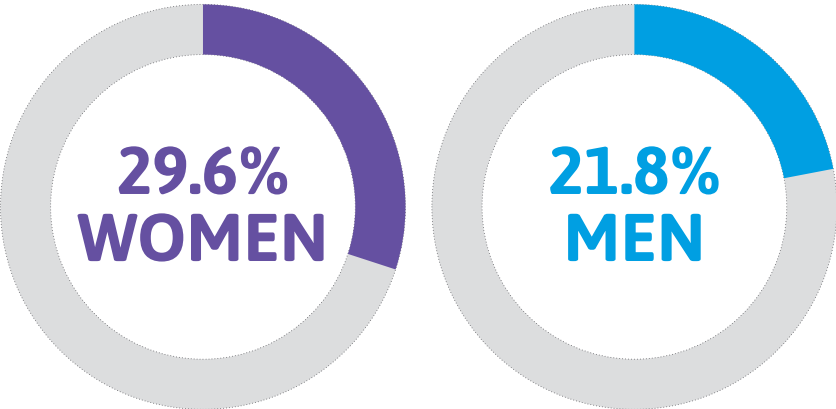
Feeling unsafe after dark on public transport



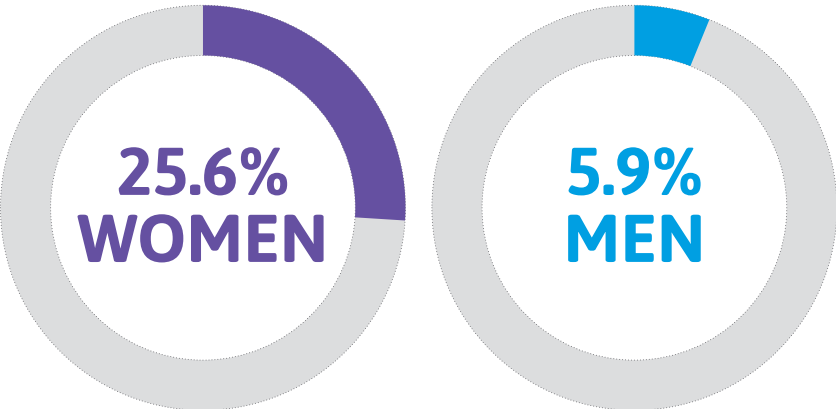
Feeling unsafe when at home, walking in the local area or travelling

PREVALENCE OF DOMESTIC ABUSE
AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE (ENGLAND AND WALES)

Source: ONS, Domestic abuse prevalence and victim characteristics, Appendix tables, March 2025, Table 1; Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, March 2025, Table 1a.



Percentage of all who experienced domestic abuse since age of 16

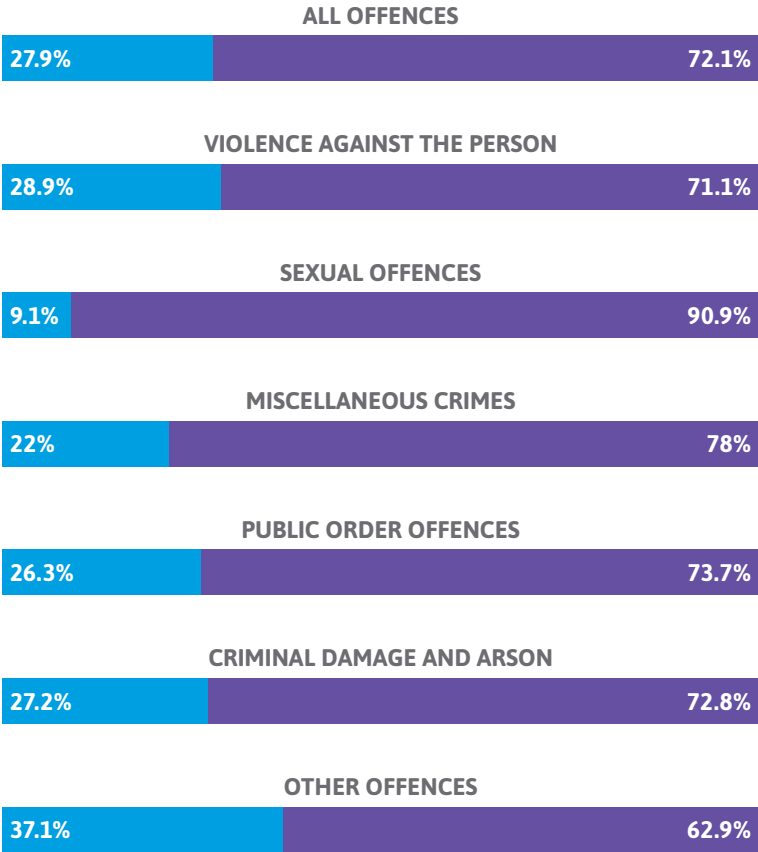


Percentage of all who experienced sexual assault since age of 16

PROPORTION OF DOMESTIC ABUSE-RELATED
CRIMES RECORDED BY THE POLICE (ENGLAND AND WALES)

Source: ONS, Domestic abuse prevalence and victim characteristics, Appendix tables, March 2025, Table 15

Male victims Female victims



DOMESTIC ABUSE

Source: ONS, Domestic abuse prevalence and victim characteristics, Appendix tables, March 2025, Table 8, 11 & 15

2025



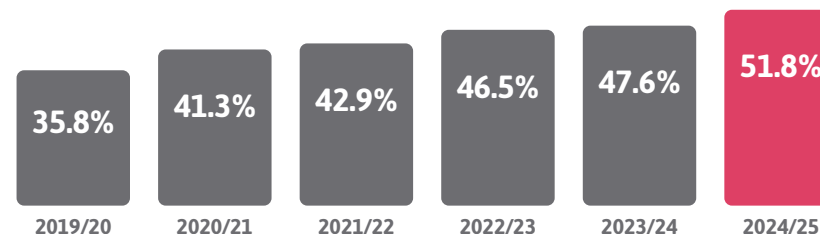
SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Source: ONS, Sexual offences prevalence and victim characteristics, March 2025, Worksheet 18; Domestic abuse prevalence and victim characteristics, Appendix tables, March 2025, Table 15



PERCENTAGE OF NEW REFUGEE REFERRALS THAT RESULT IN REFUSALS IN WALES

Source: Welsh Women's Aid, State of the System 2026



LIVE FEAR FREE HELPLINE 0808 80 10 800 (CALL/TEXT)

DATA ACROSS ENGLAND AND WALES SHOWS THAT:



74,174

RAPES WERE RECORDED
BY POLICE IN THE YEAR
ENDING MARCH 2025⁹



POVERTY

Poverty in Wales is back on the rise and women’s unequal position in the labour market and society at large makes them more vulnerable to this. In 2025, 22% of households in Wales were at risk of relative income poverty, compared to 21% in 2024.

While poverty levels slightly increased for all household types except single men without children and pensioner couples, single parent households saw the most significant increase from 39% to 45%. This was followed by single women, who saw an increase from 20% to 23%. Given that the vast majority of single parents in Wales are women, the fact that almost half of these households experience poverty yet again demonstrates that we cannot eliminate child poverty without addressing the root causes of women’s poverty.

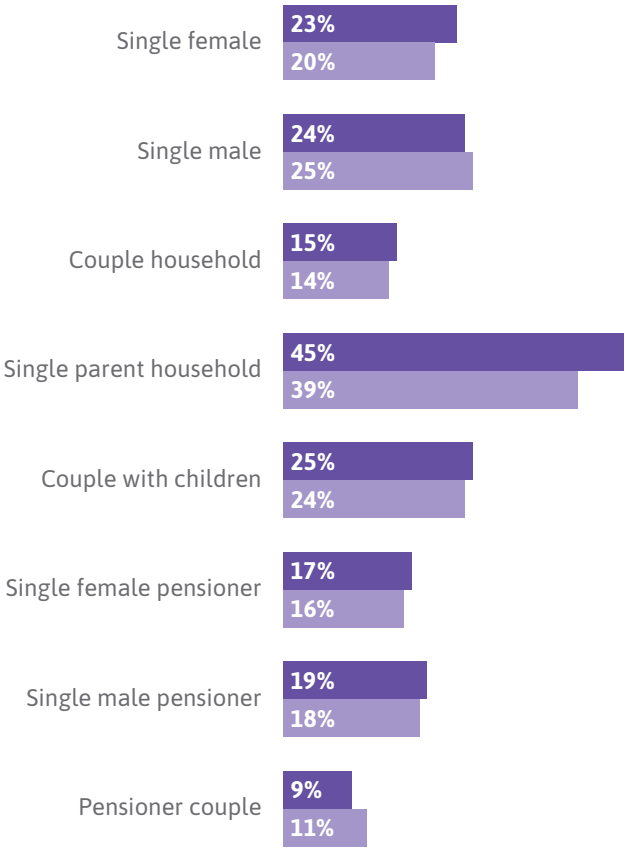
2026 brought changes to DWP poverty statistics, which now rely more heavily on administrative data rather than survey responses to reduce missing or under-reported income.¹² Data based on this new approach was first released for the three-year-average up to March 2025, together with revised data for the previous two reporting periods. Figures included in this report are based on the new approach and are not directly comparable to those in previous State of the Nation reports.

As in previous years, poverty measured at the household level likely obscures the full extent of women’s poverty. Resources between heterosexual couples may not be shared equally, especially as women tend to have less access to an independent income and are more likely to forego essentials to provide for their children.¹³

RELATIVE INCOME POVERTY BY FAMILY TYPE

Source: Welsh Government, Relative income poverty: April 2024 to March 2025, HBAI after housing costs

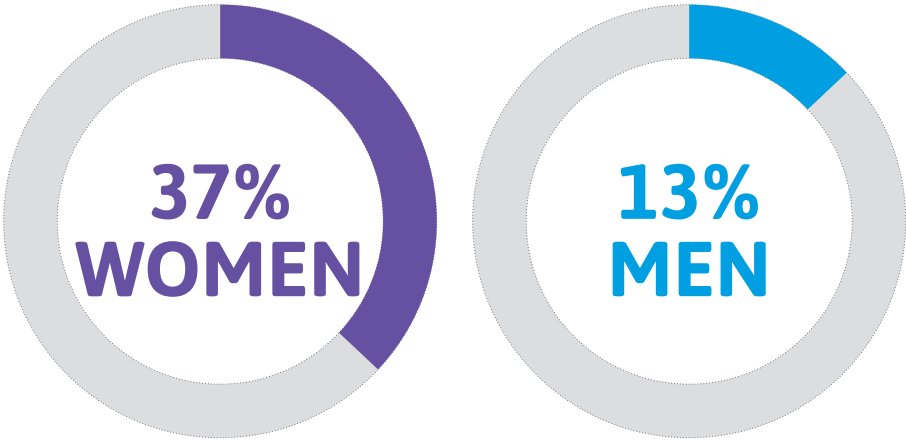
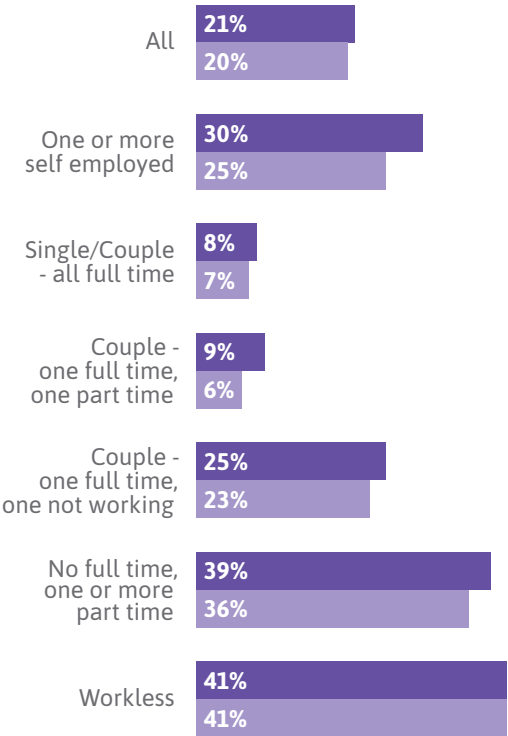
● 2025 ● 2024



WORKING PATTERNS AND POVERTY

Source: Welsh Government, Relative income poverty: April 2024 to March 2025, HBAI after housing costs

2025 2024



IN WALES ARE WORKING PART-TIME



OF HOUSEHOLDS IN WALES ARE LIVING IN RELATIVE INCOME POVERTY

SOCIAL SECURITY AND WELFARE REFORM

The social security system should provide a vital safety net for people who find themselves out of work or in financial difficulty. However, workless households remain at the highest risk of poverty at 41%.

Universal Credit is the main source of support for those out of work, as well as those whose income does not provide enough to live on. Despite a slight reduction from 2024, women continued to make up almost 60% of Universal Credit (UC) claimants in Wales in 2025. While figures were close to parity in 2018, women's proportion of UC claimants has seen an almost steady increase over the years.

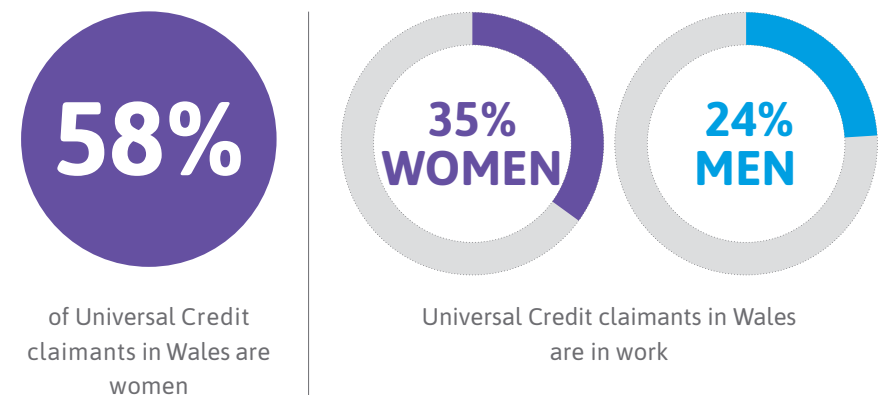
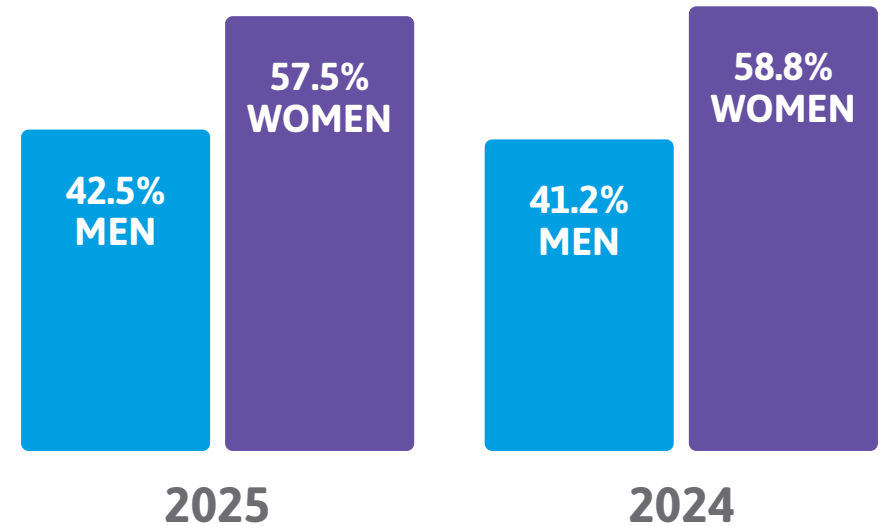
As part of the “managed move” from legacy benefits to UC, 2025 saw a major increase in the number of UC claimants with no work requirements.¹⁴ In the data for Wales, this change of the UC claimant pool shows up as a reduction in the proportion of in-work claimants from 36% in 2024 to 30% in 2025. Importantly, this does not mean that the pressure on people in low-paid work, which women feel more sharply than men, has reduced. At 35%, women remain more likely than men (at 24%) to rely on Universal Credit even while in work.

Universal Credit's limitations in protecting women from poverty and supporting them to become financially independent are well-documented.¹⁵ While the UK Government's decision to scrap the two-child limit might ease pressures on some families, it was introduced alongside a stricter conditionality regime, including for those in low-paid work. These changes risk further undermining gender equality by pushing women into low-quality jobs with no progression opportunities and making it more difficult to juggle paid work and caring responsibilities.

UNIVERSAL CREDIT CLAIMANTS BY GENDER

Source: DWP, September 2024-25, via Stat-Xplore

● Male ● Female



CONCLUSION

As we look back on another year without clear and consistent progress, the goal that inspired the State of the Nation series – for Wales to become a world leader on gender equality – may appear more elusive than ever. It is imperative that the new Welsh Government, alongside the wider public and private sectors and civil society, doubles down on this commitment and mobilises action and resources that match the scale of this ambition.

Addressing women's unequal position in the labour market, providing affordable childcare and tackling gender segregation must be key priorities. With childcare expansion on the horizon, it is critical that new provision is designed in a way that more effectively supports families on the lowest incomes.¹⁶

As Wales undergoes a major economic transition, green skills programmes must address barriers and ensure women can benefit from new job opportunities on equal terms. With long-term sickness on the rise as a reason for women's economic inactivity, the implementation of the Women's Health Plan must progress at pace and with adequate resources at every stage.

Progress on diverse and equal representation must be embedded and sustained, including through swift implementation of the recommendations of the Family-Friendly and Inclusive Parliament Review.¹⁷

Tackling violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) at all levels of society must remain a priority, but it cannot be eradicated without addressing gender inequality and discrimination more broadly. Survivors must be able to access support through a sustainably resourced specialist sector.

With the expiration of the Advancing Gender Equality in Wales Action Plan in 2023, it is essential that the new Welsh Government develops a refreshed action plan for gender equality that sets out ambitious, measurable progress for the short, medium and long-term, including the cross-government roll-out of gender budgeting and the implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

ENDNOTES

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² WEN Wales (2025), Transforming Early Childhood Education and Care in Wales, <https://wenwales.org.uk/en/transforming-early-education-and-childcare-in-wales/>.

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⁴ Welsh Government (2023), Local Government Candidates Survey: 2022, <https://www.gov.wales/local-government-candidates-survey-2022>.

⁵ The Commissioner for Public Appointments (2026), Annual Report 2024-25, <https://publicappointmentscommissioner.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/2025-12-17-CPA-2024-25-Annual-Report-for-publication-updated.pdf>.

⁶ Rape Crisis England and Wales, Rape and Sexual Assault Statistics, <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence/>.

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¹¹ Rape Crisis England and Wales, Rape and Sexual Assault Statistics, <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence/>.

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¹³ UK Women's Budget Group (2022), The gendered impact of the cost-of-living crisis. <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/The-gendered-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis.pdf>.

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¹⁶ WEN Wales (2025), Transforming Early Childhood Education and Care in Wales, <https://wenwales.org.uk/en/transforming-early-education-and-childcare-in-wales/>.

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