

NEWS RELEASE – for immediate release

Call for every school to have full-time careers advisor & better adult education to tackle ‘gender skills gap’

04 February 2009

Urgent action is needed to close a ‘gender skills gap’ which is contributing towards a cost of between £15 and £23 billion a year in lost GDP, and to encourage more women of all ages into training schemes especially in traditionally ‘male’ sectors, according to a new report published by the National Skills Forum (NSF) today (Tuesday 3 February).

According to this new report based on a seven month investigation, Government, employers, broadcasters and educationalists should support initiatives aimed at removing barriers to better training for women. Narrowing the skills gap is critical to improving the pay and opportunities open to women, improving economic competitiveness and could form a key part of plans for economic revival.

Closing the Gender Skills Gap: A National Skills Forum report on women, skills and productivity highlights the barriers faced by women wanting to gain new skills, especially those with children wanting to return to work and women in their forties or older who have missed out on training opportunities in the past.

The NSF’s research has found that despite key sectors such as science, engineering and IT suffering from a shortage of skilled workers, only just over a third (36.8%) of science, engineering and technology undergraduates and around 1 in 40 of engineering apprentices are women.

More needs to be done to challenge young women’s perceptions about traditionally ‘male’ sectors like IT, to challenge the UK’s long hours culture that unfairly penalises those with caring commitments, and to make it possible for women of all ages to develop their skills by making it easier to balance caring and career commitments through flexible working arrangements.

Recent extensions to maternity leave have not been met with similar increases for fathers, meaning that women take more time out from work than men. This leaves the way open for employers to promote men ahead of women because they are less likely to take time off. The Government plans to make leave transferable, so mothers leave can be taken up by fathers, but research has shown that this does not lead to significant increase in the amount of leave taken by men.

The report therefore recommends that the Government’s expected changes to maternity and paternity leave include an additional four weeks of *non-transferable* paid leave for fathers.

Amongst the 27 recommendations in the report to tackle barriers to female training and develop an inclusive training and skills culture are:

1. Extending the right to request flexible working to all employees and removing the need for people to be with their employer for 6 months before being allowed to request flexible working.
2. Making it illegal for employers that are recruiting new employees to specify required working hours beyond those for which the employer can make a clear business case.
3. Replacing the current complex childcare funding schemes and introducing a childcare voucher scheme for all parents of children under five.
4. Reversing recent cutbacks and reinvesting in adult and community learning (ACL) schemes. Over three-quarters of ACL subscribers are women.

5. A trained, full-time careers coordinator in every school to ensure that young people are not making career decisions based on traditional assumptions about gender roles.
6. Form and subject teachers to receive careers guidance training.
7. A well-funded, specialised careers guidance service for young people. Current services suffer from limited resources and an overly ambitious remit that also includes drug and relationship support.
8. The Carer's Allowance should be available to those studying for more than 21 hours a week.
9. Broadcasters should include positive portrayals of women in science, engineering and technology in their programming.

Dame Ruth Silver, report co-chair said:

'We want to get the clear message across that the gender skills gap exists and that it's damaging both to women and the economy. Teachers, broadcasters, Government, careers advisors and employers all have a role to play. We have to create a climate in which women can develop real employment-relevant skills; this means overcoming negative attitudes to women in science and technology whether that's in the classroom or on TV. Equally, Government needs to energetically promote careers advice services for people of all ages and provide the necessary financial support to let people realise their ambitions.'

Gordon Marsden MP, report co-chair said:

'One of the issues we looked at is the role that perceptions about job roles play in women's life chances and training decisions. There is a need to provide greater access to careers advice so we can enable young women to overcome gender stereotyping about job roles and encourage more young women to start engineering or IT training schemes. With an ageing population it is equally important to offer training to women who, for various reasons such as caring for children or relatives, have missed out on learning opportunities in the past. That's why the report recommends that the Government reinvest in adult and community learning and offer increased financial support to adult learners in further education.'

Hugo Donaldson, author of the report at the National Skills Forum, said:

'Both the 9 to 5 and long hours working cultures are damaging for women who want to balance work with caring commitments. It is unhelpful that employers in sectors with skills shortages find it hard to train and retain women. More needs to be done to foster a flexible working culture, which will ultimately benefit both individual women and employers.'

All quotes must be attributed to 'the National Skills Forum'.

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Notes to Editors:

- An embargoed copy of the report will be made available to selected media.
 - The final report will be launched in Parliament between 16.00 – 18.00 on 03 February 2009.
 - Interview opportunities with Dame Ruth Silver, Gordon Marsden MP and NSF spokespeople are available by arrangement to selected media before and after the launch.
 - There will also be the opportunity to interview some of the personal case studies of women featured in the report. Details available on request.
- For print and web journalists, a rights-free, high res online image gallery from the launch will be available within four hours of the finish of the launch. To be sent details, please contact Daniel Golding on 07779 607 887.

About the National Skills Forum (NSF)

www.policyconnect.org.uk/skills

The National Skills Forum (NSF) is a membership body that provides a channel for organisations working in the skills sector to come together with parliamentarians and engage in the policy-making process. Members are drawn from across the business and skills communities. The NSF is part of Policy Connect.

Policy Connect**www.policyconnect.org.uk**

Policy Connect provides a bridge between Parliament and commerce to promote effective policy development across five key areas: Skills, Environment, Health, Design & Sustainability.

Established in 1995, we work across the political spectrum, are issue-led and entirely not-for-profit.

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