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Scottish Parliament

Tuesday 8 March 2022

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 14:00]

Time for Reflection

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Good afternoon. I remind members of the Covid-related measures that are in place and that face coverings should be worn when moving around the chamber and across the Holyrood campus. The first item of business this afternoon is time for reflection. Our time for reflection leader today is Joanna Butterfield MBE, parasport athlete.

Joanna Butterfield MBE (Parasport Athlete): Please close your eyes for a moment and imagine with me.

You are 14, playing rugby for your school. Crash! Bang! That was a huge tackle—and you are lying on the floor, unable to move.

You are in your 20s, speeding home from a party. For a split second, you lose concentration. Crash! Bang! The car is in bits and you are sitting there, unable to move.

You are 65, going for a shower. A simple slip on the floor and the next thing that you remember is lying in hospital, unable to move.

You are a 30-something girl, working for the Army—just normal. Routine tests discover a tumour on your spinal cord. One week later, after surgery to remove it, you wake up unable to move.

Those are all real stories of people that I met in hospital. That shows us that life is fragile. No one is exempt from the possibility of a life changing completely and irreversibly in a moment.

You can open your eyes.

28 January 2011 is a date that is impaled on my brain forever: the day that I walked into an operating theatre and woke up paralysed from the chest down—the day that my life changed forever. It would be very easy for me to be sad and depressed, and to ask, why me? However, I am not here to tell you that story. Today, on international women's day, my story is one not of sadness but of happiness and success.

People ask me what that moment was like, waking up paralysed. It is hard to explain but, for me, it was very matter of fact. I could not change it, but I was not going to let it defeat me. I had a choice that day and on every day since. I still have a choice: to be angry for what I cannot do and do not have, or to be thankful for what I do have, what

I can do and who I am. I choose to be thankful. Am I thankful that I am a tetraplegic? No, but I am immensely thankful for the opportunities that I have been given because of that. I love my life.

I find myself sitting here talking to you as a multiple world, European and Paralympic champion. Sport gave me a reason to carry on—an avenue to be successful and achieve great things. I have travelled the world and met so many great people. I no longer hear the words, "You can't do that ... you'll never achieve that." I now get to see kids' faces light up as I share my story and flash a medal or two. It has taken a lot of hard work and dedication, and I still struggle—don't we all?

My message to you is that many things happen in life that we cannot control and that we cannot change. However, we can control and determine our own actions and choices in response to such events.

I am stubborn. I chose to never give in; not to accept "you can't do that"; and to take every helping hand and opportunity that was presented to me. There have been a lot of those and you never know what lies behind that unopened door.

I chose to take the tatters of a shattered life that was broken by injury, pick them up, mould them and make them into something beautiful again.

Thank you for listening. [*Applause.*]

The Presiding Officer: Thank you very much, Joanna.

Topical Question Time

14:04

Ukraine War (Women and Children)

1. Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what support it is giving to women and children who are caught up in the war in Ukraine. (S6T-00567)

The Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development (Neil Gray): On this international women's day, our thoughts, support and solidarity go to the women and girls of Ukraine, who have shown unimaginable strength since Russia's invasion of their country. It is appalling to witness women and children fleeing their homes from war and violence. Our thoughts are with all the people of Ukraine and we stand ready to welcome them to make Scotland a home.

As well as medical supplies, we are providing £4 million of humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, including £1 million for UNICEF. That funding will help to support women and children in Ukraine and neighbouring countries.

Gillian Martin: Over the past week, we have all seen more than 2 million refugees, the majority of whom are women and children, fleeing the war in Ukraine. I just heard that the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, was not present at Westminster just now to answer an urgent question on visa requirements for letting refugees in. Given the support that we have seen across Europe, does the minister agree that the United Kingdom Government must step up and introduce a comprehensive resettlement scheme as soon as possible to help people who are much in need of support and the home that he mentioned in his answer?

Neil Gray: Yes, absolutely. The Scottish Government and Scotland's local authorities have made it clear to the UK Government that they stand ready to offer refuge and sanctuary where necessary for displaced people. The UK Government's current proposals are insufficient and the Scottish Government continues to urgently call on it to act now and develop a comprehensive resettlement programme. It is vital that rapid, safe and legal routes be established immediately.

I am also extremely concerned at the mixed messages that are being sent out to people who are desperate to navigate their way through the complex bureaucratic systems to reach the UK. MPs from across the chamber have made that message clear directly to Home Office ministers in the past hour.

I also note reports suggesting that the UK visa centre that is being opened for Ukrainian refugees

who are currently in Calais might actually be opened 70 miles away in Lille. That exemplifies the tone-deaf, totally inadequate response from the UK Government regarding Ukrainian refugees.

Gillian Martin: I thank the minister for that answer, as depressing of some of that information is.

This international women's day, women around the globe are fighting for equality and we need to mention the many brave women in Russia who have been protesting against Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. It is unlikely that they will see anything from the West, as the regime shuts down internet sites that it does not like. However, the words of solidarity matter if they get through. What message does the Scottish Government have for those brave Russian women and girls who protest the regime and are subjected to violence when they do so?

Neil Gray: Gillian Martin is absolutely right. It is devastating and shocking to see 2 million people from Ukraine, the majority of whom are women and children, having to flee their country because of war and violence on international women's day, which is meant to be a day on which Governments demonstrate their commitment to making our world safer and more equal for women and girls. We can see that Putin has no respect for anyone's lives, so I can only applaud the brave women in Russia who have been protesting against his barbaric invasion and say to them clearly that our issue is with Putin and his regime and that we know that those barbaric acts are not in their name.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): This morning, the Polish embassy to the UK put out a statement expressing gratitude to UK citizens and organisations that have contributed aid to the Ukraine crisis. However, it also asked people who wished to help not to organise further collections of in-kind donations due to the time and effort that it takes to distribute such help. Instead, it asked that they organise fundraisers and direct their donations to verified organisations to use the funds in accordance with the strict needs of the people who are affected and for effective operation in the long term.

What work is the Scottish Government doing to ensure that that message gets across, while not diminishing the generosity and compassion of Scots who have come together over the past few weeks to give aid and assistance in whatever way they can?

Neil Gray: Donald Cameron is absolutely right. Once again, we applaud the generosity in kind and in spirit of the people of Scotland, who are looking to do everything that they can practically, financially and through gifts in aid to support the

people in Ukraine who are suffering the horrors of war.

The Scottish Government has been working actively and with much vigour over the past few days to try to ensure that we support aid getting to Ukraine in the best possible way. We encourage people to support the financial appeals that have been made, particularly through the Disasters Emergency Committee, to ensure that aid gets effectively and quickly to where it is needed.

We thank the people of Scotland for their generosity on that front, too. More than £10 million has been raised and I ask them to continue in that generosity of spirit.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): As well as seeing the harrowing images of families fleeing their homes, we have heard reports of black and minority ethnic Ukrainian refugees being denied exit from Ukraine or being subjected to different treatment.

I am sure that all members agree that no one who is fleeing conflict should have to face unnecessary and inhumane hurdles when they are seeking refuge.

Will the minister say to what extent the experience of Glasgow in welcoming and integrating refugees and asylum seekers influenced the Scottish Government's approach to the Ukraine crisis?

Neil Gray: Kaukab Stewart is absolutely right: Scotland has a long history of welcoming people of all nationalities and faiths, including people who seek refuge and asylum from war and terror elsewhere. We are committed to supporting such people's integration into our communities and to providing the safety and security that they need if they are to begin to rebuild their lives.

Scotland stands ready to offer refuge and sanctuary to people who might be displaced, as we did with the Syrian refugees resettlement programme, in which all 32 local authorities in Scotland participated, welcoming more than 3,300 refugees into their communities. We must ensure that we learn the lessons from that programme and the Afghanistan resettlement scheme, so that we provide rapid and appropriate support to people who need it because they are fleeing Ukraine.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): What preparation is being done to support local organisations that work with our councils, in the hope that we will be able to support people, particularly women and children, who are fleeing Ukraine?

Neil Gray: Conversations with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are active. In the context of my ministerial portfolio, the Cabinet

Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture has had discussions with COSLA, as has the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government, to ensure that we are ready to welcome Ukrainian refugees to Scotland when they are able to get here, when the UK Government's bureaucracy and intransigence have been overcome and we have a situation that allows people who are fleeing the horrors of war in Ukraine to come here and make Scotland their home.

North Sea Oil and Gas (Energy Security)

2. Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will review its position on North Sea oil and gas exploration and production in relation to the security of Scotland's energy supply. (S6T-00562)

The Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport (Michael Matheson): The Scottish Government has made it clear that unlimited extraction of fossil fuels is not consistent with our climate obligations. Scotland's energy sector has a crucial role to play as Europe and the world move beyond the age of fossil fuel, and we can be a key part of a solution that seeks to ensure energy security amid on-going economic and geopolitical turbulence.

At the Scottish Renewables conference today, I made the point that renewable power could provide a more consistent and stable energy supply in the wake of rising prices and unpredictable supplies of oil and gas. Scotland has among the richest renewable energy producing potential in the whole of Europe but is unfairly penalised by the transmission charges that are applied, which are a direct disincentive to producers and investors.

Our focus is on achieving the fastest possible just transition for the oil and gas sector—a transition that delivers jobs and economic benefit, that ensures our energy security and that meets our climate obligations.

Liam Kerr: I think that that answer boiled down to, "The Scottish Government will not review its position."

People will hope that, before the conclusion was reached that security of supply, environmental benefit and ensuring that we cut off funding to Russia are not reasons enough to pursue domestic oil and gas, a full investigation into future energy security was carried out.

In what year, following his ramping up of renewables, do the cabinet secretary's research projections say that renewables will consistently cover 100 per cent of Scotland's energy needs without our ever needing oil and gas? When does

his research say that Scotland will have no further need for imported oil and gas?

Michael Matheson: I am sure that the member recognises that Scotland and the United Kingdom as a whole have security of energy supply at the moment, with very low reliance on imported oil and gas from Russia—it is about 2 per cent, apparently, which could easily be displaced by alternative supplies. It would be wrong of the member to try to give the impression that there is an issue with security of supply.

As he will also be aware, the equivalent of Scotland's domestic electricity supply—some 98 per cent of it—now comes from renewable sources. We have been ramping that up over recent years and we plan to ramp it up yet further.

The outcome of the ScotWind leasing round demonstrates the scale of the ambition to invest in Scotland's renewables sector, which could give Scotland not only a massive environmental boost but a massive economic boost, too, and not just in renewable energy but in hydrogen power—we could not only provide hydrogen for domestic users but be a net exporter to other parts of Europe.

Scotland is well placed in its energy transition, and this Government's policies and the approaches that it is taking will ensure that we continue to drive that forward in years to come.

Liam Kerr: Many others take a very different view of the issue from that of the cabinet secretary. The UK Government has made it clear that we must ramp up domestic gas production to replace Russian supplies and reduce costs for United Kingdom families. Since Sunday, Messrs Blackford MP, Smith MP and Ewing MSP have demanded more home-grown gas for security of supply, not least because, as Ian Blackford put it, buying Russian energy funds Putin's war.

In the weekend's newspapers, an unnamed Scottish National Party minister said:

"What's puzzling to many in the party ... is when you have a domestic supply, why you wouldn't want to use that for the benefit of people here and to stop paying for supply from elsewhere, particularly if it benefits the Russians."

What evidence does the cabinet secretary have that convinces him that, in rejecting more domestic production, he and Nicola Sturgeon are right and everyone else is wrong?

Michael Matheson: The member fundamentally misses the point, which is that the climate crisis that we face has not gone away. We need only look at the report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change the other week, which set out clearly the scale and nature of the climate challenge that we face and the need to make sure that we take appropriate action to deal with it.

The answer is to step up the decarbonisation of our energy systems, just as Germany proposes to do, by bringing forward its target by some 15 years, or as the Dutch Prime Minister set out yesterday, when he was in London, sharing a platform with Boris Johnson. The answer is to decarbonise at a faster rate so that we are not dependent on oil and gas.

The failure of the UK Government to recognise that is demonstrated by the way in which it continues to have transmission charges that penalise Scottish projects, making them the most expensive in the UK to take forward and causing businesses to choose to put their investments elsewhere. It is also failing to take forward projects such as the Scottish cluster and carbon capture and utilisation—the best-placed project in the whole of the UK to demonstrate a key technology that can help us not only to deal with the energy transition but to meet our climate change targets. What we need from the UK Government is a level of ambition that matches ours in decarbonising our energy system and meeting our climate change obligations.

The Presiding Officer: There is much interest in this question. I would like to allow those who have pressed their request-to-speak buttons to ask their questions, and I would be grateful for short and succinct questions and responses.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): The SNP promised that there would be 130,000 renewables jobs by 2020, but, for the fourth year running, the number has fallen, and it now sits at just over 20,000. As a result, oil and gas workers simply do not trust the Government when it talks about a just transition, as the cabinet secretary has just done.

If the Government is serious about a just transition, will the cabinet secretary give a commitment that every single penny raised from the ScotWind leasing round will be ring fenced for investment directly relating to opportunities created by that leasing round, to ensure that the vast majority of supply chain jobs are in Scotland instead of those jobs being offshored, just as the Government has offshored the profits?

Michael Matheson: There are two key points here. First, it is important that, as we reduce our reliance on oil and gas, we deliver a just transition. That is why, as part of our refresh of the energy strategy, we are also taking forward our just transition planning, to ensure that it aligns with our energy policy for the sector, which is to support those in the oil and gas sector to move into our renewable energy sector.

My second point is about the revenues that are generated by ScotWind. As has been set out, funding payments made by those who have been

given leasing options will be used to prioritise our investment in tackling climate change and diversity loss—the twin crises that we face as part of the global challenge. We will ensure that that funding is used in a way that helps to deliver jobs, protect the natural environment and tackle climate change.

I give Colin Smyth the assurance that this Government is absolutely determined not only to capitalise on the environmental and economic benefits of ScotWind to deliver a just transition for the oil and gas sector in Scotland but to protect and enhance our natural environment for the years to come.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): We know that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could result in a significant increase in energy bills, which will be a huge concern to many households across Scotland that are already facing a cost of living crisis. Given that energy is a reserved matter, will the Scottish Government continue to push the UK Government to cut VAT on energy bills? That would be one of the simplest means of helping energy consumers in the short term.

Michael Matheson: We have raised with the UK Government on a number of occasions the fact that it needs to take seriously the cost of living crisis that households are facing, which will result in a significant number of people in Scotland ending up in fuel poverty or extreme fuel poverty. As we can now see, the measures that the UK Government has taken are nothing more than smoke and mirrors, because it turns out that there is no new money from the Government to support even the £150 that people were meant to get as a discount on their council tax payment. The UK Government has failed to recognise that this issue will blow up in its face at some point because households, particularly those on lower incomes, are facing extreme financial challenges.

It is time for the UK Government to face up to that and to put serious financial resources in place to support households that are experiencing difficulties. That could mean removing VAT on fuel bills; it could be about providing new money to meet the cost of living; and it could involve ensuring that the loans that the Government is providing to people over the course of this year are converted into grants in order to support them, instead of playing out a game that is nothing more than smoke and mirrors at a time when families are struggling to decide whether to heat their home or put food on the table.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Across Europe, Governments are waking up to the fact that we must end our dependency on oil and gas in order to create a safe and secure world. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the UK Tory Government needs to invest urgently in

renewables and insulation instead of listening to the likes of Liam Kerr and Nigel Farage, who would rather plunge households into poverty and lock us into a future of volatile gas prices and climate breakdown?

Michael Matheson: Liam Kerr and Nigel Farage are joined at the hip when it comes to energy policy—I do not know whether Liam Kerr would entirely agree with that.

It is extremely important that we do not lose sight of the climate crisis that we face. We only have to reflect on the report that was published by the IPCC just over a week ago, which demonstrated not just the extent to which climate change is already locked in—it is greater and more damaging than was previously thought—but that we are at risk of not meeting our climate change obligations because of a lack of action having been taken internationally. The report was

“called an ‘Atlas of human suffering’ for good reason: climate change threatens human wellbeing. Billions are vulnerable and some impacts are already here e.g. extreme weather. The 1.5C target is important to prevent even worse.”

Those are not my words; they are the words of Maurice Golden when he described the report just last week. We need honesty from the Conservative Party about the need to take the action that is necessary to tackle climate change rather than play petty politics on issues on which it fails to take substantial actions.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Does the cabinet secretary recognise the importance of the thousands of onshore jobs in the Scottish supply chain that support North Sea oil and gas, and that the transferable skills of those workers are critical to the innovation and development of renewables?

Michael Matheson: Beatrice Wishart raises an important point. The oil and gas sector is a strength to the renewables sector in Scotland as part of our energy transition.

We can see from the assessment work that has already been done in the oil and gas sector that many of those with skills in oil and gas have skills that are highly transferable to new, low-carbon energy systems and the renewable energy sector. We need to capitalise on that, which is why, as part of our new energy strategy, we will also take forward the just transition planning for the energy sector, to deliver the right support and assistance to help those in our oil and gas sector to transfer into the new low-carbon energies of the future.

International Women's Day 2022

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-03485, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on international women's day 2022. I would be grateful if members who wish to speak in the debate could press their request-to-speak button now or enter the letter R in the chat function.

14:25

The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon): It is a privilege to open this debate. I will talk shortly about what international women's day means for us here in Scotland, but this is also an opportunity to show solidarity with women and girls around the globe, not least those on the front line of conflict and war.

Today in particular, I know that all our thoughts are with the women and girls of Ukraine. Ukraine is one of the countries around the world that marks international women's day with a public holiday. This time last year, thousands marched through the streets of its capital city, Kyiv, to demand gender equality. Today, the reality could not be more different. Kyiv and cities across Ukraine are under brutal Russian bombardment. Far from participating in peaceful democratic protest, Ukrainians are now fighting and fleeing for their lives.

Today, from our national Parliament here in Edinburgh, Kyiv's twin city, let us send the women and girls, men and boys of Ukraine our love, solidarity and support, but let us also send this message. In the face of the horror that is engulfing Ukraine, words are not enough. In the past 10 days alone, more than 2 million people have already fled the horrors of war, and that number is rising rapidly. The majority of those who are seeking refuge are women and children.

So far, the United Kingdom's response has fallen short. Today, on international women's day, I appeal to the UK Government to follow the example of Ireland and other European Union countries, putting refuge and sanctuary first and bureaucracy second. Let us let people in and do the paperwork afterwards. Let us open not just our hearts but our doors. Our common humanity demands it.

The theme of this year's international women's day is "break the bias"—three short words that mask the scale of the task that we face if we are to ensure that there is equality for women and girls here at home and around the globe. The bias that we seek to break is ingrained. Its roots are deeply historic—I will reflect on that point later—but its impacts are very current, and all women experience it in some way, shape or form. Of

course, for minority ethnic women, disabled women, trans women and lesbians, the impact is compounded.

The bias that we must break encapsulates prejudice and discrimination, outdated gender stereotypes, sexism and misogyny—attitudes that have no place in modern society but which still shape and limit women's lives daily. Those attitudes result in the systematic underrepresentation of women, in the undervaluing of the contribution that women make to our society, and in too many women living in perennial fear of harassment, abuse, domestic and sexual violence and, in too many cases, murder.

Breaking the bias must mean changing all that, or it will mean nothing at all. Let us be clear that it is not women who need to change. What must change is a culture in which prejudice, sexism and misogyny still thrive.

International women's day is a time to take stock of progress, and progress has been made. I stand here as the first woman to hold the office of First Minister and I lead a gender-balanced Cabinet. Forty-five per cent of this Parliament's members are women and, albeit very belatedly, we now count among our number women of colour. All that is progress, and it is helping to drive deeper change.

The world's first comprehensive women's health plan, free period products, which remove for women and girls the financial cost and stigma of periods, reform of the law on domestic abuse, the doubling of early years education and childcare, and the new child payment are tangible examples of policies that are making the lives of women and girls better.

We should celebrate the progress that has been made, but we must not let it mask the deep inequalities that still exist across society or distract us from the work that there is still to do. Better representation is not yet equal representation in Parliament, in our council chambers, or on company boards or decision-making bodies throughout the country. Women still bear the biggest responsibility for childcare and unpaid care more generally, they are still much more likely to work in occupations that are underpaid and undervalued and, of course, the lives of women are still blighted each and every day by an epidemic of harassment, abuse, threats and violence.

That epidemic seems to be getting worse, not better. The problem is real and very current, but the misogyny that motivates it is age old. That is why I want to focus the remainder of my remarks on two issues, one of which is deeply historic and

one of which is contemporary. However, they are linked by the common thread of misogyny.

There is a petition before the Parliament that demands a pardon for the more than 4,000 people in Scotland—the vast majority of them were women—accused of, and in many cases convicted and executed for, being witches under the Witchcraft Act 1563. Those who met that fate were not witches; they were people, and they were overwhelmingly women. At a time when women were not even allowed to speak as a witness in a courtroom, they were accused and killed because they were poor, different or vulnerable or, in many cases, just because they were women. That was injustice on a colossal scale that was driven, at least in part, by misogyny in its most literal sense: hatred of women.

The pardon that the petition calls for would require the Parliament to legislate and, in future, it may choose to do so. In the meantime, the petition also calls for an apology—after all, those accusations and executions were instigated and perpetrated by the state. Therefore, today, on international women's day, as First Minister on behalf of the Scottish Government, I am choosing to acknowledge that egregious historic injustice and to extend a formal posthumous apology to all those who were accused, convicted, vilified or executed under the Witchcraft Act 1563.

Some will ask why this generation should say sorry for something that happened centuries ago, although it might be more pertinent to ask why that has taken so long. For me, there are three reasons for that.

First, acknowledging injustice—no matter how historic—is important. The Parliament has rightly issued formal apologies and pardons for the more recent historic injustices suffered by gay men and miners. We are currently considering a request for a formal apology to women whose children were forcibly adopted. Reckoning with historic injustice is a vital part of building a better country and so, too, is recognising and writing into history what has been erased for too long: the experiences and achievements of women.

Secondly, for some, the issue is not yet historic. There are parts of our world in which, even today, women and girls face persecution and sometimes death because they have been accused of witchcraft.

Thirdly, although in Scotland the Witchcraft Act 1563 may have been consigned to history a long time ago, the deep misogyny that motivated it has fundamentally not been. We live with that still. Today, it expresses itself not in claims of witchcraft but in everyday harassment, online rape threats and sexual violence. All that is intensified by an increasingly polarised and toxic public discourse

and amplified each and every day by social media. It is no wonder that more women than ever before—certainly in my lifetime—are now questioning whether politics and public life are safe environments for women, and it is no wonder that so many still feel scared to walk the streets.

In recent days, we have marked the anniversary of the horrific murder of Sarah Everard, whose death sparked outrage and a demand for change. However, in the year since Sarah was killed, dozens more women have been murdered across Britain.

Just last week, I chaired the Cabinet's annual meeting with the Scottish Children's Parliament and the Scottish Youth Parliament. One of the trustees of the Youth Parliament, Sophie Reid, gave a powerful presentation about the experiences of young women today. She spoke of the ways in which women are forced to adapt their own behaviours and restrict their own lives to protect themselves, as far as possible, from harassment, abuse and violence by men. Those experiences are heartbreaking, but they are not new. They are also the experiences of my generation, and of my mother's and grandmother's generations. If they are not to become the experiences of the next generation, too, a line in the sand must be drawn.

It is no longer acceptable to expect women and girls to adapt and accommodate. It is time to challenge unacceptable male behaviour and better protect women from it. We must change for good the culture of misogyny that has normalised such behaviour for far too long. It is in that context that Baroness Helena Kennedy's working group on misogyny and criminal justice published its groundbreaking report this morning. I thank Baroness Kennedy and the working group, which included the late and sadly missed Emma Ritch, for producing such a powerful and compelling report. Its recommendations are bold and far reaching. It proposes a new misogyny and criminal justice act and recommends that that act include a statutory misogyny aggravation.

It is important to stress, in anticipation of concerns about freedom of thought and speech, that that would not criminalise misogyny per se, but it would allow crimes—assault, for example—that are motivated by misogyny to be treated more seriously in sentencing. Importantly, it would not apply to crimes such as rape, which are inherently misogynistic.

The report also recommends three new criminal offences to reflect and better address the daily lived experience of too many women. Those offences would be stirring up hatred against women and girls; public misogynistic harassment; and issuing threats of, or invoking, rape or sexual assault or disfigurement of women and girls,

whether online or offline. The Scottish Government welcomes those recommendations in principle. We will now give full consideration to the detail, and we will respond formally as soon as possible.

However, in my view, the report matters beyond the detail of the specific recommendations that it makes. It matters because it acknowledges, and gives powerful voice to, the stark realities of everyday life for women. It recognises that misogyny is endemic and that it blights the lives of women every single day. It rightly points out that not all men are misogynist but all women experience misogyny. It also recognises the power of the law to drive social and cultural change and concedes that, for women and girls, our law is currently failing.

Perhaps most important of all, it articulates a fundamental truth on which, on this international women's day, we must all reflect: a society in which women do not feel safe is not one in which we can ever be truly equal. On international women's day, let us in this Parliament rededicate ourselves to building a society in which women and girls are safe and in which they feel safe. Let us acknowledge and reckon with historic injustice, and in doing so, let us redouble our work now to consign age-old misogyny to the history books, once and for all.

Let that then be the foundation on which we build a truly gender-equal Scotland and offer it as an example to women and girls across the globe. On this international women's day, at a time of real darkness for our world, let us today send a message of hope and light to women and girls everywhere.

I move,

That the Parliament unites to mark International Women's Day 2022; welcomes this year's theme of #BreakTheBias, which recognises that "whether deliberate or unconscious, bias makes it difficult for women to move ahead", and that intersecting characteristics such as disability and race can compound bias and discrimination; recognises that it is the responsibility of everyone to end the discrimination that women and girls face; acknowledges that, while much progress towards achieving equality has been made, it has not yet been achieved in Scotland or around the world; recognises the steps forward that the Scottish Parliament has taken to improve equal representation, and the record number of women elected, and acknowledges that there is more to do, especially for the representation of disabled, BAME and LGBT women and women from other minority groups; further recognises the tireless work of organisations and communities across Scotland to promote equality and support women, and agrees that equality is necessary for society and the economy to thrive, and that everyone should work together to break the bias on, and beyond, International Women's Day.

14:39

Tess White (North East Scotland) (Con): International women's day has been observed for more than a century. In many parts of the world, much has changed for women since the early 1900s, from enfranchisement to the #MeToo movement. In other parts, progress has slowed significantly or has even reversed, sometimes drastically.

So, although today is a celebration of the remarkable achievements of women around the world, it is also a protest at the persistent gender inequality and discrimination that women continue to experience every day. It is a day of reflection, frustration, anger and sadness.

As we come together to mark international women's day 2022 against a background of violence and conflict in Ukraine, we do so with particularly sombre hearts. We know that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by war: one former UN peacekeeping commander believes that it has become more dangerous to be a woman in an armed conflict than it is to be a soldier.

Too often, women bear the humanitarian cost of war, but their acts of bravery, heroism and kindness also demonstrate that there is humanity in adversity. Since Russia's unprovoked invasion almost two weeks ago, we have seen and heard harrowing accounts of how that appalling conflict has collided with the lives of the Ukrainian people.

In just a matter of days, daily commutes to work and to the school gates have been replaced by desperate journeys in search of safety. Two million people, mostly women and children, have been displaced as they flee the violence. They have left everything behind. As fathers are called up to fight and families are separated, courageous mothers have walked dozens of kilometres with their frightened children in frigid winter temperatures as the threat of Russian attack spurs them on into the unknown.

Polish mothers left prams, buggies, blankets and baby bags on a station platform for weary Ukrainian refugees crossing into Poland by train—a deeply touching gesture of solidarity and support.

The bravery and resilience of women across Ukraine humbles us all. Female doctors stayed behind in hospital basements to care for their patients as the sound of Russian shelling reverberated through the buildings. Women resisted by making Molotov cocktails and took up arms to defend their country's sovereignty from an irredentist dictatorship. The director of the Save Wild sanctuary, Natalia Popova, stayed with a lorry evacuating animals to Poland as Russian tanks advanced just 80 m away and Ukrainian

partisan women secured safe passage for them. A volunteer medic lost her life helping injured Ukrainian soldiers on the front line. A grandmother pleaded with Russian forces for the lives of her grandchildren—a six-year-old girl called Sofia and a six-week-old baby boy called Ivan—as they fled the conflict. They were shot to death.

We cannot possibly know what it is like to walk in the shoes of women in Ukraine during that senseless violence, but we want those women, and women in conflict zones around the world or who are experiencing the aftermath of war, to know this: we are with you, shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm.

Last week marked one year since 33-year-old Sarah Everard was kidnapped, raped and murdered by police officer Wayne Couzens, who pretended to arrest her as she walked home from a friend's house. He was a predator hiding in plain sight, cloaked in pretence and deceit. The brutality of Sarah's death shook our country to its core.

Other members and I were humbled to join the Sarah Everard memorial protest in Edinburgh last Thursday. But, as campaigner and founder of Strut Safe, Rachel Chung, said during the protest, "nothing has changed". In the year since Sarah was killed, 125 more women are reported to have lost their lives across the UK.

In Scotland, the number of domestic abuse incidents has increased for the fifth year in a row. On average, 180 domestic abuse cases are reported to Police Scotland every day. Dundee City, in my region, has recorded the worst rates of domestic abuse in Scotland. Nine out of ten cases took place in the home, supposedly a place of sanctuary but the least safe place for far too many women. The number of sexual crimes recorded across Scotland increased by 13 per cent last year; the number of rapes increased by 12 per cent.

The majority of the correspondence that I receive at the moment relates to women's safety. I know that women want to be able to wear what they want, without the threat of sexual harassment and violence. I know that women are hoping for the day when they can walk home from a friend's house or a night out without clutching their keys in one hand and their mobile phone in the other. I know that women the length and breadth of the country are asking what it will take for the status quo to change.

The reality is that, for change to take place, we must see a change in attitudes and belief systems. There was widespread outrage when footballer David Goodwillie, who was ruled to be a rapist in civil court proceedings, was signed by Raith Rovers in January. The Raith Rovers women's team cut ties to the club in opposition to the

decision. The women's captain, Tyler Rattray, stepped down and said that she wanted "nothing to do" with the signing.

Public outrage was compounded by a disgracefully tin-eared statement from the club to defend the decision. It highlighted Goodwillie's "footballing ability" and emphasised that that was the community club's "foremost consideration" in taking him on. What kind of message does that send not just to women and girls but to men and boys?

A poll by Ipsos and the global institute for women's leadership at King's College London that was published last week revealed that almost one in five men across the UK do not believe that gender inequality really exists. Almost a third of men think that traditional masculinity is under threat, and almost a third again think that feminism does more harm than good. Such regressive attitudes need to change to break the bias.

No longer do we want to hear statements like, "Over my dead body will you play in my boys football team—girls don't play football", as Rachel Pavlou was told by her headmaster when she was seven years old. She is now the Football Association's development manager for diversity and inclusion.

I started my career in human resources in the 1980s and, in working with some truly inspirational women, I have seen at first hand how transformative diversity and inclusion policies can be in the workplace. I remember challenging male employees about the pornographic calendars in their workplaces long before *The Sun* stopped publishing page 3 photos in 2015.

Slowly we have chipped away at the casual misogyny that has characterised workplaces for decades. For too long, employers have expected women to minimise their differences and adapt to the workplace, rather than adapting the workplace to women. So much female talent has been lost because of that draconian mindset. From pregnancy to parental leave, childcare to the menopause, we must do better at responding to the issues.

The Economist's glass-ceiling index—the annual measure of the role and influence of women in the workforce across 29 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries—ranks Great Britain well below average at number 22. That is simply not good enough.

The World Economic Forum estimates that it will now take 135.6 years to reach gender equality, as the Covid-19 pandemic set progress back by about 36 years. Without measurement there is no improvement, and I cannot emphasise enough how pivotal Theresa May's drive to compel

companies to publish their gender pay gap data was in helping to improve workplace equality.

As life increasingly returns to normal and the threat of the pandemic recedes, Governments and businesses must work collaboratively to nurture female talent and find other innovative ways to promote equality in the workplace. That is not about positive discrimination; it is about fairness.

I am proud to be in a Parliament that is made up of 45 per cent women, but I do not take that for granted, and we in the Parliament have much more to do to achieve equality in Scotland and in the world.

I move amendment S6M-03485.1, to insert at end:

“; recognises that this global day in 2022 takes place against a background of conflict and bloodshed in Ukraine and other countries blighted by violence, and that women and girls are disproportionately affected by war, and believes that more must be done to tackle the scourge of violence against women and girls in Scotland and around the world.”

14:49

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): It is a great privilege to open the debate for Scottish Labour. If someone had asked me, just over a year ago, whether I thought that I would be doing this, I would probably have said no, partly because I have massive impostor syndrome in all circumstances—as many women do—but largely because past behaviour is often the strongest predictor of future behaviour, and the past does not look great for women like me. I am proud, however, to say that the future looks much better, and that is in no small part down to the strides that the Parliament has made in the representation of women. I note and recognise how proud I am to be in the chamber alongside Pam Gosal and Kaukab Stewart, two women who have broken down barriers and made history, becoming the first women of colour to stand in the chamber, with Pam Gosal being the first Sikh woman.

International women’s day and fighting for the rights of women is an issue that transcends party lines. I know that all of us here in the chamber stand ready to do just that. Breaking the bias is a fight for us all.

Although the usual focus of this day would be to celebrate the achievements of women and girls throughout history, it is important that we stop and remember that, this year, as we celebrate women, we do so against a backdrop of an incredibly difficult few years for women and in the context of war in Ukraine, where women are fleeing for their lives, trying to escape bloodshed in their towns and cities and doing everything that they can to protect their families. Hundreds of thousands of

women have left Ukraine, taking their children to safety and, often, leaving their husbands behind.

Women in Ukraine are not just fleeing, however; many are staying to fight, taking up arms against Russian aggressors and putting their lives on the line to defend their homes and citizens. I know that all of us, from the relative safety of this chamber, stand in solidarity with the women of Ukraine. As we have heard, however, standing in solidarity is not enough. It has been reported that the number of Ukrainians who have been allowed to come to the UK stands at just 50, a number that would not fill even half of the chamber. That is simply not good enough. Scottish Labour and I will support the Conservatives’ amendment, because it ensures that the Parliament recognises the situation facing women in Ukraine and across the world, but in doing so I make a plea across the chamber to my colleagues on the Conservative benches: please ask your colleagues to do more, as lives and women depend on it.

Just this morning it was reported that 286 Ukrainians hoping to come to the UK had been turned away at Calais and were told to go back to Brussels or Paris to apply, as there is no Home Office team in Calais. I again plead with Conservative colleagues to do what they can to encourage the Home Office to send a team to Calais. Life should not be made any harder for those refugees, many of whom are women, than it already has been. Conservative colleagues should do what they can to lobby those in power. They should make their concerns known and ask the Home Secretary to go further in offering safety to those who need it. We as women must do all that we can. We can do more and we must do more.

I want to talk about the impacts of the pandemic on women and about the difficulties that many women right here in Scotland have faced this past year. I will focus first on disabled women. The theme of this year’s international women’s day is break the bias. Let me be clear: we still have far more to do before we even begin to make a dent in the bias that disabled women face. For so many disabled women, life has been characterised by broken systems and endless misunderstandings about our experience and worth. That means that many of us do not get to live up to our full potential. Bias against our worth, our capability, our contribution, our hopes and dreams and our bodies has held us back. After decades of austerity, disabled women have found that our rights are so often ignored or are the first to go. Before Covid hit, disabled women were already some of the most disadvantaged people in the country. We are twice as likely not to be in employment, and the pandemic will no doubt have made that worse. When the going gets tough, it is usually disabled women who have to get going.

The disability pay gap, which stubbornly remains at 8.3 per cent, means that we effectively work for free for the last 57 days, or eight weeks, of the year. We are more likely to have mental ill health; we did not and do not get the social care and support that we need; and disabled women do not have their reproductive rights supported either.

I was part of an Engender project called our bodies, our rights—I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. We heard horrific stories. We heard about fears that children would be removed into care due to stigma and stereotyping; forced sterilisations and terminations; lack of care or support for our sexual health; failures of maternity services; pervasive violence; discrimination in accessing reproductive health services; barriers in accessing birth control and family planning; and disabled young women and girls being less likely to get sex and relationship education in schools, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation and lacking in sufficient information to make informed choices.

We also know that there is growing violence against disabled women. At the Social Justice and Social Security Committee last week, we were told that global rates of gender-based violence show that 90 per cent of women with learning disabilities have been subjected to sexual abuse. I could go on, but I am sure that members get the picture.

A society that has been largely designed without us has not served us well. We must crave more innovations and more equality, from the high street to the board room, and from the board room to the Parliament. If we are to face the challenges of today and create the world of tomorrow, we need those disabled women. For far too long, inequality has simply been the default, due to bias and because we have not been in the room. It is time that we fixed that by design. I will do all that I can from these benches to make sure that we do so.

Today is a celebration of women and I will take a moment to celebrate the incredible women who support me every single day of my life—my carers. Without them, I would not be able to sit here today and I thank them. However, we cannot celebrate carers—both paid and unpaid—without acknowledging the barriers that huge numbers of them face. Those carers are predominantly women—women who have been put at substantial risk, either as key workers or unpaid care givers. We know that inequalities in income, power and wealth hold women back and that addressing women's income matters. Women are more likely than men to be in poverty and to experience in-work poverty and they find it harder than men to escape poverty.

Women's work in sectors such as care, cleaning, hospitality and retail has long been undervalued, underpaid and underprotected. This

year, paid carers, most of whom are women, received just a 48 pence an hour increase on their wages. It fails to take account of the substantial risk that they put themselves at to continue to do their job and support all those who rely on them. That is why my party supports a wage of £12 an hour for carers.

Unpaid carers are not properly supported either. The pandemic has led to women doing more unpaid labour and being forced to carry more unpaid caring responsibilities, such as childcare and housework, than before. Women have been forced to perform more unpaid labour, with their collective lost earnings or productivity equating to more than £15 million a day in Scotland.

So far, the Government has not committed to a further doubling of the carers allowance supplement, which could help to address some of that injustice. Again, I make a plea to the Government to make that commitment in order to give unpaid carers certainty.

Young women have also faced incredibly detrimental impacts from the pandemic. Many of them work in sectors such as retail and hospitality, which were shut down entirely. Many of those women were struggling before the pandemic—two thirds of people who were earning less than the living wage were women. We have to fight for all women. Today, we must celebrate, but we must also recognise that things have gone backwards and we must all work together to put us back on track and move forward.

Women's inequality has been exacerbated in the pandemic, but if we put women at the heart of our recovery we can reverse that trend and, once again, make great strides. The innovation of women, of disabled women, black minority ethnic women and lesbians, bisexual and trans women—the resilience! We must fight through together and how we continue to campaign for our social justice never cease to amaze me. The graft of women this year should never be forgotten.

If we celebrate and reward the efforts of all women, a better world lies ahead. Do not just look in awe or admiration—although do that too, because women are pretty remarkable—but put us in the room in which things happen. I ask my males colleagues across the chamber, many of whom are fierce supporters of women and our rights, to please keep backing us and do what they can to help us to break down barriers. I am pleased to say that my party leader, Anas Sarwar, would do that tomorrow. He leads our work to deliver Milly's law, which will do much to ensure that, from one girl's story, other women and girls will get their justice too.

Sisters, let us do everything that we can to put our talent in the room in which things happen. I

believe that that is how we build a world free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination; a world that is diverse, equitable and inclusive; and a world in which difference is valued and celebrated. Together, we can do this. Together, we can all break the bias.

14:59

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): In last week's members' business debate on international women's day, I spoke of the situation in Ukraine and in Afghanistan, and the impact that conflict has on women. My thoughts and solidarity are very much with the people of Ukraine today. Let us also remember women and girls around the world who face conflict, injustice and poverty every day.

I also take this opportunity to thank Baroness Helena Kennedy QC for the work of the misogyny and criminal justice in Scotland working group and its published report. We will look at the report in much more detail, but I hope that we are able to end the abuses that degrade women's lives.

Today, I would like to focus on the issues that are facing women in modern Scotland, and on how we can break the bias to improve women's health, finances and representation in politics.

The stigma and lack of understanding surrounding women's reproductive health leaves millions of women suffering pain and shame every year. Biases that lead people to believe that debilitating period pain is normal or that there is something embarrassing about cervical screenings can also have long-term consequences.

Despite an estimated 1.5 million women in the United Kingdom being affected by endometriosis, too many are led to believe that the debilitating symptoms are something that they must just put up with. Since I started speaking out about endometriosis, I have heard from many women in Shetland about how it has impacted their lives, relationships, education and work. One woman told me that it took 15 years—15 years!—to get a diagnosis. It would be interesting to know whether a similar painful condition that affected as many men would take an average of eight and a half years to diagnose.

Misconceptions and misogyny need addressing. Medical staff need to learn how to listen to what women are saying when they describe what is happening to their body. Data from Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust reveal that one in three do not attend their cervical screening appointment when invited. Every year, 220,000 women and people with a cervix are told that they have cervical changes, and many more receive a diagnosis of human

papillomavirus. Those receiving the news are often confused, ashamed and scared.

Screening numbers have fallen across Scotland, which is likely due to the pandemic. It is really important that those who are eligible have the screening and keep it up to date. It must be scary to hear the news that there have been cervical cell changes, but support and treatment are available. We must break the bias that tells people that reproductive health is something that is not to be talked about. Screening saves lives. No barrier should prevent anyone from being proactive about their health, especially not the feeling of shame after diagnosis.

I turn to finances. We know that women are more likely to be paid less, to work in more insecure jobs and to take on the bigger share of caring—paid and unpaid—and domestic chores. Those inequalities have been exacerbated by policies that have had consequences that were either not foreseen or were ignored by those making them at the time.

I am a member of the cross-party group on women against state pension inequality. Changes that were made in 1995 later left many women facing a longer-than-anticipated wait to receive their state pension. Many were left unaware at the time of the initial announcements and the subsequent changes. Many found out only when they neared what they thought would be the end of their working life and were shocked to discover that they would not get their pension at 60 after all. It might have been the right thing to have the same state pension age for everyone in a modern economy, but some of the women affected did not have the same work opportunities that have been open to later generations.

We should not have a situation in which women are forced to choose between heating and eating because of when they were born. Women of pensionable age living alone are one of the demographics most at risk of fuel poverty, and the islands have some of the highest levels of fuel poverty in the country. We need a better understanding of the gender impacts of policies, so that such devastating negative impacts do not happen again.

It is a privilege to be one of the women elected to the Scottish Parliament and also to be Shetland's first female MSP. The 2021 election results mean that women now account for 45 per cent of MSPs, which is a record number. However, at local authority level, women account for just 29 per cent of elected officials.

I have spoken to women who say that they would not stand for elected office because of the toxic nature of social media. We must strive to have many more women from all parties elected.

What we wear, how we do our hair, how we look and how we sound are often commented on more than the ideas that we bring to debates. We need to break the bias against women candidates and politicians. Having more women in politics would bring wider understanding of society to our discussions and better representation of the people who put us here.

Finally, I thank the men who are in the chamber. I am sure that we will hear more about men's violence against women during the debate and it is only through men listening, learning and changing their behaviour that men's violence against women will be addressed. Scottish Liberal Democrats have been calling for the establishment of a commission to end gender-based violence. We need a more socially equal society to break the bias against women.

The Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:05

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): On this international women's day, I am extremely proud to stand here in the most representative Parliament that this country has ever seen. As a woman from a working class background, I never thought that I would be standing here. It is proof that we are moving in the right direction, but we have a long way to go.

It is right that recognition has already been given to the horrors that women are facing right now in Ukraine and I join others in emphasising my dismay over that. It has been heartbreaking to see the displacement of more than 1.5 million citizens, most of whom are women and children, and in terms of those who have been unwilling or unable to flee, we are hearing about allegations of rape, women giving birth in underground stations and newborns being treated in makeshift bomb shelters. The strength and bravery of those women cannot be overstated.

I welcome the First Minister's apology to the people who were convicted under the Witchcraft Act 1563. I am in the process of beginning a member's bill to pardon those victims, who were mostly women, and I am sure that it will go a long way in tackling bias and sending a message across the world that that is not acceptable.

Turning to the present day, I pay tribute to the contribution and sacrifices that women have made throughout the pandemic. Women have played a huge role in keeping society together during the toughest of times, undertaking the majority of front-line roles and taking on an increase in caring within the family setting. However, that has come at a cost. The UN Women organisation has estimated that the impact of the pandemic on

women's equality could mean a roll back of 25 years of progress on women's rights.

The majority of women are expected to be managers in our own homes, taking on the majority of caring responsibilities and everyday mundane tasks including cleaning and cooking, and the pandemic has served only to strengthen that expectation. A publication from Engender noted that if all that uncounted labour was recorded in national accounting, it would be worth an estimated £1.1 trillion, or around 56 per cent of gross domestic product.

New mothers have also missed out on a whole range of experiences with their little ones and, over the past two years, pregnant women have experienced pregnancies like no other, with limited visits from birthing partners, missed antenatal classes and face masks during birth. With a two-year-old daughter and a seven-month-old son, I have experienced some of that myself and I have heard at first hand, both through my personal relationships and from my constituents, how difficult mothers and pregnant women have found it. It is no wonder that mental health issues among women are soaring—an issue that I am confident that the Scottish Government is committed to improving.

As my colleagues have rightly highlighted, we have seen an increase in cases of domestic abuse during the pandemic. That was especially heightened during severe restrictions. Eradicating violence against women and girls is a priority for the Scottish Government. In our first 100 days in government, funding was directed specifically to rape crisis services, and the delivering equally safe fund will see funding go directly to front-line services and prevention. It is absolutely right that tackling violence against women is, and remains, a priority.

With all of those issues put upon us, it has been an extremely hard time for so many women and I pay tribute to each one who has given everything that they have during the pandemic.

I move on to this year's theme for international women's day: "break the bias". Structural barriers and prejudice continue to cause inequality in our society and that theme challenges each one of us to take action against prejudice whenever we see it. I believe that in Scotland we have come a long way with gender equality but, despite that, bias continues to surround our everyday lives, and breaking it can be difficult.

Stereotypes fuel misogyny and women should not have to act or behave in a certain way to conform to outdated stereotypes. Women face judgment, stigma and criticism for everything we do, everything we say or dare to speak about, the clothes we wear, how we style our hair, our

weight, our height and how we conduct ourselves on social media. We are expected to go above and beyond to help, and to keep a smile on our face while we are doing it.

We get judged if we choose a career over a family. Likewise, we get judged if we decide to start a family and, if we do, even more questions come.

How are we going to cope with work? Are we even going to bother with work? How do we raise our children? Are we going to bottle feed or breastfeed them? The list is exhausting, and it goes on and on.

So much more is expected of us women, and there are so many ways in which we are expected to behave. Whether someone is a young girl, a woman, a mother or grandmother, I have no doubt that they have faced that kind of judgment, or questioning along those lines. It is tiring. Please, can we just let women be, and stop scrutinising them in a way that few men would ever be subject to? From witnessing the women in my life, I have no doubt that the majority of us are smashing it, regardless of any negativity or perceived bias. However, it takes an emotional toll, and it is unjust that women should have to fight those battles daily.

Our Scottish Government is blazing a trail when it comes to fighting for equality for women but, as with most things in Scotland, we do so with one hand tied behind our back by Westminster, which reinforces gender stereotypes with abhorrent, misogynistic policies such as the disgusting rape clause, the cheated WASPIs and the British Prime Minister's refusal to apologise for writing in an article in *The Spectator* that the children of single mothers were

"ill-raised, ignorant, aggressive and illegitimate",

and for calling for action to

"restore women's desire to be married".

To the UK Prime Minister, and to any other misogynistic man in a position of power, I therefore say, as a young woman who was raised by a single mother, that we will not stop, we will not be quiet, and we are here to be heard.

I want my daughter to grow up in a world where she is free to do what she wants and to follow any path that she wants, without fear of judgment—a world where she does not have to walk down the street with her keys between her fingers, in the way that we all have in the past. Equally, I want my boy to grow up in a world where he is respectful to women and understands that we are all equal. We have made much progress here in Scotland, but, undoubtedly, we have such a long way to go to break the bias. Until the day when we

achieve true equality for women of all different backgrounds, we have much work to do.

15:12

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): I take the opportunity to celebrate some of the most influential and inspiring women who I know and call friends. In my role in the Parliament as shadow minister for public health and women's health, I particularly want to mention some trailblazing women who work in healthcare.

First is Dr Eimear O'Connell. Eimear is leading the way for women in dentistry. She was the first woman president of the Association of Dental Implantology, and she works hard to promote women in dentistry in Scotland, England and Wales. She was also the first female dentist in the UK to gain her implant diploma from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. She is a warm and reassuring dentist who builds excellent, long-term relationships with her patients—I should know, as I have been one of those since 2006.

In 2014, Eimear won a UK business award from Software of Excellence, as well as winning best overall practice in Scotland. In 2015, her practice won the award for best patient care.

I also acknowledge that her positivity has helped me in more ways than through dentistry. When things have been tough, Eimear found quiet and discreet ways to support me through them.

In 2019, the BBC selected 100 influential women from around the world, asking:

"what would the future look like if it were driven by women?"

The list of 100 women featured globally recognised names, including climate change activist Greta Thunberg and footballer Megan Rapinoe, but I was absolutely thrilled to see my friend Dr Sarah Martins Da Silva on that list. Sarah is a consultant gynaecologist and honorary senior lecturer in reproductive medicine at NHS Tayside and the University of Dundee. In 2019, Dr Da Silva featured in a BBC documentary on fertility issues and in vitro fertilisation.

What makes Sarah's approach to fertility different is that her work is running a translational research programme that is focused around male infertility, sperm biology and drug discovery. Why is it so important to recognise and note that on international women's day? I cannot express it better than Sarah did, when she said:

"I hope that we can harness science, technology, investment and innovation in male reproductive health to redress global inequalities and the current burden of fertility"

that women face.

I met both of those fabulous women while studying at the University of Edinburgh. However, it was not science and healthcare that brought us together; it was sport. We all met through Edinburgh University Women's Hockey Club. Sadly, sport is never given the focus that it deserves in the chamber despite the positive impact that it has on many lives. For me, it has provided unconditional friends for life.

The leadership shown by women in elite sport should also be recognised. As a child, I was a huge fan of Martina Navratilova—we did not have as many channels on the television, right enough. Navratilova is one of the best female tennis players in history. She is the only player to be ranked number 1 in singles and doubles for over 200 weeks. She won 18 grand slam singles titles, a record 31 major women's doubles titles and 10 major mixed doubles titles. She is also one of only three women to achieve a career grand slam in women's singles, doubles and mixed doubles, which consists of every senior grand slam title.

However, Navratilova's achievements did not stop on the tennis court. She came out as bisexual in 1981 and has been an activist for gay rights, along with animal rights and underprivileged children. In 2000, she was the recipient of the national equality award from the Human Rights Campaign, the US's largest gay and lesbian activist and lobbying group.

Closer to home, Sharron Davies set a record by swimming for the British national team at the age of 11. At age 13, Davies was selected to represent Great Britain at the 1976 summer Olympics in Montreal. In the 1980 Olympics, Davies took the silver medal in the 400m individual medley behind East German Petra Schneider, who later admitted that her victory was drug enhanced. By the time she retired in 1994, Davies had been a British champion on 22 occasions and broken 200 British swimming records and five world masters records.

Davies continues to highlight the need to protect the credibility of fair sport for biological females. The reason that Davies is so vocal on that issue is that she spent 20 years racing testosterone-fuelled East Germans who cheated a generation out of their rightful medals and she does not want that to happen again.

Like Martina Navratilova, many women find that their voices, views and opinions are being cancelled. For all that they have achieved in their chosen sport and for all that they continue to accomplish, they have earned the right to be listened to.

International women's day is celebrated annually on 8 March to commemorate the cultural, political, and socioeconomic achievements of women and I am delighted to have taken part in

the debate and raised all the amazing achievements of women across different fields and across the world.

15:18

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to speak in the debate and to stand with my colleagues as we celebrate the journeys and achievements of women all over the world on this day.

This time last year, there were no women of colour in the chamber. Today, we have two. I thank my colleagues for bringing that to everyone's attention—as if nobody had noticed—but, without diminishing our success, I say again that, in 2022, we have two. Members should let that sink in.

Although there has been progress and the Scottish Parliament has more women MSPs in this session than in any previous session, we share a collective responsibility to continue the trajectory towards equal representation for women and to “break the bias”. Despite the progress in recent decades, we have also witnessed sobering reminders that the fight for equality is far from over. The fact remains that, whether we are competing in the labour market, caring for loved ones or simply walking home, women face obstacles, discrimination and dangers that men do not.

We know that the pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities between men and women. Furthermore, research from Close the Gap last year showed that black and minority ethnic women face a combination of gendered and racial barriers that affect their ability to enter, progress in and stay in good-quality employment. According to Close the Gap's research, more than 50 per cent of workers in roles that the Scottish Government assessed as being at high risk of job disruption are women, and BAME women, particularly young BAME women, are more likely to experience loss of hours and loss of earnings, with almost three quarters reporting they had experienced racism, discrimination, racial prejudice and/or bias in the workplace.

It is important to understand and recognise the intersectionality of race and gender inequalities. Women face institutional and other prejudices, and it is clear that the experience of women of colour is even tougher and has additional layers. We talk about glass ceilings, but we should also talk about the glass walls and the glass floors.

One notable example can be found in education. In 2019, the National Union of Students reported that more than 80 per cent of white UK university students domiciled in the UK received a first or upper second-class degree compared to 70

per cent of black, Asian and minority ethnic students. When they were asked about possible contributory factors, students frequently cited the lack of role models and diversity among senior staff at their institutions.

In the same year, writer and activist Nicola Rollock interviewed 20 of the UK's total of 25 black female professors. Twenty five is a pitifully low number, which represents just 0.1 per cent of all professors in the UK. White men comprise 68 per cent of UK professors. In her interviews, she heard repeated descriptions of a culture of bullying, racial stereotyping and micro-aggressions in higher education.

Sadly, we are even seeing a disparity in the treatment of Ukrainian women of colour as they run for refuge.

Today, we renew our call on employers across all sectors, including our schools, colleges and universities, to be bolder and not to prop up ineffectual equality policies with box-ticking exercises. We call on employers to implement real change with measurable outcomes.

We must also hold people accountable within our own communities and among friends, and we ourselves should not be afraid of introspection—we must appreciate that we are not always free from bias.

On a national level, the Scottish Government has proven its commitment to eradicating racial and gender inequality through an extensive range of actions and proposals, including a new bill to incorporate into Scots law four United Nations human rights treaties, notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. That will help to advance economic, social and cultural rights. Fair work and gender pay gap action plans will also assist Scotland in achieving its ambition to be a fair work nation.

We welcome every centimetre and metre of progress—a modern reference, instead of a reference to inches and miles, which did not work—but we know that there is much more to do and that the road is long and winding. It is also exhausting. However, as we celebrate this international women's day, let us acknowledge the essential contributions of women and the importance of diversity, and let us recommit ourselves, in solidarity, to breaking the bias.

I will end with the words of one of my favourite poets, Maya Angelou. It is dedicated to all women: the women from our past, those in the present and those to come.

"Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.

When you see me passing,
It ought to make you proud ...

'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me."

That is all of us today.

15:24

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

The theme of international women's day this year is "break the bias". The very foundation of discrimination against women is a negative bias, whether in the workplace or the home, in design, in wider society or even in the health service. I will touch on some of the issues.

In a letter I received recently from the Lord Advocate, she told me that, at the end of March 2020, 2,978 summary trials were scheduled that involved domestic abuse-related offences. However, at the end of September 2021, 6,889 summary trials were scheduled that involved domestic abuse-related offences—an increase of 131 per cent. That is shocking. Just when we think that we have moved forward in dealing with violence against women, we appear to fall back even further.

The reason for my approach to the Lord Advocate was to push for an increase in virtual trials in which domestic abuse is involved. I understand that the virtual trials national project board presented its report to the cabinet secretary in January, and I wonder when we can expect a response to that report. Virtual trials are especially necessary in rural areas, where public transport is limited and the abuser and their ex-partner often use the same public transport to reach court, which is often some distance away. That is intimidating and can lead to a reluctance to give evidence.

In a report in 2019, Scottish Women's Aid stated that

"the Scottish Government needed to pay more attention to the experiences of women who live in rural and remote areas".

The report made a series of recommendations, including about ensuring

"that the safety of women and children is paramount when planning and promoting participation."

Women in the Highlands and Islands are particularly vulnerable due to close-knit communities, geographical isolation and distance from services. That is why I pushed for the roll-out of domestic abuse courts throughout Scotland. I am now asking that they be virtual.

Another aspect of violence against women is commercial sexual exploitation. For decades, we

have been aware of the damage that commercial sexual exploitation causes, yet it takes place unchecked—indeed, it is growing throughout Scotland. We hear of men offering to be sugar daddies in return for sex, to fund young women through university. We hear of men offering accommodation in return for sex. That is all exploitation and violence against women. Way back in 2009, a Public Health Scotland report on commercial sexual exploitation stated:

“The key risk factor for being abused through commercial sexual exploitation is being female.”

Nothing has changed since then.

The cross-party group on commercial sexual exploitation carried out an inquiry into websites that are used to sell sex. It was clear to us that those websites were not only profiting from sexual exploitation and trafficking but were encouraging it. They offered account managers to those who placed a large number of adverts. They offered deals that involved changing where a woman was based, with promotions such as “on tour”, which is trafficking by any other name.

The same Public Health Scotland report in 2009 talked about prostitution, pornography and other involvement in the sex industry, and it found

“that the exploitation of women through these forms of ‘entertainment’ legitimises negative attitudes towards women and is inextricably linked to gender inequality and sexual violence.”

Nonetheless, we know that many young people get their sex education from that same pornography, hence the changing attitudes that have led to an increase in sexual violence.

I will touch quickly on health services and their bias against women. Let us take, for example, maternity services throughout my region. Communities in both Caithness and Moray have campaigns to reinstate local maternity services. If men gave birth, would they be expected to travel 100 miles in an ambulance, in labour? I really do not think so.

Beatrice Wishart talked about harrowing experiences of endometriosis and the length of time that women wait for a diagnosis of the condition. Women have been told that it is all in their heads. They have been ignored and belittled and have had their health concerns ignored. Engender’s briefing tells us that

“For many women pain, especially that associated with gynaecology, is normalised or dismissed in interactions with healthcare professionals.”

We often hear that women experience heart attacks differently from men and that they are less likely to ask for help and are therefore more likely to die. I look forward to hearing more about the Scottish Government’s commitment to establish

an institute for women’s health, as was promised in its 2021 manifesto.

I also look forward to the day when, in an international women’s day debate, I can stand here and simply celebrate women and our equality. However, I sometimes lose heart.

Last year, this Parliament protected many groups of people from hate crime. Labour members believe that women should have been protected, too. That stance is borne out today by Baroness Kennedy’s report, which tells us that women and girls should be protected from hate crime. A year has already passed and women and girls still have to wait for new legislation to get that protection. Again, women are being left behind. How much longer will women have to wait to be equal in every respect?

15:31

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): What is it to be a woman? It is a risky business. So many harrowing examples of why that is have already been provided by colleagues in the debate. I could list all the negative aspects of being a woman in Scotland, and I have done so many times before. I spoke last week on bias and economic disparity, in a members’ business debate on international women’s day that was led by Michelle Thomson.

Today, I will check my privilege and use it, because there are women in the world who are silenced and who, due to decisions that are taken and actions that are made by powerful men, are bearing the brunt of the contempt, dismissal, hatred and fear of the female that endangers their lives and erases them from their societies. What is happening to those women around the world is a problem for us all.

Last year, the women of Afghanistan had their rights stripped from them wholesale. The voices of condemnation of women around the world were not enough to convince leaders in the west not to remove international troops, opening the door to the Taliban, who removed those women’s rights, as we knew they would. While heaven and earth were moved to rescue dogs from Afghanistan, Afghan women were plunged back into the dark old days, after 20 years of having the rights and freedoms that we enjoy here.

The bias that comes from looking at the world through a male lens leads to women being let down. The women of Afghanistan have been let down, as they and we knew that they would be. Taliban leaders are currently implementing a raft of discriminatory measures to, in effect, erase women’s participation in civic life. Women’s refuges are being closed, which is putting women at risk of death at the hands of their abusers. It

has been more than 150 days since girls over the age of 12 were allowed to go to school. To keep sanctions at bay, the Taliban have said that they are committed to reopening all girls' education institutions by the end of March. As we near that deadline, we must not be distracted by other world events—the Taliban must know that the world is watching.

In January, UN-appointed experts highlighted the fact that, far from the Taliban keeping their promises in relation to women's rights, they are, as many people predicted and feared,

“barring women from returning to their jobs, requiring a male relative to accompany them in public spaces, prohibiting women from using public transport on their own, as well as imposing a strict dress code on women and girls.”

The UN has called it

“a collective punishment of women and girls, grounded on gender-based bias and harmful practices.”

Those Afghan women who are brave enough to demand their rights are in grave danger. On 16 January, some Afghan women marched near Kabul University to demand the right to return to work or to continue their education. Footage of the march shows Taliban fighters pointing their firearms at the women and calling them “puppets of the west”. Three days later, one of the attendees—a 25-year-old journalist called Tamana Zaryabi Paryani—put out a frantic livestream message, saying that the Taliban were at the front door of the flat that she shares with her three sisters. The four Paryani sisters, including the youngest, who is just 13, were missing until 13 February, when the UN confirmed that they had been released by the de facto authorities.

Another woman who attended the march, Parawana Ibrahimkhel, went missing, too. She was released two days earlier, on 11 February. However, for some time, no one knew what had happened to the women. Their detention speaks to the risks that women in countries all over the world are having to take, day after day, to ensure that their voices are heard.

Other marches are happening in Afghanistan, but they are bigger and more tolerated by the Taliban. They are full of men condemning the women who marched for their rights. These men hold up pictures of the women marchers with their images crossed out in red ink. There are slogans saying that the protesters were not “representatives of chaste Afghan women” and demands that they “should respect their worth”. Meanwhile, the women on those placards are in hiding, fearing for their lives.

Today, our eyes are rightly on Ukraine, and I urge anyone who has not already watched Michelle Thomson's really powerful speech from

last Thursday to do so. She talked about how the Russian invasion is affecting the women of Ukraine in particular. The people who are fleeing Afghanistan to safety are more likely to be men and boys, because they have the money to leave. The women do not. In Ukraine, it is the women and their children who are leaving the country in their millions. We have a duty, as a democratic country, to support them until they can return to their own country, which will hopefully be a preserved independent and democratic one. I also send my solidarity to the brave Russian women who are putting their safety at risk by protesting against Putin's invasion.

Both situations have toxic masculinity at their core, with the worst of humanity made heads of state. It was ever thus. What is more, some of those leaders in the west who claim to uphold the rights of women make decisions that enable their erosion in other countries. Tackling the suffering of women is not a high enough priority when it comes to international relations. Those who left the women of Afghanistan high and dry, fearing for their rights and lives, must take responsibility and threaten sanctions if those rights are removed.

Over here, in the UK, we should not just be celebrating international women's day with debates and banners, nice as that is. We should be opening our borders to Ukrainian women and children now. We need action to help women and action to uphold their rights. Anything less is virtue signalling.

15:37

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland)
(Green): Presiding Officer,

“Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience. In our society we make much of love and say little about fear. Yet we are all terribly afraid most of the time. As a culture we are obsessed with the notion of safety. Yet we do not question why we live in states of extreme anxiety and dread. Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. When we choose to love, we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other.”

Those are the words of Gloria Jean Watkins—better known to us by her pen name, bell hooks—who sadly died in December last year. Her fine words provide us with an important reminder of how the structures that we live within are used to constrain, oppress and dominate.

Today is international women's day and, perhaps more than ever, I would like to associate myself with the comments of the First Minister and many others about standing in solidarity, love and peace with the women and girls in Ukraine and

those who have already fled their country. We stand in solidarity, love and peace, too, with the women and girls in Belarus, in Russia and elsewhere who have stood up, and continue to stand up, to oppressive regimes and institutionalised violence. War is an extreme form of the domination and oppression that society's patriarchal system relies upon and sustains.

At its inception 111 years ago, international women's day was international working women's day—a socialist holiday that was established by the Socialist International. It is now recognised by the United Nations and celebrated around the world—in some countries as a holiday—to mark women's contributions to society, because women have contributed and will continue to contribute to every aspect of our society and our lives. Others have spoken very eloquently about many of the different types of contributions that are made daily by women.

Today, outside the Parliament building, women have come together for a climate vigil and rally. They have gathered together because women bear the brunt of the weight of the world's climate inaction. Incidentally, as I was talking to some of the women at lunch time, two men yelled from their vehicle, "Get back into the kitchen."

Part of that vigil marks women who have been murdered for their community activism. Blanca Jeannette Kawas Fernández was killed for protecting the land that her community relied on. Margarita Murillo was murdered for protecting lands and rivers. Fikile Ntshangase was murdered for protesting against coal mining destroying her community's environment. María Enriqueta Matute was killed for campaigning against logging and mining. Many more have been murdered. Today, we remember them all, and we acknowledge all those whose names we do not know.

This year, we are focusing on the theme of "break the bias" because bias—conscious and unconscious—is deeply rooted in our patriarchal society. It is systemic and deeply ingrained in each and every one of us. How many of us choose to surround ourselves with people who are just like us? How many of us judge others negatively because we have heard something unpleasant about them? How many of us value the opinion of someone more because of their age or skin colour? How many of us ignore something that a woman says only to acknowledge it when it is repeated by a man?

All of us must confront our biases. That requires active thought to challenge and break down. We must recognise how one bias can be compounded by another. Intersections of difference make for a very complex landscape of oppressions and inequalities. I thank Engender in particular for the detailed briefing that it sent for this debate, in

which it clearly outlined the overlapping intersections that compound the inequalities that many women in Scotland and around the world experience on a daily basis.

We women know the consequences of those biases. We women live the consequences of those biases every day. We women die because of the consequences of those biases.

It is not for us women to address those biases alone. Everyone in the chamber and everyone in every workplace, community and home across Scotland has a responsibility to act, to change, and to challenge themselves and others to be better.

There remains a wide chasm between the aspirations that we have heard for decades about the eradication of biases that women face and the reality that affects women and girls around the world. I thank the First Minister and others for acknowledging the work and recommendations of the misogyny and criminal justice in Scotland working group. We must now act. We need real gender mainstreaming and genuine engagement with, and realisation of, the rights held within the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, as well as engagement with, and realisation of, the rights of other minority groups. Equality is for everyone.

I hope that, on this day next year, we will all be here to say that we are much further along in our struggle for a different kind of culture—one where we have broken the bias.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): I call Paul McLennan, who will be followed by Oliver Mundell.

15:43

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in this debate, Presiding Officer.

On Saturday, I attended the international women's day event in the Parliament. Women from throughout Scotland sat in these seats and talked about issues that women face in our nation. That was great to see. There were lots of inspirational speeches on the day, and it was an opportunity to meet various groups and discuss the work that they do. It was the first time that I met the force of nature that is called Agnes Tolmie, who is the chair of the Scottish Women's Convention and a very inspiring and motivating woman. I am sure that I will hear from her again. The message that I took loud and clear from the event was that gender inequality not only makes our society poorer in equality terms but impacts on our ability to grow our economy. Gender inequality is economic inequality.

Like Kaukab Stewart, I will quote Maya Angelou. She said in "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings":

"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."

Too many women in our society have an untold story inside them that they want to tell and share, to highlight what they can do. Our job as parliamentarians is to break the bias and give equal opportunities to women.

In Scotland, we are making progress, but much work needs to be done. In 2018, the full-time equivalent employment rate for women was 42 per cent, compared with 58 per cent for men. Eighty-five per cent of people aged 16 to 64 who were inactive due to caring were women; men made up the remaining 15 per cent. Eight per cent of women in employment aged 16-plus were self-employed, compared with 16 per cent of men. The median hourly earnings were £2 less for women than they were for men.

Last year, the Scottish Women's Convention highlighted some key issues in its manifesto asks document, "Scottish Parliament Elections 2021: What Women Want". I will touch on some of those, because it is important that we remember them.

On housing, the SWC called for

"An increase in funding for women to access help for housing costs",

including as much flexibility as possible around

"the Scottish Welfare Fund and Discretionary Housing Payments."

It also highlighted that,

"Ensuring safe accommodation for women that accounts for their unique personal experiences is of the utmost priority."

I saw that when I met Women's Aid East and Midlothian. On childcare, the SWC called for

"A commitment to high-quality working conditions for staff within the childcare sector, including working benefits",

and for

"adaptability and flexibility for childcare".

The importance of those issues came through strongly in the forum on Saturday. On social security, the SWC highlighted the need for

"Placing emphasis on the need for greater food security for many families living in poverty".

That is even more important than ever now, as people face a choice between whether to heat or eat. The SWC also called for

"a commitment to universal strategies such as free school meals",

which needs to continue. It went on to highlight that we need to ensure

"funding for advocacy organisations to ensure women are aware of their rights around the social security appeals process and other financial issues."

On health, Scotland's "Women's Health Plan: A plan for 2021-2024" is very welcome, but the SWC points out that we need to encourage

"uptake and recruitment of Community Link Workers."

We also need to grow the Scottish prescribing network, which is key to

"Increasing the use of community hubs in less populated areas where women can go to access information and support around health."

On employability, the SWC highlights that we need

"A commitment to work with businesses and trade unions to further promote the real living wage across all sectors",

with

"Designated return to work and retraining programmes that account for all age groups, including older women and digital skills abilities."

Secondly, I want to talk about what we men need to do more of in tackling violence against women, because we are not doing enough. We need to lead and drive change, not only in this place but in society in general. We need to challenge misogyny every single time we hear it, and we need to take women's safety concerns even more seriously. The only way to change that is by changing men's behaviour.

Next week, I am hosting a round-table session, and I have invited MSPs to discuss that issue with Engender, Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre, Scottish Women's Aid, Zero Tolerance, White Ribbon Scotland and others. As of today, more than 40 MSPs have accepted the invitation.

Graham Goulden, formerly of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow, has called on us men to define violence in a way that would help us, individually, to prevent it. I have mentioned that in the chamber previously, and I mention it again, because it is important. In a blog for the "Don't be that guy" campaign, he said:

"When I see the term violence, I look at it as more an attitude, a behaviour, rather than a physical act. When we do this we can start to address behaviours and attitudes that can, if unchallenged, lead to other acts of violence like murder, sexual assault and rape."

He went on to say:

"When we don't focus on these behaviours, when we remain silent about what we see and hear, we give permission for abuse and violence to take place."

The struggle for women to achieve gender equality is for every single one of us to take part in. As men, we have had privilege for far too long.

I will close with a quote from an amazing woman, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who said:

“For both men and women the first step in getting power is to become visible to others, and then to put on an impressive show ... As women achieve power, the barriers will fall. As society sees what women can do, as women see what women can do, there will be more women out there doing things, and we'll all be better off for it.”

Let us all ensure that we work together to achieve that goal for the women of Scotland and worldwide.

15:48

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I have contributed to the international women's day debate a number of times since I was first elected to the Parliament. That always strikes me as a little bit odd, when I hear the many powerful voices from women on all sides of the chamber—a number of voices that has grown again—and hear them speak directly of their lived experience.

I can contribute to the debate as a father, a husband and an MSP, but I am conscious that, in doing so, my voice is heard while my wife and daughters remain at home. Too often in our society, it is still the voices and perspectives of men that are heard, even when they are talking about issues that affect women. That seems almost as if it happens by accident, until you realise that it is no accident at all. That is why we still need to break the bias.

Gillian Martin: Does the member appreciate that, when a man stands up to talk about women's rights, that is greatly appreciated by women across the country?

Oliver Mundell: I take that point. There is always a delicate balance to strike. We must ensure that we hear women's voices, but I think that men—as Paul McLennan powerfully said—have an important role to play, particularly when it comes to influencing the decisions of other men in society and calling out some of the appalling acts that we still see.

One thing that saddens me is that, when we talk about women here in Scotland and around the world, we realise that progress on establishing even the most basic of rights is painfully slow. As Maggie Chapman and Gillian Martin pointed out, being a woman is a risky business that still results in many women ending up dead as a result of standing up for basic rights or, in some cases, just for existing. That is wrong. It shames our society.

Every time we discuss this subject, we hear countless examples of women being pushed into secondary roles—women who, as we have heard many times in this debate, are expected to play a merely domestic role or who are not seen in the same way as men. That came home to me again as I listened to Michelle Thomson's speech last week, and my colleague Tess White's contribution

today, about the challenges that women face during wartime. We all fall into the lazy habit of watching television and thinking that it is men who are at the front and who face the brunt of conflict, but we do not have to look far or try hard to see the harms that are inflicted on women, many of which remain with them long after the conflict is over.

As we take part in the debate, war has moved closer to our shores. As Gillian Martin and others have said, it is not a new issue. Women around the world have always faced war. For many, there is no escape, and our words of solidarity alone are not enough.

In last week's members' business debate on the subject, my colleague Pam Gosal gave a personal account of some of the barriers that she had faced in getting into this place. That is something that I admire about Pam in particular, and about all the women in this Parliament: they are not wasting the opportunity to help others to follow them. It is no coincidence that, with each new Parliament, we hear new voices. We must work harder to ensure that everyone feels safe to participate in our politics.

In the time that I have left, I will touch on something personal. Although I cannot speak as a woman, I do not want to miss the opportunity to highlight some concerns that I have seen for myself. They might not fit neatly with this year's theme or with my party's amendment, but it is important that they are heard.

Natalie Don has already touched on one of the issues. I previously mentioned it during a debate on whole-family support and have asked questions about the issue throughout the pandemic. It is an issue that I feel very uncomfortable about: the support that was given to expectant and new mums during the worst of Covid.

I have seen how tough this time has been for my own family, and that has also come through from my inbox. Too often, the rules and guidance that we in this chamber have sought to impose for public health reasons have left all parents and carers, but particularly women, to struggle without a support network. In many cases, they have been separated from their families and left without access to the medical support that they would have had in the past. At times, it seemed that, in trying to do something good, we lost the balance between protecting physical health and protecting mental health.

There is a group of women out there who got no face-to-face maternity classes. Others got no support at appointments or scans. Some were left to give birth, wearing a face mask and without anyone there to help and support them. We were able largely to dodge those issues for the birth of

our second child, but I am painfully aware of the impact that this had, and continues to have, on others.

As with so many caring and other family and domestic responsibilities, the physical and emotional burden throughout the pandemic has fallen disproportionately on women. I remain concerned that we sometimes see such decisions as being somehow less important or that we take it for granted that there will be no real pushback. We must do better on that in the future.

I was going to touch on another issue, but I am out of time, and it has been covered in part.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Mundell, we have a little time in hand and you have taken an intervention, so I will allow you time if you want to mention an issue briefly.

Oliver Mundell: That is kind, Presiding Officer.

Rhoda Grant touched on the additional challenges that women face in more rural and remote parts of our country. In my time as an MSP, that has come up again and again. In large parts of the country, we too often make provision only for telephone or other remote offerings. In their time of crisis, many women who live in rural communities are asked to travel disproportionate and excessive distances to receive medical treatment, counselling and other expert advice services. That can be impossible because of the cost, caring responsibilities, unsupportive partners or family influences.

There is no point in living in a country that claims to stand for equality when equality exists only for those who live in certain postcodes. I ask all who make decisions, and particularly the Scottish Government, to keep it at the forefront of their minds that we cannot move forward and break the bias if we are not willing to challenge issues that remain in our own society.

15:56

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I acknowledge the work of women's groups and communities across Scotland and the world to tackle women's inequality. The work that they do is important, often unpaid or underpaid and, sadly, frequently undervalued by some, but it makes a difference and is in many cases life saving. Thank you, sisters.

I especially mention North Ayrshire Women's Aid and the North Ayrshire violence against women partnership, which will gather with the wider community for a reclaim the night march in Irvine this evening. I am sorry that I cannot join them.

Our debate takes place against a background of conflict and bloodshed around the world. We know that women and girls are disproportionately affected by war. Given this year's focus on bias, it is worth reflecting a little on our collective response, on the rhetoric and action of Governments and Parliaments and on media coverage in regard to global conflicts and injustice.

In Afghanistan, there remains a devastating humanitarian and economic crisis. More than half the population is suffering extreme levels of hunger, and the UN has stated that an increase in child labour, child marriage and the sale of children has been observed. As Gillian Martin laid out eloquently, for Afghan women and girls, the de facto authorities have taken actions to curtail fundamental rights and freedoms. Women have been excluded from the workplace, and limitations on freedom of movement are negatively impacting other aspects of their lives, such as access to health services.

I do not think that war can be anything other than grotesque and unfair but in Yemen, for nearly seven years, a grossly asymmetrical war has seen Saudi bombs pummelling the country, sinking it into widespread famine and pushing it to the cusp of collapse. Instead of hearing widespread condemnation, Yemeni women who are struggling for their survival have heard very little from the rest of the world. That war has caused an estimated 233,000 deaths, including 131,000 from indirect causes such as a lack of food, of health services and of infrastructure because of a Saudi-led blockade.

In Palestine, ordinary Palestinian women and their families who are resisting state seizure of their homes in Sheikh Jarrah and other occupied territories are conflated with armed militants, which means that they are labelled and treated as terrorists. The recurrent killing of civilians in Gaza by Israeli air strikes is defended with the same excuse as Putin's propaganda has adapted for Ukraine's invasion—that women and children are being used as human shields, which justifies striking civilian targets. A shameful lie is just that, no matter who is telling it.

Those global events can feel entirely overwhelming when the Parliament has no powers over foreign affairs or immigration, but we are not powerless. As a nation, could Scotland direct resource to one of the countries that are doing the humane thing and opening their borders to provide sanctuary? Europe's poorest country, Moldova, now has the largest proportion of refugees of any nation. Tens of thousands of people fleeing the Russian invasion have crossed its border from Ukraine, according to the country's Prime Minister. As of Monday, of the 250,000 Ukrainians who had

crossed the border since the war began, 120,000 have remained in Moldova.

Although our Parliament in Scotland does not yet have the power do something about the UK Government's pitiful response to the refugee crisis, we can raise our voices and say that Scotland stands ready to accept those who are fleeing conflict. I am very grateful that our First Minister and her Government do just that. Refugees are welcome here.

We must maintain pressure on the UK Government to step up and do the right thing. I saw a clip yesterday of the Home Secretary seeming to say that the reason for not letting folk in was that there were trafficking gangs operating in Calais. Yes, Home Secretary, there are and there will be—and the direction of travel of your Government, with the Nationality and Borders Bill, plays right into their hands. Pushing displaced, traumatised women to the edges of society makes them even more vulnerable to traffickers—something that, according to Maria, a Ukrainian feminist activist, is already happening. In an interview with Julie Bindel that was published this morning, she speaks of

“Organised gangs ... trying to abduct young women on the Ukrainian Polish border”

and of girls being abducted by pimps from German refugee camps.

Sex trafficking is of course most prevalent in nations with legalised prostitution regimes. That is another thing that we can do right now: Scotland can ensure that there is no market here for the criminal gangs and sex traffickers to profit from by getting on with the job of adopting laws against sexual exploitation that are fit for the 21st century, making it a criminal offence to enable or profit from the prostitution of another person, tackling and ending male demand by criminalising paying for sex, and decriminalising and supporting victims of sexual exploitation.

With no home, no money, no job, no resources and a very limited legal framework protecting them, those displaced women are the most vulnerable in the world. From our position of safety here, we owe it to them, as well as to all the women and girls who are at risk of harm here, to take every action that we can and to use every power that we have to make the changes that are needed.

16:02

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): How fortunate I am today to stand in the chamber for the third time to address international women's day. The first time was for a members' business debate that was led by Michelle Thomson and the

second was on Saturday, when many diverse women came together here.

This is a subject that I am extremely passionate about in my capacity as a mentor for women, as a politician and as a volunteer for women's organisations. I recognise that a major glass ceiling was shattered in the Scottish Parliament in May 2021, with Pam Duncan-Glancy, Kaukab Stewart and me being elected to a Parliament with 45 per cent women. Although that is a great achievement—and we celebrate it today—there is still much to be done. It is just not good enough.

Sadly, this international women's day takes place against a backdrop of conflict and bloodshed in Ukraine. When the world descends into chaos, women's rights are disregarded. Far too often, women are deserted or become targets of sexual violence. Progress is made, but conflict emerges and women are again robbed of their education, their liberties and their safety.

Just last year, I stood here to address 20 years of progress in Afghanistan, which had been torn apart, with women forced to give up their rights. Today, I stand here again with a heavy heart as we think of women in Ukraine: those women who have been displaced, those women who have stayed behind and those women and girls who now face an uncertain and daunting future. Until 2016, women in Ukraine could not officially join the military, but today they make up 10 per cent of Ukraine's military, with many more staying behind to fight for their country. I salute their bravery and wish them all safety.

The theme of this year's international women's day is “break the bias”. The problem with bias is that it is deep rooted in traditional stereotypes that continue to inhibit the progress of women and women's rights. Bias has a multitude of outcomes, so it is right that we do not look at international women's day as an event in isolation but look at it in concurrence with other events.

This week is also “no more” week—a campaign to say “no more” to domestic violence and abuse. The pandemic saw many women being trapped with abusers due to an increased reliance on a partner's income, with some struggling to access support services due to entrapment, a lack of faith in the system or a multitude of other reasons. Today is an opportunity to address many of the root causes.

Domestic abuse is a vicious circle and, sadly, it is worsened by many of the biases that we are discussing today. We should all keep in mind that by eliminating biases in the workplace and barriers to education, we can, in turn, eliminate inequality.

During the pandemic, women—particularly BAME women, disabled women and lone mothers—were disproportionately affected. That

influenced financial insecurity, isolation and mental ill health. The striking commonality among those women is that they simply felt misunderstood by mainstream services due to either cultural barriers, accessibility or other differences.

It is imperative that public boards and decision making are representative of women and the subsequent intersectional groups. How can we expect policy and services to reflect the needs of women if the people who make the policy do not understand the plight of those women? We cannot continue to take a one-size-fits-all approach to women; it is clear that it does not work.

I cannot emphasise enough that education is of paramount importance to women and girls globally. Education encourages independent thinking, is a key tool in women's economic empowerment and is of the utmost importance to women's future progress.

This week is apprenticeship week, and the Scottish Conservatives rightly recognise the importance of apprenticeships and the role that they will play in our economic recovery and our future economy. However, the gender gap continues to grow in modern apprenticeship starts. Companies such as Scottish Power recognise the need for female apprentices and the benefits that they bring. As a result, they have altered entry requirements to suit female subject choice. It is such decision making that will encourage women to be part of the technological evolution and the future job market.

I will repeat three key points. First, education is paramount. Female education is imperative to our future economy, the continued advancement of women and the economic empowerment and independence of women. Secondly, if we are truly to see a change in the support of policies that affect women, we must advocate for more women on public boards, in leadership roles and in policy making. Last, but not least, if we are to truly progress, we must not treat international women's day in isolation—women's rights and progress must be continuously in our line of vision.

I will leave members with a quote from Mother Teresa:

"I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples".

16:09

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): Over the past few horrific weeks, we have witnessed dreadful images of women, young and old, carrying their few possessions, some pushing baby buggies, through the ruins of Ukraine to some kind of sanctuary. That reminds us of

women's resilience and determination in the worst of circumstances.

Although what I will describe is by no means on the same scale, I hope to illustrate how far we, as women, have come over the short period of three generations in my family, through the resilience and determination of my grandmother and mother. However, of course, there is still a long road ahead in addressing bias not only in Scotland but across the globe.

The first member of my family whom I will mention is Margaret Grahame—my paternal grandmother—who was born in 1877. The daughter of a shepherd, her childhood was peripatetic because her father had to move for work. Her education would have been sparse and disrupted. She left school at 14 and went straight into service as a lady's maid. A trait that she kept throughout all her long life was to favour doilies, cake stands and cups and saucers from her press. She never had a mug in the house in all the time that I knew her.

There is a picture of my grandmother in her Edwardian dress with bustle and hair piled high. She was tall for her generation, and was a strong and determined woman. Having received a sum as compensation for her heart condition, she put down, with her husband Yade, a deposit on 305 Easter Road, Leith, where she lived until her death. Although she had been diagnosed with that heart condition, she fooled everybody and lived to 93.

She sent her four children, including a daughter, to the then fee-paying Leith academy. Somehow, that shepherd's daughter managed the finances and saw education—this has been referred to by other members—as the route to improvement, as it is to this day. Despite that, her advice to me as a teenager was to become a clerkess and to marry early. I resisted the latter until my mid-20s, which was unusual for the time.

However, my grandmother's advice about education stayed with me and was reinforced by my father, who never discriminated between boys and girls. I became the first girl in my road in the housing scheme to stay at school beyond 15, and was the first to go to university.

Another Margaret Grahame—my mother—had an even tougher life. Born in 1922, her father was a miner. Her mother died at the birth of her baby brother Anthony, when Margaret was only 15 months old. When she was six, her father died—he succumbed to a head injury that he sustained when a pit prop fell on him. On the very day of her father's funeral, she was—this is almost Dickensian—forcibly taken by strangers, kicking and screaming, along with her young brother, to an orphanage. She was separated from her

brother on the following day. My mother spent months in an orphanage, until finally becoming a ward of court and being placed, with her brother, in the care of an aunt. Those were bad years of real poverty—and tragedy; her brother Anthony, to whom she was very close, died of meningitis at just 11 years old.

At 14, Margaret—or Margie as she was known—had, like my grandmother before her, a live-in job at a vicarage, which paid four shillings weekly. Rebellious even at that age, she refused to wear the servile grey suit as ordered by the vicar's wife and quit the job. She progressed to an enamel works at Burton upon Trent for 6 shillings a week. From there, she went to work in a factory in Church Gresley for 7 shillings and sixpence a week.

In 1940, my mother was making de-icers for war planes at the British Tyre & Rubber Co Limited, before she volunteered for the women's land army. In March 1942, she met my father. The rest is history; that is why I am here. The war changed everything for her. Being part of what became a large extended family meant everything to her, having been deprived of that in her own life.

Those trials, sorrows and incredible hardships, including poverty, that my mother endured during her formative years, became the foundation of her indomitable spirit and of her exceptional qualities of compassion for and understanding of anyone who was troubled—particularly children and young adults. Principled to breaking point, she was fearless in defending the underdogs and attacking injustices. As I have grown older, I recognise how much influence she has had on my values.

I left school before I was 17 but—remembering the value of education—with highers in my back pocket. I first approached Ferranti, which was a major electronics company in Edinburgh at the time, to get a job, because I had science and maths qualifications. On the factory tour, I met a woman who was working in the research department. She told me that there was no future for women at Ferranti. I took her advice.

Unfortunately, I then went for a clerkess job, as my granny had suggested to me all those years previously. At that company, I saw young men being promoted over bright and able women. I packed in the job and went to university.

Why do I tell members this? The women in my family and life played fundamental parts in taking Christine Grahame from her predetermined biased destiny—leave school at 15, get engaged at 18, get married at 20 and have her first child at 22—to seeing herself as an individual who had the courage to aim beyond that clerkess job and early marriage. Those two Margarets gave me that determination. We, as individual women and men

in Parliament, can give other young girls that determination and self-confidence.

16:15

Foysoil Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab): I declare an interest as chair of Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the chamber on international women's day. Scottish Labour supports the motion and the amendment. As other members are, I am shocked by the scenes of families being torn apart by the war on Ukraine and of women continuing to care for their children and elderly relatives in unimaginable conditions. Women there are, as they are in every other conflict, being exposed to rape, sexual abuse and male violence simply because they are women. In situations of war, women must be placed at the heart of the peace process and at the centre of recovery. That must be one of our messages on international women's day.

In Scotland, each year the Parliament provides a focus for members to celebrate women's achievements in every sphere of life. For example, members have supported me in a motion commending Angela Moohan and the Larder West Lothian. The project provides high-quality training and dignified food provision. Angela has now made it into the NatWest WISE—women in social enterprise—2022 top 100 list. She is only one example among many inspirational stories. The pandemic has shown the strength of so many women who have been caring for their communities and families throughout it.

All political parties have made promises that there should be no return to the old inequalities, as we come out of the pandemic, but we must recognise that the evidence is that we are not going in that direction. Yesterday, for example, Women in Sport published a report, "Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Building Strong Foundations for their Futures". It caught my attention because I am concerned by the decline in sporting activity during the pandemic, which has led to increased isolation and mental health problems for young people, as community and sports facilities were closed.

The report shows that, by the time they reach secondary school, girls drop out of active participation in sport at nearly twice the rate that teenage boys drop out. Citing reasons including loss of confidence, worry about body image and increased pressure from gender stereotyping, those girls are missing out on so much. It is on all of us to address that.

Scottish Labour is committed to seeing more women and girls living active lives and participating in sport at all levels. We must

encourage participation by women from various religions and diverse minority communities, in particular, through provision of single-sex opportunities. We must also create community spaces that are welcoming and safe places in which women can exercise.

The remit and membership of the Scottish Government women in sport advisory board is under review as we learn from the pandemic. I ask that the “Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls” report be considered by the advisory board and that priority be given to addressing the issues that have resulted in girls and young women pulling away from sport and outdoor activities.

I hope that the specific needs of women and girls from ethnic minority communities can be addressed. Investing in the next generation means investing now in girls and young women, and supporting them to lead healthy and active lives.

I pay tribute to the many smaller organisations that work for and with women in our black and ethnic minority communities and in our various cultures. Those organisations include Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council, Saheliya, Networking Key Services, Milan Senior Welfare Organisation and Multi-Cultural Family Base. There are many others that work with and support women in Edinburgh—for example, Action for Children’s heritage and inclusion project, which seeks to end isolation among teenage girls, and Intercultural Youth Scotland.

We recognise that the contribution that is made by many women in our communities is so often in addition to the commitment that they already invest in their homes and families. Parliament must find a way to ensure that their knowledge and experience inform our legislation and policy making.

I also pay tribute to individuals including Mrs Saroj Lal, Mrs Shamshad Rahim, Mrs Shaheen Unis, Mrs Rohini Sharma Joshi and, of course, my two colleagues Pam Gosal and Kaukab Stewart, for making a difference in the black and ethnic minority community.

To conclude, I say that women in Scotland must have confidence that the Parliament listens to, learns from and acts on their concerns and priorities—not only on international women’s day, but every day.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Rona Mackay will be the last speaker in the open debate.

16:21

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): On international women’s day 2022, it is time to break the bias that holds women back, be

it deliberate or unconscious. We must call it out. We must not put up with it for any longer. That is the message behind today’s motion and the fact that gender equality is at the heart of the Scottish Government’s vision for a fairer Scotland. Who could disagree with that? I am glad that a consensus has been struck among members. As the last speaker in the open debate, I say that all the speeches have been amazing and inspirational.

However, on this day, my heart—like the hearts of so many other speakers—is with the women of Ukraine, who are being forced to flee their homes with their children and elderly parents in order to keep them safe. It defies belief that that is happening in 2022. None of us can imagine how hard it must be to summon the strength to keep going in the face of such adversity. Those ordinary women are the heroes of today, and I know that they have the hearts and hopes of everyone as we watch their desperate plight, which has been caused by a deranged dictator. I agree with my colleague Gillian Martin, who said that we need action now, in order to help those courageous women.

We have come a long way since the days in which the suffragettes fought so hard and sacrificed so much to win for us—more than half the population—the right to vote. I will highlight the inspirational women who live ordinary lives—just like those of the women of Ukraine, which have been turned upside down.

I start on a personal note. My maternal grandmother came to Scotland from Tullamore in the south of Ireland, in the 1920s. She was unable to read or write, but she was smart—smart enough to know that education was a passport out of poverty for her four children. She also dealt with the stigma and discrimination that Irish people faced at that time by ensuring that my mother and her brother and sisters were always immaculately dressed and well mannered. She was proud, feisty and funny, and she was my inspiration as I grew up.

However, as we know, not all children have the good fortune to grow up with inspirational role models. That is why, the more we learn about adverse childhood experiences and attachment, the more we know how vital growing up with such role models is.

For much of my lifetime, and until recently, Scottish heroines were virtually airbrushed from history—women such as Elsie Inglis, the founder of the Scottish women’s hospitals and the subject of my colleague Jenni Minto’s members’ business debate tomorrow; Ayr’s Marion Gray, a mathematician who influenced the telecoms giants of today; and the geologist Maria Gordon from Aberdeen. I could go on, but time will not allow.

The value that ordinary and extraordinary women have made to society is incalculable. However, today, despite the progress that has been mentioned, we know that women bear enormously the brunt of gender inequality.

A helpful briefing from Engender tells us that UN Women estimates that the impact of Covid-19 could mean the loss of 25 years' worth of progress for women's equality. Of course, Scotland is not immune to that. Measures to respond to the pandemic have disproportionately affected the access that women, especially younger women and women of colour, have to paid work and the volume of care that women provide. Women disproportionately make up our army of unpaid carers, are disproportionately in low-paid jobs and still, despite the Scottish Government's innovative early years education policy, disproportionately manage childcare.

The Scottish Government has a proud record of promoting women's equality and I am delighted that today, on international women's day, Baroness Helena Kennedy QC's report on misogyny and criminal justice in Scotland has been published. That immense piece of work includes an examination of whether there are gaps in the law that should be addressed by a specific criminal offence to tackle misogynistic behaviour. I am delighted that the Scottish Government will now consider the report's recommendation to create a misogyny and criminal justice (Scotland) act containing: a public misogynistic harassment offence; an offence of stirring up hatred against women and girls; an offence of issuing threats of, or invoking, rape or sexual assault or disfigurement of women and girls; and a new statutory aggravation of misogyny.

We fight on to banish the gender pay gap and to gain equal access to the boardroom. We fight on for an end to sexual harassment and bullying at work. We fight on for an end to the curse of violence against women with our equally safe strategy and £5 million of new funding to rape crisis centres and domestic abuse services to help to cut waiting lists. We fight on for an end to the bias against LGBTI women, disabled women and women of colour, and we recognise the inhumane treatment of women who were forced to give up their babies just a few decades ago.

I celebrate all women—mums, grans, aunts, sisters and carers. I celebrate women who are an inspiration to someone, somewhere. I celebrate the many amazing women who work tirelessly in the third sector to protect and improve the lives of women. We should celebrate how far we have come but know that there is much more to do so that our daughters and granddaughters are shown the respect that they deserve and have the best

possible future. When that happens, our work and that of our pioneering sisters will be done.

16:27

Katy Clark (West Scotland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to make this closing speech on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party and associate myself with the solidarity with women and girls around the world that the First Minister and other members have expressed.

This is a day to celebrate the achievements of women against the backdrop of centuries of oppression. It is a day for sisterhood. I welcome the speeches from women MSPs who have spoken of the systematic discrimination against women in Scotland and throughout the world. I also welcome the speeches from men who spoke of the actions that men must take.

My colleague Pam Duncan-Glancy highlighted the specific challenges for disabled women. Kaukab Stewart, Foysol Choudhury and Pam Gosal spoke of the challenges that women from black and ethnic minority backgrounds face. Ruth Maguire and Gillian Martin spoke eloquently of the horrific situation of women in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen and many other countries. Rona Mackay and Christine Grahame spoke of the struggles and strength of women in working-class communities over many generations and confirmed again that education will be the liberation for women.

International women's day was created by working-class women fighting for their rights. In 1908, women in the needle trades demonstrated in New York to form their own trade union for better pay, shorter working hours and the right to vote. The fights of women in the United States reached Europe and inspired socialist women, such as Clara Zetkin, who suggested the creation of an international day for women. In 1975, the United Nations made that an official day, and this year's theme, #BreakTheBias, asks us to imagine a world free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination.

This Parliament has a good record when it comes to improving women's representation in Scotland, although, as we all know, there is still a long way to go. More women have been elected to this Parliament since 1999 than have been elected to Westminster since 1918. Forty five per cent of members of the Scottish Parliament are women, which of course means that women are still underrepresented in this chamber. Even more needs to be done at council level, for example.

We have heard from members of all political parties, who talked about many aspects of women's lives. We heard about women's health

and women's achievements in sport and many other fields.

There were many expressions of solidarity with women in Ukraine. Of course, it is women who bear the brunt of violence, including sexual violence, in war. It is right that we also express solidarity with the people in Russia who are protesting against the war, many thousands of whom have been arrested—even children have been arrested.

The challenges for women are challenges for humanity. We have to recognise that the position of women in the UK has worsened, due to the pandemic. The World Economic Forum says that the time that is needed to close the global gender gap has increased from 99.5 years to 135.6 years, due to the pandemic. It is not necessarily the case that the position of women and girls in society continues to get better. What we heard about Afghanistan reinforces that.

Austerity, too, has had a disproportionate impact on women. I ask politicians in all political parties to think about that when they make the political decisions that have an impact on communities.

We know that there is a growing rape culture in schools and that new technology has created a new range of pressures on girls and young women. In Scotland, 40 per cent of the sexual crimes that are recorded by the police relate to a victim who is under 18 years old. The Labour Party has strongly welcomed the report from Helena Kennedy and the proposal that misogyny be made an aggravating factor in criminal cases.

I am a member of the Criminal Justice Committee of the Scottish Parliament, which has heard repeatedly from victims about the retraumatising effect on women of going through the criminal justice system in cases of rape, attempted rape and other forms of sexual violence. We look forward to the recommendations in Lady Dorrian's report being implemented during this parliamentary session.

International women's day was created as a day on which to fight for women's rights. It has changed over the years, with a far greater range of organisations involved and a far greater range of events taking place. The fact that a whole afternoon is dedicated to this debate, with speeches from members of all political parties, demonstrates that change.

Fundamentally, this is a day on which to celebrate the struggles of women and the fight of women and girls against the challenges and discrimination that we face. It is a day on which we can refocus ourselves, not just on the massive challenges that women and girls face but, more important, on what we all need to do as we fight collectively to ensure that historical oppressions

become a matter for history, so that we go forward, united as sisters, with the rights that mean that such oppression is discussed in history classes but does not need to be discussed weekly in chambers such as this one.

16:34

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con):

It is a pleasure to conclude on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. We have heard passionate contributions from members across the chamber, and, although we normally have different political views, we are united in our commitment to mark international women's day and work together to break the bias that exists in our society.

As we know, international women's day is a global day on which we celebrate the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. However, it is also a day for action to improve and accelerate women's rights. Despite it being more than 100 years since women first received the vote, we still earn roughly 11 per cent less, on average, than our male colleagues. We run just 4 per cent of Scotland's top businesses, fill just 13 per cent of senior Police Scotland posts and are just 6 per cent of Scottish newspaper editors. It is important to acknowledge that, although progress has been made, inequality still exists in Scotland and around the world. Members of this Parliament have a duty to stand up and fight for women's rights and, especially, the representation of disabled, BAME and LGBT women. As we know, the theme of international women's day this year is "break the bias".

One issue that I wish to highlight in relation to achieving equality is pregnancy and maternity leave for women. It is an issue close to my heart, because my fiancé and I are expecting our first child this summer. Although we are both excited about becoming parents, I have already started to worry about the short time that I will take away from my role as an MSP. I have even felt a sense of guilt about wanting to start a family. I know that I will not be the only woman to experience that feeling of dread. I am fortunate enough to have a fantastic support network at home and in my party, but, for others, starting a family could spell the end of career progression and future job opportunities. In 2022, no woman should be put at a disadvantage just because she has chosen to start a family.

Research outlined by the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that pregnancy and maternity discrimination remains widespread in the Scottish labour market. Almost half of mothers in Scotland said that pregnancy and maternity discrimination had negatively impacted their employment status and job security. Women reported that they had not been informed about

training or promotion opportunities. They had been denied training opportunities, threatened with dismissal or put under pressure to hand in their notice.

More disturbingly, research carried out during the pandemic showed that pregnant women and women on maternity leave or returning to work were being discriminated against in the workplace. One in four pregnant women or women on maternity leave experienced discrimination or less favourable treatment at work and was singled out for redundancy and furlough during the pandemic. Some businesses, however, such as my former employer, John Lewis, have taken innovative steps to improve working conditions for those who are starting a family. Simple but effective changes in the workplace, such as equal parental pay and leave, pregnancy law support, and part-time and flexible working options, are all measures that will not only support women but give them opportunities to find a work-life balance and return to work free of discrimination and with opportunities to continue to progress their career, should they choose to do so. I hope that, one day, all workplaces will adopt similar practices in order to continue to improve conditions for working mums and families. That would be a step towards breaking the bias and improving equality for women in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

I will pick up on some of the excellent contributions from across the chamber. Pam Duncan-Glancy spoke passionately about breaking down barriers, about the on-going inequalities that women with disabilities experience and about the responsibility that we have to improve the lives of women with disabilities by looking at the social, economic and cultural challenges.

Sue Webber mentioned some of the inspirational women in her life and their amazing achievements.

Kaukab Stewart stated that we have a collective duty to do more to tackle the obstacles that women face, especially black and minority ethnic women, and to eradicate bias—racial and gendered—in the workplace.

Rhoda Grant rightly highlighted the stark increase in domestic violence cases and the unacceptable maternity experiences that rural women have to endure just to give birth. Many members have raised that issue. I hope that the Scottish Government finds a permanent solution for rural mums.

Paul McLennan raised the issue of the need to change attitudes towards women. Campaigns such as “Don’t be that guy” are one step forward in improving men’s behaviour and how men treat women.

Oliver Mundell mentioned the need to improve societal behaviours and the unconscious bias that many women face.

Pam Gosal spoke about her experiences as a mentor and supporter of women in groups. She was right to highlight the “no more” campaign and the need to tackle the domestic abuse that is experienced in this country.

Many members mentioned the on-going conflicts and struggles of women and girls in Ukraine and other countries. Regrettably, this year’s international women’s day takes place under a dark cloud, which is highlighted in the amendment that my colleague Tess White lodged. Every day, we witness more harrowing scenes of violence, conflict and bloodshed in Ukraine.

One of the stories that I have found hardest to read is that of a 10-year-old girl, Polina, who was one of the first children to be reported as having been killed in the Russian invasion. Polina died alongside her parents when her family was gunned down in Kyiv by Russians. Polina will never grow old, go on to further or higher education, have a career, get married or have children. What a waste of a beautiful young girl, who was mercilessly killed by those who were seeking to oppress her and her people.

That is one example of violence against women and girls, who, as Tess White rightly pointed out, “are disproportionately affected by war”.

I hope that members will support her amendment, because we can all do more to stand up for women against violence, whether that is at home in Scotland or around the world. Although international women’s day is a day for celebration, we cannot and must not forget women who have fallen victim to violence.

Every member in the chamber has pledged to break the bias by highlighting the stark inequality that women face in today’s society. We must work together to achieve equality for women and girls, whether that is in our communities, workplaces, schools, colleges or universities. Let us make Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom a society in which women are treated with dignity and respect.

16:42

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government (Shona Robison): I thank all the members who have spoken in the debate. We have heard some fantastic, powerful and moving speeches from around the chamber. As Katy Clark described it, it has been a day for sisterhood.

Before I get into my speech, I congratulate Meghan Gallacher and her partner on their wonderful news. Perhaps I might also give them some advice. When I had my daughter nearly 20 years ago—I can hardly believe that it was 20 years ago—I put enormous pressure on myself and came back to work far too soon. I strongly encourage Meghan Gallacher to take her maternity leave—it is her entitlement and she should take it. *[Applause.]*

I begin, as other members did, by offering my unqualified support to the people of Ukraine. It is, as others have said, shocking and appalling that, on international women's day, we again see women and children fleeing their homes from war and violence. Our thoughts are with all the people of Ukraine. Scotland stands ready, with open arms, to welcome those who have been displaced by that terrible war.

Tess White talked about women being the main casualties of war. We of course accept her amendment.

Other members talked about the atrocities that women have faced. Gillian Martin talked about the plight of Afghan women, with their rights being removed, schools being closed, their removal from their jobs and a return to dark days at the hands of the Taliban. She talked about toxic masculinity and the worst of humanity being made heads of state. That is absolutely true.

Ruth Maguire talked about women in many other countries, including Yemen, whose plight is sometimes out of sight. She talked about the pressures on Moldova, which is one of the poorest small countries in the world, yet is taking in many refugees.

We in the Scottish Government will continue to work at pace with our key partners, including the Refugee Council and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to put in place the necessary arrangements to ensure that people from Ukraine who want to come to Scotland receive the support that they require.

The theme of this year's international women's day is "break the bias". Sadly, every woman and girl in Scotland and around the world will be touched by gender bias in some form during their lives. That point was made by Kaukab Stewart, Pam Duncan-Glancy and Pam Gosal. Some women and girls experience that more acutely and often, including for example disabled women, women living in poverty, women from minority ethnic communities, and refugee and migrant women. The pandemic has shown that and it has exacerbated the deep-seated inequality that has been a feature of our society for too long. To return to the status quo as it was before the coronavirus is simply not good enough, which is

why gender equality must be at the heart of our pandemic recovery.

Women have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19. The challenges of balancing childcare, paid work and caring responsibilities with the stresses and uncertainties of the pandemic have without doubt been unprecedented. Women were more likely to lose work or hours during the pandemic and to care for those who have been ill with Covid. We are now—we hope—moving step by step out of the pandemic, and we are starting to look ahead. Many members mentioned those pressures, including Natalie Don and Pam Duncan-Glancy. We need to learn the lessons and, as we move forward, make sure that we tackle those fundamental inequalities.

We have much to do. However, as others have said, this Parliament has already taken important steps to break the bias. We have raised awareness, changed policy and passed legislation that we can all be proud of. We have world-leading legislation to make free period products accessible to every woman and girl who needs them. We have legislation, which was developed directly with women's organisations, that reflects the reality that domestic abuse is more than physical violence and is, in many instances, an insidious pattern of coercive, controlling behaviour and psychological abuse. Natalie Don mentioned that.

We have legislated to ensure that women are more fairly represented on our public boards—an issue that Pam Gosal mentioned. In December 2020, we unanimously passed the bill that became the Forensic Medical Services (Victims of Sexual Offences) (Scotland) Act 2021, which established a legal framework to ensure that victims of sexual violence can access healthcare and request a forensic examination without having to make a report to the police.

Work continues apace. We are delivering more childcare and we have published our women's health plan, as Beatrice Wishart mentioned. The plan reflects the importance of recognising women's healthcare needs, listening to women and responding appropriately. Since the plan was launched, we have developed a platform for women with information on the menopause, including information on symptoms, options for care, treatment and support. For too long, the impact of the menopause on women, including in the workplace, has not been taken seriously enough. We want to change that.

Through "Equally Safe: Scotland's strategy to eradicate violence against women", we are working with partners to eradicate violence against women and girls in all its forms. The work in schools on consent is vital. It is so important that

young people including, importantly, boys understand the issue of consent.

We are consulting on a new human rights bill that will incorporate four international human rights treaties into Scots law including, importantly, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. That demonstrates the Scottish Government's commitment to upholding human rights and promoting and enhancing the current framework.

I join the First Minister and others in thanking Baroness Kennedy and the working group on misogyny and criminal justice in Scotland for their excellent report, which was published this morning. Rona Mackay mentioned the importance of that and how it will help to move us forward. The Scottish Government will take the report and look at moving forward with the recommendations in due course.

I said that the Parliament should be proud of the actions that it has taken to break the bias. I am grateful to our male allies around the chamber, who have made some powerful contributions during the debate. It is clear, though, that that progress would not have been possible without women standing here in our Scottish Parliament and speaking up about and championing the many issues that women and girls face and which are important to them. I do not think that we would have reached the position that we have reached on the issues that I have highlighted, whether through policy or legislation, without women in this Parliament moving them forward.

Christine Grahame talked about the importance of education and the story behind how many of us got here. Thank goodness Christine Grahame's ancestors made the decisions that they made, otherwise we would not have her here among us to give us lovely, amazing and powerful speeches. One thing that we have in common is the power of education. My late mum used to drum home to me the importance of education. I was the first person in my family to get a degree, which was ground breaking. Education has been absolutely critical for many generations of women, and I really relate to that. We need to encourage the next generation of girls to recognise the importance of education to go into any roles, to go into science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and to break through some of the barriers that, unfortunately, still mean that women are underrepresented in the workplace.

Last year, the Scottish Parliament came closer to the goal of equal representation, with women making up 45 per cent of MSPs. That is the highest proportion of women MSPs that we have ever had. However, as Katy Clark said, we are not there yet. There has been progress, but we are not there yet. The Parliament has to strive to

reflect the people whom we serve. Although, as others have said, we are not there yet, we are closer than ever before. I acknowledge the presence among us of Pam Duncan-Glancy, Kaukab Stewart and Pam Gosal as women in the Parliament who are breaking barriers, breaking the bias, and making the Parliament look more like Scotland. That is absolutely fantastic.

The progress that we have made cannot be taken for granted. We have to strive to do more. As the First Minister highlighted in opening the debate, the misogyny and harassment that women and girls experience are harmful for all, including for women in visible positions, such as in politics. Being an MSP, an MP or a councillor is a privilege, and misogyny, abuse and harassment should not be seen to be, and must never be accepted as, part of the job.

I urge all political parties to keep taking action to ensure that more women, more disabled women, more women from minority ethnic communities and other women who are not represented as they should be in the Parliament are supported through our parties' selection processes to make our Parliament and, indeed, our town halls, more equal.

In conclusion, I know that one could be disheartened by the fact that we still need an international women's day to acknowledge that women and girls around the world still face the inequality and violence that we have heard described across the chamber, but I am not disheartened because, as long as we do that, we can highlight that inequality and violence and collectively, as parliamentarians, show our resolve to back the day and its intention to end gender inequality across the world. We have done much, but there is more to do. That is a goal around which political parties can find common ground, as we have this afternoon, and that has been true of the Parliament going back many years. We can be proud of that, and I am absolutely optimistic that that will continue. I can give members my commitment to keep working to break the bias and make Scotland a fairer, safer and more equal country for all women and girls.

Business Motion

16:53

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The next item of business is consideration of business motion S6M-03518, in the name of George Adam, on behalf of the Parliamentary Bureau, which sets out revisions to this week's business.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees to the following revisions to the programme of business for—

(a) Wednesday 9 March 2022—

after

followed by Scottish Labour Party Debate: Anne's Law

insert

followed by Legislative Consent Motion: Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill

followed by Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Motion: Nomination of a Pension Fund Trustee for the Scottish Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund

followed by Appointment of the Chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission

delete

5.10 pm Decision Time

and insert

6.00 pm Decision Time

(b) Thursday 10 March 2022—

delete

2.15 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.15 pm Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions

and insert

2.00 pm Parliamentary Bureau Motions

2.00 pm Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body Questions

after

followed by Portfolio Questions: Constitution, External Affairs and Culture

insert

followed by Ministerial Statement: Rail Accident Investigation Branch Report into Carmont Passenger Train Derailment

after

followed by Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee Debate: The Road to COP27 and Beyond: Tackling the Climate Emergency in the Aftermath of COP26

insert

followed by

Withdrawal of Bill: UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill

delete

5.00 pm

Decision Time

and insert

5.15 pm

Decision Time—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Parliamentary Bureau Motion

16:54

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): The next item of business is consideration of Parliamentary Bureau motion S6M-03519, on the suspension of standing orders.

Motion moved,

That the Parliament agrees, for the purposes of consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill, Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.—[George Adam]

The Presiding Officer: The question on the motion will be put at decision time.

Motion without Notice

16:54

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Under rule 11.2.4 of the standing orders, I am minded to accept a motion without notice that decision time be brought forward to now.

Motion moved,

That, under Rule 11.2.4 of Standing Orders, Decision Time on Tuesday 8 March be taken at 4.55 pm.—[George Adam]

Motion agreed to.

Decision Time

16:55

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are three questions to be put as a result of today's business.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-03485.1, in the name of Tess White, which seeks to amend motion S6M-03485, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on international women's day 2022, be agreed to.

Amendment agreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The second question is, that motion S6M-03485, in the name of Nicola Sturgeon, on international women's day 2022, as amended, be agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

That the Parliament unites to mark International Women's Day 2022; welcomes this year's theme of #BreakTheBias, which recognises that "whether deliberate or unconscious, bias makes it difficult for women to move ahead", and that intersecting characteristics such as disability and race can compound bias and discrimination; recognises that it is the responsibility of everyone to end the discrimination that women and girls face; acknowledges that, while much progress towards achieving equality has been made, it has not yet been achieved in Scotland or around the world; recognises the steps forward that the Scottish Parliament has taken to improve equal representation, and the record number of women elected, and acknowledges that there is more to do, especially for the representation of disabled, BAME and LGBT women and women from other minority groups; further recognises the tireless work of organisations and communities across Scotland to promote equality and support women; agrees that equality is necessary for society and the economy to thrive, and that everyone should work together to break the bias on, and beyond, International Women's Day; recognises that this global day in 2022 takes place against a background of conflict and bloodshed in Ukraine and other countries blighted by violence, and that women and girls are disproportionately affected by war, and believes that more must be done to tackle the scourge of violence against women and girls in Scotland and around the world.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-03519, in the name of George Adam, on the suspension of standing orders, be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

That the Parliament agrees, for the purposes of consideration of the legislative consent memorandum on the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill, Rule 9B.3.5 of Standing Orders is suspended.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Scottish Apprenticeship Week 2022

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The final item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-03226, in the name of Pam Gosal, on Scottish apprenticeship week 2022. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I would be grateful if members who want to participate in the debate could press their request-to-speak button or place an R in the chat function.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament acknowledges Scottish Apprenticeship Week, which runs from 7 to 11 March 2022; recognises what it sees as the potential of apprenticeships to transform the career prospects of people of all ages across Scotland; notes with concern the belief that apprenticeships are sometimes seen as a lesser career path when compared to university; considers that, as Scotland recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic, apprenticeships will be essential in addressing new gaps in the labour market; expresses openness to new ways of apprenticeships being used to address employer-led demand to aid the economic recovery, and notes the calls for an increased awareness of apprenticeship offerings across Scotland.

16:57

Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to lead my very first members' business debate. I welcome colleagues from across the chamber to speak on my motion, which acknowledges Scottish apprenticeship week 2022.

As the Scottish Conservatives' shadow spokesman for further education and training, I am pleased to be able to mark apprenticeship week for the first time since I was elected. This year's theme is "apprenticeships work", and I therefore dedicate my speech to the ability of apprenticeships to transform career prospects, address gaps in the labour market and advance our economy.

I offer thanks to the Apprenticeships.scot team, Skills Development Scotland and the Construction Industry Training Board not only for providing me with helpful briefings ahead of the debate, but for their hard work all year round to facilitate links between learners and employers. I also commend every employer that has taken a chance on keen learners and considers apprenticeships to be a worthwhile investment.

As we know, apprenticeships are work-based learning opportunities or jobs with industry-recognised qualifications. More than 12,000 employers support Scottish apprenticeships, and it is estimated that there are currently around 43,000 apprentices across Scotland. Right now, in 2022,

a dramatic skills shift is taking place as a result of factors such as Covid-19 and the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—declarations. The long-lasting changes in the jobs market that Covid-19 has created mean that skills shortages are becoming increasingly common. Around two thirds of Scottish companies are struggling to find employees who possess the required skills, and a further 74 per cent anticipate the need to upskill their staff.

The journey to net zero will require nothing short of a green skills revolution. Projects such as the mass retrofitting of Scotland's households will require skill sets that are, as things stand, few and far between. That is exactly the type of dilemma that apprenticeships can address, and for that reason, they will play a fundamental role in our economic recovery.

Many businesses are unexpectedly experiencing increased demand, but they do not have the capacity to expand their operations. Although many school leavers are currently going into higher education, that should not be to the detriment of other learning pathways. It is therefore essential for us all, across the chamber, to stress the importance of apprenticeships and the opportunities that they afford learners.

University is not for everyone, and it is important to diversify the skills with which we equip workers. If everybody had the same set of skills, there would be a lack of diversity in thought, innovation and creation.

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con): Does Pam Gosal agree that an apprenticeship is not second best to a university place?

Pam Gosal: Absolutely—an apprenticeship should never be second best. It should be there as a choice for every learner.

During my teenage years, my father took me under his wing and showed me the ropes of his business. Today, we may call that process an apprenticeship, but the truth is that the practice has been around for many years. It was not until my father sadly passed away that I decided that I had to step up and take over the business, and provide for my family. Despite leaving school with no qualifications or experience, I found that what I had learned from my father was invaluable. I later decided to return to formal education as a mature student, which I did alongside my work. As a result of my non-traditional route into education, I am a huge advocate for gaining on-the-job experience, which apprenticeships provide.

However, we still need to do more to ensure that everybody is afforded the same access to apprenticeships. Employers such as Glenmorangie, which my colleague Sue Webber

visited yesterday, say that they are still struggling to attract female apprentices into what are perceived as male-dominated industries. I heard that concern myself when I visited the New College Lanarkshire campus at Kirkintilloch. Employers also warn that apprenticeships are easier to access in some local authority areas than in others, and that more needs to be done to address that postcode lottery.

Just this morning, at the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee, I raised the importance of ensuring that apprenticeships are accessible to all groups, including disabled people. When my colleague Alexander Stewart met apprentices in Alloa yesterday, he learned that there needs to be better engagement with third sector organisations in order to maximise apprenticeship opportunities in those settings. However, we would also like to listen to apprentices themselves. That includes apprentices such as Kieran, whom I met in Dumbarton yesterday. In his apprenticeship with Dingbro, Kieran is learning skills that will set him up for his whole career. However, he feels that, for some young people, current apprenticeship pay is not enough to incentivise them to follow that career path.

It is clear that apprenticeships work for apprentices, employers, the local economy and the wider community. For that reason, I conclude with three things that we can all do to help apprenticeships to fulfil their potential role. First, we can engage with individuals, businesses, educators and apprenticeship providers to better align skills provision with demand and future trends. Secondly, as members across the chamber visit apprentices and employers to mark Scottish apprenticeship week, it is important that we ask what more we can do to improve access to that career pathway. Thirdly, we can encourage young people to properly consider every career pathway that is open to them. No single pathway is right for everyone, and we should encourage people to take a truly open-minded approach to the issue.

17:05

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I congratulate Pam Gosal on securing this debate during Scottish apprenticeship week, and I thank her for sharing her experiences with us.

Scotland has 43,000 apprentices, who are acquiring first-hand industry experience that is suitable for responding to the nation's ever-changing employment skills needs. Those opportunities play an essential role in the nation's economic renewal as we recover from the pandemic.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Mr Gibson, could you adjust your microphone? Thank you.

Kenneth Gibson: Apologies, Presiding Officer.

Work-based learning systems help to address skills shortages and boost productivity. With more than 12,000 employers offering apprenticeships, the opportunity to learn on the job significantly reduces youth unemployment, with 92 per cent of modern apprentices staying in work after they have qualified.

Despite the reduction in uptake due to the pandemic, from 2020 to 2022, 447 young people started a modern apprenticeship in North Ayrshire, which highlights the success of the programme and the motivation of young people to gain employment, boost their skill set and confidence and start a career.

The young persons guarantee has created 18,000 opportunities for young people, including modern apprenticeships. It has also tackled inequalities and removed barriers that prevent young people from entering employment. Apprenticeships can help to drive equity of opportunity, and they give employers the tools and support to be inclusive in recruitment.

Skills Development Scotland strives to ensure fair workplaces and equal opportunities for Scotland's young workforce. Employers that recruit apprentices are encouraged to diversify their workforce, as unconscious bias can sometimes be present when selecting candidates. It is vital to ensure that all frameworks, particularly for apprenticeships in science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—reduce gender bias in order to encourage all young people into the industry that suits them best.

Young disabled people can now receive the highest level of funding for their chosen modern apprenticeship, with that scheme having supported more than 5,000 disabled people as they enter employment.

Stephen Kerr: I thank Mr Gibson for his excellent speech. Does he agree that Scotland's college sector has a huge part to play in the evolution of modern apprenticeships? Does he also agree that the current set of cuts that that sector is facing as a result of this year's Scottish Government budget will hardly benefit the apprenticeship programme across Scotland?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back, Mr Gibson.

Kenneth Gibson: Colleges have a vital part to play; I do not recognise the cuts agenda that the member mentions. He should perhaps look at the difference between college funding north and south of the border. That might open his eyes somewhat.

Scotland's unique apprenticeship programmes allow employers more flexibility to ensure that apprentices benefit their business while offering continuous assessment to ensure that apprentices achieve their goals, technical qualifications and core skills. In comparison, English apprentices are tied to approved programmes and must complete end-point assessment, including in core functional English and maths, meaning that many young people cannot access the benefits of those programmes. The continuing increase in apprentice numbers ensures a bright future for both the economy and the apprentices themselves as they learn valuable interindustry skills.

Yesterday, as part of Scottish apprenticeship week, I was pleased to visit DSM Nutritional Products in my constituency and meet six of their 36 apprentices—Jamie, Karla, Liam, Logan, Murron and Timo—to discuss their career pathways so far and their future ambitions. The company plans to employ 119 apprentices by 2024. A number of them will work on DSM's world-beating methane-reducing feed additive for cattle, Bovaer, which shows the exciting opportunities that young people are offered.

In her motion, Pam Gosal

"notes with concern the belief that apprenticeships are sometimes seen as a lesser career path when compared to university".

She reflected that in her speech and was right to do so. Several young people I met were surprised to discover, through the work of Skills Development Scotland and their personal experience, that they can be just as successful by completing an apprenticeship as they would have been by going to university. They all said that that was not what their teachers told them when they were at school, where it was made clear that anything less than university would be second best. The positive attitude of the apprentices highlighted how important it is for Skills Development Scotland to engage directly with schools, parents and young people to change that misguided perception. More employers should also be encouraged to adopt work-based learning and ensure that young people know that university is not the only pathway after leaving school.

I am delighted that DSM has been nominated in the large employer of the year category at tomorrow's Scottish apprenticeship awards for its commitment to increase apprentice opportunities and provide exciting, secure and enduring careers for our young people. I thank all the employers in Cunninghame North and across Scotland that hire apprentices, and I look forward to the numbers growing even further as Scotland recovers from the pandemic.

17:10

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in the debate to acknowledge Scottish apprenticeship week 2022, and I thank my colleague Pam Gosal for bringing it to the chamber.

It is always a pleasure to mark the success of an initiative that simply was not around during my school days. Admittedly, that was more than a few years ago, but, at that time—and, in fact, not so long ago—if somebody did not shine academically, the teacher was likely to tell them that they would not amount to anything and could forget about a career. I ask members to imagine the damage that that did to the many young people who were consigned to the scrap heap at such an early age. I am thankful that those days are over and that the Scottish apprenticeship scheme plays a vital role in supporting youngsters, employers and the economy.

Yesterday, I had the pleasure of visiting an amazing early years facility, the Lullaby Lane nursery in Bearsden in my constituency, to present a certificate to Chloe Winning, who recently completed her apprenticeship Scottish vocational qualification in social services for children and young people. Chloe joined Lullaby Lane Nurseries straight from school and has thrived in the vocational learning environment. It was clear that she loves every minute of her job.

Lullaby Lane Nurseries, which also has a facility in Milngavie, uses an exceptional business model that I would love to see replicated throughout Scotland. Director Pauline Scott, who is also the co-owner and director of Tigers (STA) Ltd and might be known to some members, and nursery manager Donna Adams offer a bright, airy and very much home-from-home, attachment-based nursery. Outdoor, play-based learning can account for up to 80 per cent of time spent at the nursery and, needless to say, the children love getting muddy.

During the early stages of the pandemic, the nursery was open to provide care for the children of essential workers, then to help to provide stability and interaction for all children at the earliest possibility. It is a living wage employer and there are currently 16 modern apprentices with the company, who are training on various frameworks, but mainly social services for children and young people. A previous modern apprentice of the year winner comes from the Bearsden site, and Lullaby Lane is nominated this year in the small and medium-sized enterprise employer of the year category at the Scottish apprenticeship awards. Two other employees are previous winners of apprentice of the year, so the company is definitely doing something right.

Pauline Scott told me of the energy and fresh ideas that young people bring to the richness of the nursery experience. The benefits are so much more than a taster of a potential career in childcare—much of the hands-on coaching and reflection can be applied to different career aspirations, such as in law or accountancy, with transferable skills such as understanding brain development, psychology, family dynamics, empathy and problem solving.

Kirkintilloch high school works in partnership with Tigers to place senior school pupils in foundation apprenticeships, which offer a blended learning approach for senior-phase pupils alongside the traditional high school qualifications. Many young people do not learn by listening—they need hands-on, practical experience, which is why apprenticeships are important. We now know that there are different ways of learning and of upskilling young people, who go on to have fulfilling jobs and happy lives. Pauline Scott puts it very well when she says:

“First you start with gaining trust, building a relationship with the young person, then comes the training and education.”

It really is not rocket science. It is common-sense psychology and is about mutual respect between a young person and their mentor or trainer.

I welcome all the commitment that employers give to Scottish apprenticeship week. In particular, I congratulate all the young people who have committed to the scheme and wish them all well in their future careers.

17:14

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I congratulate Pam Gosal on leading an effective and efficient first members' business debate with an excellent speech. It is a great pleasure to follow Rona Mackay, who talked about the role of modern apprenticeships for our young people working in nursery and childcare services.

Scottish apprenticeship week shines a light on the vital role that apprenticeships play in supporting people, employers and the economy. Scottish apprenticeships provide the chance for businesses to adapt, sustain and strengthen their business, and for young and not-so-young people to acquire skills and experience to underpin the future for themselves and their families.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Will Mr Whitfield take the opportunity to join me in congratulating young apprentices across East Lothian and the south of Scotland on their commitment and dedication? I am thinking in particular of two inspirational young apprentices, Lewis Murphy and Hayley Goldthorpe, whom I met yesterday and who are apprentices with

Openreach, helping families in those areas to connect to full-fibre broadband.

Martin Whitfield: I am more than happy to extend my congratulations not only to those two apprentices—who, I hope, will have great future careers—but to all apprentices across East Lothian and the south of Scotland.

Apprentices do so much. Although they might frustrate some people by turning up ever so slightly late at the beginning of their apprenticeships and occasionally forgetting their safety boots and even their hard hats, by the end, they are no longer apprentices but skilled operatives who understand what work is, what they need to do to satisfy their employer and how to show them what they can do. Apprenticeships ensure that our whole society moves forward in a much more safe and productive way.

We have three types of apprenticeships: foundation, modern and graduate. It is important to have different types of apprenticeships, and we are further developing the apprenticeship model. As Pam Gosal said, that is much needed, given that many companies do not have apprenticeship pathways for work that is coming down the line. An example is Forestry and Land Scotland. There might be pathways in the forest itself, but apprenticeship pathways fall apart when it comes to timber production and how timber will be used in future.

Like many members, I, too, want to speak about my visit to see an apprentice. I had the great pleasure of visiting McMillan (Coppersmiths and Fabricators) Ltd in Prestonpans in East Lothian. The great advantage was that I did not need to take my car—I could stroll there from my house. I stepped into a huge warehouse that many people have walked past, wondering what goes on in there.

When I went inside the building, I was delighted to see the treasure of all treasures: whisky stills. The company makes whisky and spirit stills that are used around Scotland, the United Kingdom and the world. One can see copper being hammered from a flat plate into a beautiful spherical shape, and stainless steel and copper, and brass and copper, being welded together.

For the uninitiated, those metals melt at different temperatures, and the staff at McMillan were aware of the mess that an ignorant MSP could make with a welding torch. That led them to give me not a welding torch but a hammer. I sincerely apologise to the apprentice whose efforts to make a beautiful swan's head for his still—it was almost six weeks of work—I ruined as I whacked at it. I felt as I did when I was a teacher, only the other way round, when he looked at me, gently shook

his head, turned and said to his boss, "He could make it better, but it might take some time."

I would like to praise Euan, the apprentice. He guided me around the factory and provided calm explanations to my very silly questions. When he told me that he was a cell manager, I said, "Ooh—a cell manager. What does a cell manager do?" He looked at me with sympathy and said, "I take care of 12 people." He is a man—not a boy—who is getting towards the end of his apprenticeship and who looks after the health and safety of other apprentices and workers. He knows the skills that are needed—skills that are hundreds of years old. He works in a company that is proud to display its founder's apprenticeship papers from all those years ago.

To all those apprentices, I say thank you. I thank them for the magic that they showed me, and I thank them for the magic that I felt when they explained to me that school is not everything—I know that—and that education is not just about going to university. For apprentices, it can be about having the privilege of sitting with a craftsman and moving from being someone who knows nothing to becoming, at the end of the journey, a craftsman themselves.

This is apprenticeship week. I thank all apprentices and their employers. Through apprenticeships and apprentices learning skills, there is a better future for Scotland. I saw that better future yesterday.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Mr Whitfield, for that timely reminder that not everyone is geared up to make a success of an apprenticeship.

17:19

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank Pam Gosal for lodging the motion and join members in celebrating Scottish apprenticeship week.

Presiding Officer, after what you and Martin Whitfield said, I am now incredibly nervous about the visit to a factory that I will make on Friday—I will not touch anything; I will just stand back and watch.

Apprenticeships are an integral part of our strategy to train a new workforce and build paths to stable, long-term careers. They provide essential skills and valuable training. Between April and December last year, 419 modern apprentices were in training in East Lothian, 66 per cent of whom were aged between 16 and 24.

Modern apprenticeships play a key role in the positive destination rate for school leavers, which is 96 per cent in my constituency.

Craig Hoy: Does the member share my regret that the decommissioning of Torness power station and the closure of the nuclear industry in Scotland will mean, in effect, that East Lothian has five fewer apprenticeships through the EDF apprenticeship scheme, through which people went on to highly skilled and well-paid jobs in the nuclear energy sector?

Paul McLennan: We discussed Torness in a debate a few weeks ago. The member knows that I have spoken to the station manager, who is confident that, as was the case with apprentices at Hunterston, every person who is currently in an apprenticeship will be moved on in EDF.

Craig Hoy: But not necessarily in Scotland.

Paul McLennan: There are around 43,000 apprenticeships in Scotland.

A key point about apprenticeships is that they aid companies, increasing productivity by 83 per cent and improving staff morale by 79 per cent and staff retention by 72 per cent. Research has showed that the most common reasons why employers support apprenticeships are that they provide young people with opportunities, train workers in core skills and provide industry experience.

The employers website www.apprenticeships.Scot, which provides free advertisements for apprenticeships, is well used, with 800,000 visits a year and as many as 700 live apprenticeship vacancies every month.

Last week, the First Minister talked about the crucial role of apprenticeships in addressing the skills gap in the national health service. Through a new £3.5 million Scottish Government recruitment programme, 150 apprentice pharmacy technicians will be recruited and trained in Scotland.

In East Lothian, we face labour and skills shortages in sectors such as renewables, food and drink and agriculture. Currently, most apprenticeships in my constituency are in social services and construction.

Apprenticeships are key to addressing labour and skills shortages. Moreover, our economic recovery from the pandemic relies on such opportunities. As our recovery progresses, we must go further to encourage businesses to take advantage of the opportunities that apprenticeships provide.

Businesses are doing that well at the moment. This week, I will visit Had Fab, an engineering company in my constituency that has great knowledge and experience of the apprenticeship scheme. Had Fab is presented with great opportunities to work in the renewables sector in the months ahead. As I think that I said in the debate on Torness last week, on 18 March I will

meet many operators in the renewables sector in East Lothian. There are many apprenticeship opportunities in that regard.

Through the young persons guarantee and the apprenticeship employer grant scheme, the Government is ensuring that it takes a wraparound approach. From speaking to careers advisers in my constituency, I know that free bus travel for under-22s has the potential to increase young people's access to apprenticeships and will increase employment opportunities for that age group, especially in rural areas.

The change to the approach to modern apprenticeships with the introduction of a rural supplement for providers, in recognition of the costs of rural delivery, shows that the Government has taken a truly nationwide approach. NFU Scotland is working on a skills strategy paper that will consider issues to do with agriculture and forestry, which are key sectors in rural communities. In East Lothian, there are serious labour shortages in those sectors, due to Brexit.

In that regard, we should look at modular approaches that offer opportunities to work with local colleges as part of an extensive suite of opportunities for school leavers and others.

I celebrate all the apprentices in East Lothian and beyond. I encourage school leavers to consider a local apprenticeship and ask businesses to review their apprenticeship offerings and consider whether there is scope to offer more apprenticeships, which are a valuable opportunity that should not be passed by.

17:24

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Today is a good reminder of the positive role that is played by members' business debates in the chamber, which suffered during the pandemic when the business of the Parliament was severely disrupted. Over the years, I have lodged a number of motions for debate on apprenticeship week, so it is great to see my colleague Pam Gosal take up the mantle—I thank her for doing so. Apprenticeship week has always been a great opportunity to show what apprenticeships achieve and to highlight the key role that they play not only in skills-based learning but in our economy.

The modern apprenticeship era took hold in the United Kingdom in 1994, taking an ancient concept and renewing it to adapt to the conditions of our time. In that form, apprenticeships will soon celebrate their 30th birthday. That is not only a milestone but an opportunity to look at decades of progress on an issue that has always enjoyed wide support in the Parliament.

However, like much of what we find ourselves discussing these days, apprenticeships have taken a hit from Covid-19. After years of slow but steady growth, the number of modern apprenticeship starts has taken a nosedive over the pandemic. That is not a positive place to find ourselves in, but it is sadly reflective of the impact that the situation has had on education and opportunity in Scotland.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I am the mother of a fourth-year apprentice joiner who, at the height of the pandemic, with countless apprentices throughout the country, was working in a front-line service, turning around void properties and enabling people to move on from homelessness and into a property. Will Jamie Halcro Johnston celebrate those apprentices, who responded in such a fantastic way on the front line?

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I absolutely will. There has been a huge amount of pressure on some apprenticeships, but many apprentices have taken the opportunity to stand up and play a vital role. I thank all of them, across Scotland, for the role that they have played. Elena Whitham makes a really good point.

Recovery must be the priority. It can be fast or slow, depending on how much resource the Scottish Government is prepared to commit. I hope that the minister will be able to go into some detail on that point. We do not want to find ourselves in years to come looking back wistfully at 2019 as some sort of better time for Scottish apprenticeships. I have said before that many businesses have found themselves in a more precarious position than they were in pre-2020. If we are to ensure a large and diverse group of apprenticeship providers, we must ensure that business is supported and that confidence can return.

Although we often think of the foundation and graduate apprenticeships as two new strands, both are now settled into the landscape.

Foundation apprenticeships are a particular area of interest. They give young people a great opportunity to experience the practical approach that apprenticeships can provide. Unsurprisingly, they, too, have been disrupted over the past two years, as sizeable numbers of participants have been unable to complete their courses. I welcome the fact that some reassurance has been given to that cohort that their work will be recognised through letters of recognition.

It is commendable that all 32 local authorities are now involved in foundation apprenticeship delivery, but the most recent figures published by the Scottish Government show that 10 per cent of state secondary schools are still not engaged with

the scheme. That falls short of where we should be.

Growth has also sometimes seemed unbalanced. The two social services frameworks have expanded at pace, but there is an enormous gender divide. On the other side of the coin, many traditional science, technology, engineering and mathematics-based frameworks remain enormously male dominated, with around nine in 10 participants being male.

Choice also remains an issue. As with subject choice in schools, we should ensure not only that foundation apprenticeships are widely available but that the breadth of learning is reflected across Scotland.

Another element that I will consider is rurality. For the Highlands and Islands in particular, there must be an increasing focus on skilling and reskilling in our rural economy. Although there have been positive steps in recognising rural-based apprenticeships, demographic changes mean that those efforts must be upscaled considerably. Conditions have changed, but the problem was not unforeseen. For decades, rural businesses and trades have struggled to attract new entrants, and Government support has too often been piecemeal and pushed problems further down the line. If we want to mend some of the regional inequalities in Scotland and in our economy, apprenticeships in rural sectors are a vital tool for achieving that.

I am pleased, once again, to be able to mark apprenticeship week and recognise the great work of apprentices, who have often had to achieve in incredibly challenging circumstances. There is a road ahead to ensure that apprenticeships and the opportunity that they provide are available and accessible to all. Let us hope that 2022 brings some necessary change.

17:29

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): One of the facets of members' business debates is the opportunity that they provide for all of us to indulge in a little parochialism. That is far from a criticism, not least because I will focus my contribution on the Angus South constituency that I represent.

Specifically, and not for the first time, I will note the work of an organisation that, over the almost 11 years that I have served in the Scottish Parliament, I have highlighted by speaking in the chamber and by hosting visits to it by ministers such as Jamie Hepburn and by our former Presiding Officer, Tricia Marwick.

I am, of course, speaking about Angus Training Group, which has been located in Arbroath for the past 56 years, during which time it has produced

in excess of 2,000 engineering apprentices for a range of north-east firms. This non-profit-making organisation is supported by its member companies and Skills Development Scotland, and its role in the delivery of modern apprenticeships has been a constant during my tenure as the local MSP.

ATG has faced challenges, but it has shown itself to be nothing if not resilient and capable of adapting to the evolving nature of a changing world. Indeed, currently, the organisation is engaged in a refresh of its offering in a number of areas, including robotics and automation. As I said, it has faced challenges, especially following the oil price slump of a few years ago and from the pandemic.

The Catherine Street centre, which the group operates from, is capable of hosting 75 apprentices but, on the back of the slump, it was training just 12 new starts. By 2017-18, that number had bounced back a little to 23 and, in the following two years, numbers had climbed back into the mid-30s. However, the pandemic came and an anticipated intake of 50-plus translated into just 12 modern apprentices.

Despite the difficult times, ATG secured a contract for 30 pathway apprentices and built back from there. Indeed, feedback for employers suggests that the upcoming intake could rise to 40 to 45 MAs.

Stephen Kerr: Will the member take an intervention?

Graeme Dey: I wondered which half of the Statler and Waldorf double act would get to their feet; I give way to Mr Waldorf.

Stephen Kerr: I am not sure whether that is a compliment; I am trying to work out which one was which in "The Muppet Show", but I cannot remember.

I welcome Graeme Dey's speech. Does he agree that every penny of the apprenticeship levy that is raised in Scotland should be spent on apprenticeships?

Graeme Dey: It is regrettable that Mr Kerr regularly spends his time in members' business debates simply sniping at the Government. I invite him to fashion a speech, as many of his colleagues have done, and make a more positive contribution to these occasions. After all, the speeches are only four minutes long.

ATG is very proactive in seeking out the modern apprentices of tomorrow. Over the course of the past fortnight, its instructors have visited Carnoustie high school, Forfar academy, Morgan academy and, just today, Montrose academy, in order to entice local youngsters into an

engineering career through the modern apprenticeship route.

I hope that that offers positive evidence that the raising of awareness of apprenticeship opportunities, which the motion calls for, is already taking place in the engineering space, at least in Angus.

However, ATG has continued to struggle in one area, which is the recruitment of young women engineering MAs. Today, on international women's day, we need to reflect on that issue.

Pam Gosal: In the light of international women's day today, does the member believe that the Scottish Government needs to do more to promote more females into male-dominated roles?

Graeme Dey: There is no doubt that the Scottish Government has a part to play in that, but I contend—and I think that Pam Gosal would agree—that it is a wider issue. It is about the education system and society. The fashioning of gender stereotypes—"That is not a job for girls"—is a big problem in our society, and we need to start tackling that collectively.

I have chatted to some of the young women who have taken up the opportunity but, over the past decade, I can think of only one occasion on which more than two female apprentices have been part of any one intake. A small cohort from Aberdeen found its way to Arbroath via a programme that actively encouraged female entry into engineering—I think that it was run through the college in Aberdeen. However, in the main, the female apprentices I have met had identified engineering as a career path purely through family links.

That should give us all food for thought. The engineering workforce of the future must be better gender balanced and, clearly, a great deal more work needs to be done to make that happen. When the minister is summing up, I would be keen to hear from him what renewed attempts are being made to address that long-standing issue, but I reiterate that it is a societal issue; it is not about the minister or the Government.

I do not want to wind up on a negative note, because there is an overwhelming amount to celebrate about the modern apprenticeship programme. Angus Training Group might be a flag bearer in my neck of the woods, but it is not alone in modern apprenticeship delivery. I am pleased to see the numbers in Angus beginning to rise again and get back to pre-pandemic levels.

I thank Pam Gosal for lodging the motion and allowing us to showcase the positive benefits of the modern apprenticeship programme Scotland-wide and in Angus South.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I gently discourage members from calling other members names, although I appreciate that what was said was not the most barbed of comments. I am sure that I do not need to give that warning to Stephanie Callaghan, who will be the last speaker in the open debate.

17:35

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Thank you, Presiding Officer. I will take care not to do that.

I, too, congratulate Pam Gosal on bringing her first members' business debate to the chamber.

Apprenticeship week provides a chance to celebrate Scotland's apprentices and the businesses that support and nurture them. As we have heard, the theme of this year's celebration is "apprenticeships work". In my speech, I will focus, as many others have done, on demonstrating, not through a statistical lens but through personal stories and insights, why apprenticeships work.

It seems that our MSPs were out in force yesterday, and I was no different. My visit was to Saltire Facilities Management in my constituency. Saltire is Lanarkshire's success story, providing boilers, renewable heating and electrical services to the community. Throughout Saltire's history, providing apprenticeships to local people has been at the heart of its workforce strategy.

What better way to get informed on why the apprenticeships work than talking to the apprentices themselves. Yesterday, I met Connor, Euan, Jonathan and Liam—four young tradesmen who were full of enthusiasm—and talked to them about their experiences and the fact that they chose to follow the apprenticeship route from school. Their stories are the best marketing tool for apprenticeships, and their insights provide the best signposts in relation to where we—as a society, as policy makers and as educators—must do better.

Those four articulate and intelligent young men all made personal choices to become apprentices. They knew that they wanted to go down that path, and they are proud of their decisions. They see the path that they are following as equally valid and reputable as that followed by those who enter university, and they were all supported by their families, as Stephen—I cannot remember his surname for a second—Kerr mentioned. However, they were in the significant minority among their peers at school, with most of their friends choosing university over apprenticeships. Indeed, I got the impression that their friends never truly contemplated an apprenticeship. It is clear from the anecdotes that were provided yesterday that too many families and schools still view

apprenticeships as a less valuable, less marketable and less successful choice.

The young men I met yesterday love their jobs. They enjoy the mix of work and learning, the human and technical contact, the remuneration and having their weekends free to socialise with their friends. They also love the security that comes with an almost guaranteed job at the conclusion of their apprenticeship.

However, none of the young men felt particularly supported or encouraged by their schools to follow the apprenticeship path. The minister could perhaps pick up on that in his closing speech. They were all clear that schools need to become far more informed about foundation and modern apprenticeships. They suggested that schools offer students class time during which what different apprenticeships offer could be set out, and that employers and schools need to work more closely together to promote apprenticeship opportunities in the community.

Apprenticeships work because apprentices earn while they learn. They work because the opportunities directly relate to where the economy needs the skills. Apprenticeships work not only on an economic level but on social and community levels. The Saltire trade apprentices I met were caring, compassionate and confident. They enter between six and eight houses a day and engage with and talk to people they have never met before, who are often socially isolated. The young men really value those conversations and interactions. Apprenticeships create good citizens. We should never underestimate their benefit to our local communities.

As we emerge from the pandemic and work towards net zero, we must urgently adapt the skill requirements for our future workforce. Labour shortages in key industries, which have been exacerbated by Brexit, mean that policy makers and educators need to fully harness the power that apprenticeships can provide. Apprenticeships are fundamental in ensuring that Scotland has the necessary skills for our rapidly changing employment landscape, and in ensuring that we create the fairer, greener economy that Scotland seeks.

The Scottish Government has demonstrated its commitment to increasing the number of apprenticeships in Scotland. It is now incumbent on all of us as a society to ensure that they are encouraged and respected. Whether it is in relation to housing, healthcare or hospitality, we must cherish, celebrate and promote the crucial part that apprenticeships will play in Scotland's economic future. Apprenticeships do indeed work.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, Ms Callaghan. I am sure that it will not be long until

you come to know and love Mr Kerr and his interventions.

I call the minister to respond to the debate.

17:40

The Minister for Higher Education and Further Education, Youth Employment and Training (Jamie Hepburn): Presiding Officer, I think that we can lay the blame for Ms Callaghan misremembering firmly and squarely at Mr Dey's door, given that he misnamed Mr Kerr. I can remember Mr Kerr's name. I think that the problems were probably caused by the name Stephen Waldorf.

I join others in thanking Pam Gosal for bringing her motion on Scottish apprenticeship week to the Parliament for debate. I had not realised that this is her first members' business debate. It is a very good choice. As Jamie Halcro Johnston mentioned, he used to bring the issue for debate each year. It is right that we have a debate every year to mark Scottish apprenticeship week. One of the great joys that I have in the activity that I undertake in my ministerial role and have undertaken in previous ministerial roles relates to the ability to meet apprentices who are engaged in work-based learning. I have seen that it is a life-changing opportunity for them. It is right that we recognise that by having this debate. I thank other members for their various contributions.

I join Pam Gosal in commending Skills Development Scotland and the other partners that she mentioned on the significant amount of work that they do to support the range of activity that takes place during apprenticeship week. Not least of that is the work to support members with the various visits that have been undertaken or will be undertaken during the week. I thank members for the visits that they have undertaken—even Martin Whitfield, despite the chaos that he seemed to unleash with his visit. I commend engaging in such a visit to every single member, because it is only through the process of engaging with apprentices and their employers that we can really understand and see at first hand the difference that an apprenticeship makes to both.

Stephen Kerr: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: I will certainly give way to Mr Kerr, whose name I can remember.

Stephen Kerr: I thank the minister for remembering my name. I also pay tribute to his commitment to modern apprenticeships across Scotland. The first time that I ever met the minister was at Forth Valley College.

That brings me on to the evidence that has been presented to the Education, Children and Young

People Committee—there are at least two and a half other members of the committee present at the moment—that suggests that Colleges Scotland is deeply concerned about the level of cuts that colleges will suffer as a result of this year's budget allocation. Will the minister comment on those concerns, which are well founded and are not based on rumour or political point scoring? Colleges are deeply concerned about that and the impact that it will have on apprenticeships across Scotland.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for that intervention, minister.

Jamie Hepburn: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I will first make the incidental point that the vast majority of apprenticeships are funded through Skills Development Scotland, rather than through the budget line that is allocated for colleges, which relates to their core activity. There is a little in that line for apprenticeships and, in the main, the apprenticeship funding is through a different budget line. That is just for clarity and information for members.

On Mr Kerr's point about college budgets, we have here the convener of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, and I am sure that he and other members of that committee have heard directly from the Scottish Fiscal Commission and so would be able to testify to the fact that the Scottish Government this year is facing a 5.2 per cent cut in real terms to its overall budget. That means that we have £3.7 billion less to expend this year than we had last year. That is the challenge that we face.

Against that backdrop, however, I am absolutely committed to working with Colleges Scotland and the Scottish Funding Council to make sure that we, collectively, respond to the economic and societal imperatives that we have through colleges engaging with local communities and economies, and with employers and citizens, to ensure that they are responsive as they continue to do the great work that they always undertake.

Martin Whitfield: On international women's day, would it not be right to agree to try to narrow the gap between male and female apprentices, which is currently a 60:40 split, and aim for a 50:50 split?

Jamie Hepburn: It absolutely would be. I was going to pick up on that later. We have a challenge in that regard, as Graeme Dey rightly pointed out. As Mr Whitfield and others will recognise, we are dealing with deeply ingrained societal attitudes that have been inbuilt over generations. It is not easy to undo those, but we must set ourselves that task and must respond to it.

Through our developing the young workforce activity, we are seeking to challenge gender perceptions about what occupations different genders do. We are waiting to see what recommendations the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board's gender commission makes. Through the gender pay gap action plan that I was responsible for developing in my previous ministerial role, we will take a range of action to overcome some of the barriers that exist in that regard.

I underline the fact that Scottish apprenticeship week is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate the achievements of apprentices and the system that we have. As has been pointed out, the challenges that we face in relation to gender participation are significant. We also face challenges around parity of esteem. I am committed to responding to those challenges. As Pam Gosal, Stephanie Callaghan, Kenny Gibson and others have said, there is a misperception that, somehow, an apprenticeship is not of as high a standard as some other forms of post-school qualification. We need to tackle that misperception head on because, fundamentally, that is not the case.

Pam Gosal: Will the minister take an intervention?

Jamie Hepburn: I will give way in a moment. I want to make a point that picks up on Graeme Dey's point. I know that there is more to life than what a person might earn at the end of their qualification, but it is a factor for some folk. When I visited Angus Training Group with Mr Dey, I was told that the young engineers it was training will earn significantly—to save their blushes, I will not mention the precise figure—in excess of median earnings by the age of 21. That is one measurement that shows the benefit of undertaking an apprenticeship.

Pam Gosal: I mentioned in my speech that the issue of accessibility of apprenticeships for disabled people has been highlighted to the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. I believe that apprenticeships are there for everybody. We have talked about gender, but how can we help more people with disabilities to access apprenticeships? That issue has been brought up by disability support groups today.

Jamie Hepburn: We have had a concerted focus on that through Skills Development Scotland's equality action plan. I do not have the precise figures from previous years before me, but the latest figures that are available for the most recent full year show that around 12.8 per cent of modern apprenticeship starts self-identified with an impairment, health condition or learning difficulty. That represents a significant increase on where we were before. Therefore, we have made

improvements in that regard, but there is much more to be done, as I said in responding to Mr Whitfield. Ms Gosal can rest assured that we are committed to that end.

Presiding Officer, I have probably extended your patience enough, but I will quickly conclude by responding to Mr Halcro Johnston, who was concerned that we might look back at 2019 as the hallowed land. He was right to recognise—some of his party colleagues have not always done so—that it was inevitable that Covid-19 would have an impact on apprenticeship starts. Covid has had such an impact—we saw that with a significant fall in the most recent full year. Before Covid hit, we were on track to meet our 30,000 target, so it has had an impact. However, if we look at the latest figures, we see that, by the end of quarter 3 this year, there were nearly twice as many apprenticeship starts as there were last year. Therefore, we are on the road to recovery, although there is more to be done. I assure Mr Halcro Johnston that we will not look back at the pre-2020 period as the hallowed land.

I still have great ambitions for apprenticeships. We will work back towards the 30,000 target. That is a salient reminder of the value of apprenticeships year round, not just in this Scottish apprenticeship week.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: To the roll call of young apprentices that we have heard this evening, I add the name of Ryan, a young apprentice electrician at RS Merriman whom I met yesterday while he was working at Highland Park.

Meeting closed at 17:50.

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