



RESEARCH CENTRE

Hard to stay hopeful

Young women's experiences
of being NEET

August 2026

Executive summary

Young women are a major part of the NEET challenge – with nearly half a million (451,000) not in education, work or training¹. That's the highest level in over a decade.

But young women are NEET for different reasons from young men: caring and health problems are much bigger factors. Of the 451,000 young women who are NEET, 310,000 are economically inactive. More than 1 in 4 (28%) NEET young women are economically inactive because they are looking after family or home, compared to around 6% of NEET young men².

The system isn't designed around the realities of young women's lives.

Fast-diminishing accessible entry-level opportunities, inflexible work, fragmented support, and scarce help with caring responsibilities are common system gaps which young women are falling through.

And the quality of work matters.

Insecurity, discrimination and poor conditions can push women back out of work.

Confidence and self-belief are also a key building block to supporting young women to work.

Therefore Government needs to design youth employment policy with young women in mind.

Young Women's Trust is calling for:

- 1. Better routes into good-quality work**
- 2. Flexible work and training by default**
- 3. Integrated, personalised employment support**
- 4. Childcare and caring support that enables participation**
- 5. Gender-responsive youth employment policy.**

¹ ONS, Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: May 2026

² Characteristics of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), England: March 2021 – ONS, published March 2026

Young Women's Trust insight³

In August 2026 **Young Women's Trust surveyed over 4,004 young women and non-binary people, and 1,005 young men aged 18–30** about their experiences of working and finding work. The survey deliberately goes beyond those currently NEET, helping us understand the wider barriers that shape young women's ability to enter, stay in and progress through work.

- **More than 3 in 10 (33%)** young women aged 18–30 who weren't working or learning are out of work because they are looking after children.
- Mental health has prevented **more than 3 in 10** young women who are unemployed and looking for work **(31%)** and who are not working or looking for work **(32%)** from applying for a job.
- Young women have experienced a steady decline in job opportunities since 2023, and are feeling this more than young men. In 2026, **more than half (53%)** of young women disagree that there are enough job opportunities accessible to them in their local area, compared to **39%** of young men.
- Lack of flexibility has made it difficult to apply for a job for **more than 3 in 10 (31%)** young women who are unemployed and looking for work.
- Discrimination at work and when looking for work presents an additional barrier to work for disabled young women, young mums and carers. More than **4 in 10 (41%)** young women with a mental health condition have been discriminated against because of their mental health.
- **More than 3 in 10 (31%)** young single mums, more than **1 in 5 (22%)** young mums with a partner, and more than **1 in 4 (26%)** young women caring for an adult family member have been discriminated against because of their caring responsibilities.

³ Young Women's Trust survey of 4,004 young women and non-binary people and 1005 young men aged 18–30 in England and Wales, carried out 30th July – 17th August 2026. 516 of the young women were not working or looking for work, and 710 were unemployed and actively looking for work. Subsequently referred to as YWT 2026 survey.

Introduction

Almost half a million young women are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET)—the highest number in a decade. Yet despite making up almost half of all young people who are NEET, and being far more likely to be economically inactive, their experiences have received far less attention than those of young men.

Young women are not out of work for the same reasons as young men. They are far more likely to be caring for family members, managing poor mental health or disability, or unable to access the flexible employment they need. These are not simply individual barriers; they are signs that our labour market and public services are failing to accommodate the realities of young women's lives.

If Government is serious about increasing young people's economic participation, it must recognise that one-size-fits-all solutions will not work. Applying a gender lens to both the diagnosis and the response will strengthen the implementation of the Milburn Review and help ensure its recommendations benefit all young people.

To contribute to a gender-based analysis of youth inactivity, we identify three primary cohorts of NEET young women and the common system gaps that cut across their experiences. We then set out recommendations to address these gaps and embed a gender-responsive approach within youth employment policy.

To complement the analysis of NEET data, Young Women's Trust carried out a survey of 4,004 young women and



non-binary people, and 1,005 young men aged 18–30 in England and Wales, looking at their experiences of working and finding work. The survey was carried out between 30 July and 17 August 2026. While the survey is not limited to young people who are NEET, this provides a broader picture of young women's experiences of entering, staying in and progressing through work, helping us understand the barriers that can contribute to young women becoming disconnected from the labour market, as well as those that can make it harder to enter or remain in work. Of the young women surveyed, 516 were not working or looking for work and 710 were unemployed and actively looking for work.

NEET young women in numbers

451,000 young women are currently NEET – the highest number for a decade⁴.

Although there are still slightly more young men who are NEET (**530,000**), the number of young women has risen steadily since 2022.

More young women than young men are ‘economically inactive’ – 310,000 young women are in this category, compared to 278,000 young men.

While the majority of NEET young women are economically inactive and a smaller number are unemployed (141,000), for young men, the split is more even with 252,000 unemployed.

Men’s NEET rates fluctuate more than women’s, because they are more closely tied to labour market fluctuations, while women’s are more tied to caring responsibilities.

⁴ ONS, Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: May 2026

Who are the NEET young women?

We have identified three key cohorts of NEET young women, whose differing experiences demonstrate the need for a gender-responsive approach to youth employment policy.

1 YOUNG WOMEN WITH CARING RESPONSIBILITIES – FOR THEIR OWN CHILDREN, YOUNGER SIBLINGS OR OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS

Economic inactivity is a defining feature of young women's NEET experience, and remains consistently high – even normalised.

For young women, unlike young men, this is primarily driven by unpaid caring responsibilities. More than one in four (28%) NEET young women are economically inactive because they are looking after family or home, compared to around 6% of NEET young men⁵.

Many young women are caring for their own children, with having a child before the age of 21 more than doubling the likelihood of being NEET⁶.

Others are carers for younger siblings, elderly relatives, or other family members. Unpaid carers are more likely to be female than male⁷, and carers are much more likely to be NEET than non-carers⁸.

Young Women's Trust survey data⁹ shows:

- **3 in 10 (33%) young women** who weren't working or in education said the reason was that they are looking after children – the most common answer.
- Lack of flexibility had made it difficult to apply for a job for **more than a quarter (28%) of all young women** with sole childcare responsibility and **27% of young single mums**; and more than **3 in 10 (35%)** of those caring for an adult family member.
- The costs of working – such as travel and childcare – are also a significant barrier for those with caring responsibilities. **Almost a sixth (16%) of young single mums, over a sixth (17%) of young mums with a partner, and 2 in 10 (20%) other young women carers** said that not being able to afford the associated costs made it difficult for them to apply for a job.

⁵ Characteristics of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), England: March 2021 – ONS, published March 2026

⁶ National Centre for Social Research, Risk factors for being NEET among young people

⁷ ONS, Unpaid care by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales

⁸ Milburn review

⁹ YWT 2026 survey

Childcare costs remain a barrier to many young women working the hours they want to. However, affordability is only part of the challenge: childcare provision often does not reflect the realities of the jobs available to young women. Many sectors that provide important entry routes – including hospitality, retail, health and social care – operate outside standard working hours. Childcare that is designed around a standard working day can therefore unintentionally exclude young women from the very jobs most available to them.

Caring at a young age can interrupt young women's working lives at a crucial point in their careers, with potential longer-term consequences for their employment.

These young women may have never worked, or they may have been disconnected from the workplace for a long time – with an impact on their skills and confidence, both in relation to work itself and to applying for jobs.

They require targeted support and pathways back into work, with a focus on confidence and skills-building. Many young women say the skills they have gained through caring are unrecognised by employers. They also need jobs and training opportunities which are flexible to match their other responsibilities.

2 YOUNG WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES, MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS OR OTHER HEALTH-RELATED BARRIERS

Young women are twice as likely as young men to have a common mental health disorder between the ages of 17 and 25¹⁰.

There are various explanations for this. Among these is an established link between gender-based violence and poor mental health outcomes¹¹. Digital technology now means the majority of young women experience some form of this: More than three quarters (77%) of girls have experienced online harm¹². The impact on their mental health cannot be underestimated. In turn, this affects labour market participation.

Young Women's Trust has found that¹³:

- Mental health has prevented more than **2 in 10 (22%) young women** from applying for a job, compared to just **16% of young men**.
- **Almost 3 in 10 young women** who are unemployed and actively looking for work (**31%**) and those who are not currently working or looking for work (**32%**) said that their mental health has prevented them applying for a job.

Like caring responsibilities, having a mental health condition or disability – with accessibility needs, and the need for flexibility at short notice – can significantly restrict available opportunities for work and training¹⁴.

10 NHS England 2023

11 Cambridge University Press (2019) Female survivors of intimate partner violence and risk of depression, anxiety and serious mental illness | The British Journal of Psychiatry | Cambridge Core

12 Girlguiding (2024) girls-attitudes-survey-2024.pdf

13 YWT 2026 survey

14 YWT Living Precariously, March 2025 YWT-0225-02-Insecure-LONG-DIGITAL-v4-FINAL.pdf



Finding work that fits around barriers or other needs such as caring responsibilities or health challenges is hard. And the world is not set up for me, but for a typical 9-5 person who is healthy and able to manage time.”

The labour market isn't meeting these young women's needs. And nor are the support systems that should be around them. More than half a million young people were on a waiting list for mental health support¹⁵ with almost 125,000 waiting more than a year¹⁶.

For these young women, as for those with caring responsibilities, flexible work and training opportunities are essential to enable them to remain in or return to employment while managing fluctuating mental health or other health conditions.

- Lack of flexibility has made it difficult to apply for a job for more than 3 in 10 (32%) young women with a long-term health physical health condition and 3 in 10 (30%) neurodivergent young women¹⁷.

They also need timely access to mental health support. Crucially, health, welfare and employment services should work together, so that a period of ill health does not become a prolonged period out of work. Young women should be supported not only to recover, but to stay connected to, or return to, education and employment when they are able.

3 UNEMPLOYED YOUNG WOMEN – SEEKING WORK BUT UNABLE TO ACCESS ENTRY-LEVEL OPPORTUNITIES

Young women's unemployment rates are rising steadily, although they remain lower than young men's.

The sectors where jobs are being lost fastest are those which have traditionally been a common entry point for young women, including retail, administration and hospitality. In May to July 2026, the largest decreases in job vacancies were in human health and social work, and education – industries where women are overrepresented¹⁸.

Young Women's Trust has found that¹⁹:

- Young women have experienced a steady decline in job opportunities in their area since 2023, and are feeling this more than young men. In 2026, more than half **(53%) of young women** disagree that there are enough job opportunities accessible to them in their local area, compared to **39% of young men**.
- This has risen from **41% of young women** and **33% of young men** in 2023.
- **6 in 10 (60%) young women** who are unemployed and actively looking for work think that AI has made it more difficult to get a job.

At the same time, employers increasingly expect previous experience, creating a cycle in which young women struggle to secure the first job needed to gain experience.

15 Care Before Crisis, Mind 2025

16 Children and young people's mental health services in England, BMA 2026

17 YWT 2026 survey

18 ONS, Vacancies and jobs in the UK, August 2026

19 YWT 2026 survey

Case study

Holly, 24, has struggled with her mental health during school and since leaving at 16, and has also been a full-time carer for her mum. She has moved in and out of employment and has now been out of work for a year despite gaining work experience, volunteering and additional qualifications.



I must have applied for 300 jobs and I've had 5 interviews. I'm only 24 and it's really hard to stay hopeful for my future when I've had terrible experiences of employment and now I'm struggling to get my foot through the door.

At 16 I left school with an English and maths GCSE. I really struggled through school with my mental health and had a lot of time off. I secured an apprenticeship in a nursery, but soon after my mum had a pulmonary embolism and I became her full-time carer for two years. As an only child I had no choice but to look after her.

Once my mum was doing better I started looking for work. I worked for an energy company, but my mental health deteriorated and the customer service role made my health issues worse. I tried to raise it with my manager but had no support, so I felt I had no choice but to leave.

I moved into an admin role, but became physically unwell and needed time off for hospital appointments. My manager let me go. After that I worked part-time in Tesco and eventually secured a receptionist role, but the environment was toxic and discriminatory. It really affected my mental health, and I eventually left.

I've done volunteering in admin roles and an online qualification to help me get ahead when applying for jobs. I spend every day adapting my CV and filling in applications. Life is very monotonous. I try to stay hopeful but it's so hard.

I'm also seeing the impact of AI in recruitment. Only a few weeks ago I applied for a job and within 15 minutes I was told I wasn't right for the role. I know my application, which I'd spent hours on, had been put through AI and filtered out. It's completely demoralising."



I must have applied for nearly 700 positions and only a fraction turned into interviews. Often it was down to a lack of experience.”

As AI reshapes the labour market, there is a risk these trends could accelerate, reinforcing existing inequalities because women are disproportionately represented in occupations most exposed to automation while remaining underrepresented in sectors expected to benefit most from AI enhancement.

In the context of a rapidly changing labour market, good-quality careers support, vocational training, and pathways into employment are increasingly important. These must challenge gender stereotypes and connect young women with the full

range of opportunities available. Without a deliberate focus on young women’s participation, there is a risk that new vocational pathways could simply reproduce existing patterns of occupational segregation.

This means opening pathways into high-growth sectors where women remain underrepresented, such as construction and technology, while also investing in the sectors where many young women are most likely to begin their careers, including health, social care and education. These ‘everyday economy’ sectors are fundamental to the UK’s economic and social wellbeing, and should offer high-quality entry routes, clear progression opportunities, secure employment and fair pay. A youth employment system that values both growth sectors and the everyday economy will provide more diverse and accessible routes into sustainable employment for young women.



System failures

Across these different cohorts, a common set of system gaps emerges. While the barriers young women face vary, the underlying failures are strikingly consistent. Addressing these gaps would improve labour market participation across multiple groups of young women.

1 INSUFFICIENT ACCESSIBLE ENTRY LEVEL OPPORTUNITIES

The decline in traditional entry-level sectors and rising employer expectations for previous experience make it harder for young women to secure a first job. There is a risk that without an intentional focus on gender equality, emerging opportunities will benefit young men while traditionally female occupations in the everyday economy will be left behind.

2 INSUFFICIENT FLEXIBLE, SUSTAINABLE JOBS THAT ENABLE YOUNG WOMEN WITH CARING RESPONSIBILITIES, DISABILITIES AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS TO WORK

Many young women with caring responsibilities or health conditions need flexible work to participate, but suitable opportunities remain limited.



Young Women's Trust data shows that²⁰:

- Lack of flexibility has made it difficult for **more than 3 in 10 (31%) young women** who are unemployed and actively looking for work – the joint biggest barrier (along with mental health) for this group.
- **More than 6 in 10 (62%)** of those with a long-term physical health condition and two thirds **(66%)** of those with a mental health condition disagreed that there are enough job opportunities available to them in their local area.

3 POOR INTEGRATION BETWEEN HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH AND EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

Delays in treatment and fragmented services can allow temporary ill health to become prolonged labour market exclusion.

4 INSUFFICIENT SUPPORT FOR CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

Gaps in childcare and wider caring support prevent many young women from accessing or remaining in work and training.

- Not being able to get support with caring responsibilities has made it difficult to apply for a job for almost 2 in 10 (19%) young mums and over 2 in 10 (22%) of those caring for an adult family member²¹.

5 A LACK OF PERSONALISED, RELATIONSHIP-BASED SUPPORT TO HELP YOUNG WOMEN NAVIGATE BARRIERS AND MOVE TOWARDS WORK

Young women who spend time out of work due to caring, ill health or unemployment often need targeted support to reconnect with employment and build their confidence and skills.

20 YWT 2026 survey
21 YWT 2026 survey

Common experiences

Alongside the distinct systemic barriers facing different groups of young women, three recurring patterns shape their experiences across the labour market. These are not confined to any one cohort, but influence whether young women are able to enter, remain in and progress in work.

POOR QUALITY, UNSAFE OR INSECURE WORK

Whether because of caring, disability, or simply because they are the only jobs available, young women tend to enter insecure sectors where pay is low, hours are unpredictable, conditions are poor and progression opportunities are limited – such as hospitality, health, and retail.

In a Young Women's Trust survey of young women experiencing job insecurity, 6 in 10 (60%) young women who had caring responsibilities, and nearly 6 in 10 (58%) of those with a long-term health condition or disability, said they felt forced into precarious work because of their needs²².

A lack of guaranteed hours has made it difficult to apply for a job for 1 in 5 (20%) young women, rising to more than a quarter (27%) among those with adult caring responsibilities, compared with 18% of young men²³. For young women with caring responsibilities, taking a job can mean finding, arranging and paying for care, and reorganising their lives around uncertain working hours. If the job does not offer enough

income or certainty, it may simply not be worth the considerable effort of making it work.

Insecure work is associated with higher levels of discrimination, harassment and other forms of unfair treatment and can then lead to young women cycling in and out of jobs. Young Women's Trust research has found that more than 3 in 10 (33%) of those who experienced such treatment and were unable to resolve it left the workforce entirely²⁴.

Working in low-paid jobs, on insecure contracts in poor working conditions – which young women are more likely to do than young men – can also contribute to poor mental health and labour market drop-out²⁵. It is therefore important that good quality work is on offer to address the mental health and NEET feedback loop.

Insecure work is having a detrimental impact on young women's mental health. 2 in 5 (40%) young women told us that their mental health got worse while working in insecure work²⁶. In turn, this impacts their ability to work.

22 YWT Living Precariously, March 2025 YWT-0225-02-Insecure-LONG-DIGITAL-v4-FINAL.pdf

23 YWT 2026 survey

24 YWT Swept Under the Rug, November 2025 YWT-1025-06-Research-Report-Long-Digital-FINAL-v3.pdf

25 40% of young women working in insecure work said their mental health got worse as a result. Young Women's Trust, Living Precariously (2025) YWT-0225-02-Insecure-LONG-DIGITAL-v4-FINAL.pdf

26 YWT Living Precariously, March 2025 YWT-0225-02-Insecure-LONG-DIGITAL-v4-FINAL.pdf

> DISCRIMINATION AS A BARRIER TO WORK

Young Women's Trust research shows that young women experience discrimination both at work and when applying for jobs. Disabled young women, young mums and carers are particularly likely to face discrimination:

- More than 4 in 10 (41%) young women with a long-term mental health condition and more than 3 in 10 (34%) neurodivergent young women have been discriminated against because of their mental health when working or looking for work²⁷.
- More than 3 in 10 (31%) young single mums, more than 2 in 10 (22%) young women with joint childcare responsibility and more than a quarter (26%) of young women caring for an adult have been discriminated against because of having children or other caring responsibilities²⁸.

Discrimination can create barriers at every stage of the journey into work – from applying for jobs, to being recruited, to staying and progressing in employment. For young women already facing barriers because of ill health, disability or caring responsibilities, it can compound those barriers and

further narrow their employment options. As Government creates new routes into work and training, tackling discrimination must be part of ensuring that young women can access and benefit from them.

> CONFIDENCE AND SELF-BELIEF

Young Women's Trust's experience of supporting young women also shows the importance of confidence and self-belief in applying for work, particularly in a challenging labour market. This is a key building block to supporting young women to work.

Young Women's Trust has seen from our own services the power of person-centred, strengths-based coaching in unlocking young women's self-belief, identifying their unique strengths and ambitions, and driving them forward. Among young women who worked with us over the last year, more than 6 in 10 (63%) reported increased confidence and self-belief – and 4 in 10 (42%) of those who were unemployed found a job within six months. This type of individualised, relationship based support has been identified as lacking in the Milburn review – and it can be transformative.



Coaching with Young Women's Trust made such a difference to my confidence at a time when a string of rejections and a tough job market had really got me down and made me question my abilities. Having someone to talk through my answers with, and who gave me the encouragement and reassurance that I was doing the right things, really boosted my confidence ahead of a couple of big interviews. I landed a great role, and I don't I could have gotten there without the Young Women's Trust's support."

Young woman who used YWT's services

27 YWT 2026 survey
28 YWT 2026 survey

Recommendations

Young Women's Trust is calling for:

- 1 Better routes into good-quality work**
- 2 Flexible work and training by default**
- 3 Integrated, personalised employment support**
- 4 Childcare and caring support that enables participation**
- 5 Gender-responsive youth employment policy**

These recommendations focus on the changes needed to ensure youth employment policy works for young women. They are not intended to replace broader action to tackle the NEET challenge, but to ensure that reforms are designed with young women's experiences and barriers in mind.

1 CREATE BETTER ROUTES INTO GOOD-QUALITY WORK FOR YOUNG WOMEN

- Government should make gender responsiveness a core requirement of youth employment policy, ensuring that careers education, skills and employment programmes actively improve young women's participation, tackle discrimination and challenge occupational segregation. Devolution settlements and local skills and employment plans should embed the same approach.
- The Government should ensure high-quality entry routes and progression pathways are available across both growth sectors and the everyday economy, recognising the

importance of sectors such as health, social care and education alongside AI, digital and green industries.

- Technical and vocational pathways should provide high-quality training in sectors where many young women begin their careers (such as care and retail), and recognition of skills gained through caring responsibilities.

2 DESIGN FLEXIBLE WORK AND TRAINING BY DEFAULT

- Apprenticeships, vocational training and employment programmes should be designed flexibly, so young women with caring responsibilities, disabilities or health conditions are not excluded.

3**PROVIDE PERSONALISED SUPPORT TO HELP YOUNG WOMEN ENTER AND STAY IN WORK**

- Young women aged 16–24 should have access to integrated employment support that brings together careers, health, caring and wellbeing support in one place. This should include a single trusted adviser who understands the issues young women face, and who helps them navigate employment, childcare/caring, health and wider support services. And it should adopt a strengths-based approach that explicitly develops confidence, aspirations and self-belief alongside employability skills.
- Employment support should provide targeted outreach to young women with caring responsibilities, health conditions and other barriers to work.
- Health, mental health, welfare and employment services should work together so that periods of ill health do not become long-term exclusion from work.

4**PROVIDE BETTER SUPPORT FOR YOUNG WOMEN WITH CARING RESPONSIBILITIES**

- The Government should pilot flexible childcare models that enable young women working non-standard hours to access affordable, reliable childcare, including evening, weekend and shift-based provision.
- Integrated employment support should help young women identify and access childcare, caring and financial support alongside employment and training opportunities.

5**MAKE GENDER A CORE PART OF YOUTH EMPLOYMENT POLICY**

- The Government must collect and publish gender-disaggregated data on participation, completion, sustained employment and progression across youth employment programmes.
- Government should require gender impact assessments for major employment, skills and welfare reforms affecting young people.



Young Women's Trust

Young Women's Trust champions young women on low or no pay. We're here to create a more equal world of work and raise young women's incomes. We offer coaching and support to build young women's knowledge, networks and self-belief. We carry out research into what young women's lives are really like and use this evidence to campaign for equality.

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