

Women and Poverty – Position Paper Engender 2009

Introduction

Engender works to make Scotland a fairer, safer place where women can flourish and contribute to both the social and market economies with dignity, freedom and justice. To this end we seek to increase women's power and influence; make visible the impact of sexism on women and on Scotland's social, economic and political development; and support people, organisations and our government to make equality a reality.

We believe that women's poverty reflects women's unequal place in society, in the gendered division of labour, continued sex discrimination and gender stereotyping. Together these underpin women's position in the labour market, family and welfare state and the interaction between the three determines women's economic status over their lifetimes and this in turn is inextricably linked to child and pension poverty despite seldom being acknowledged as such.

Policy background

Between February and June 2008 the Scottish Government conducted a consultation exercise with their *Discussion Paper on Tackling Poverty, Inequality and Deprivation in Scotland*. Notably, the paper set out that in analysing poverty we must also recognise that “*the issues experienced by men and women may be gender-specific and demand distinct approaches to be taken in addressing the needs of men and women.*”

You can view Engender's response to this consultation at:

<http://www.engender.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Consultation%20Responses/080621%20Discussion%20Paper%20on%20Tackling%20Poverty%20Final%20Response.pdf>

In November 2008 the Scottish Government (SG) published *A Framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland*¹. This Framework – agreed with COSLA – provides a focus for public, private and voluntary sectors to work together to deliver greater Solidarity for all and within it the SG state quite clearly that tackling poverty and income inequality is at the heart of their activity.

“Evidence tells us that of all households, those headed by lone mothers with dependent children are most vulnerable to persistent poverty, and by far the most frequent route out of poverty for working age adults is through well paid and sustained employment.

¹ Achieving Our Potential A Framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland, 2008. Available at www.scotland.gov.uk

The quality of employment people are able to access is therefore crucial, as is removing barriers to that employment. To tackle poverty effectively we need to tackle it across the board.”

(Achieving Our Potential, 2009)

Engender’s position on women and poverty

The Government’s overarching aim to “increase sustainable economic growth” is of some concern to us at Engender since we are aware that increases in economic growth do not automatically lead to reduction in poverty. There is evidence to suggest that people living in more equal societies report being happier and feeling a greater sense of ‘belonging with’ than do people in more unequal (but wealthier) societies. If the Scottish Government seriously believes that inequalities in and of themselves damage society, it might need to admit that unfettered economic growth is simply not desirable.

Engender holds that sustainable economic growth should be widened to include **social sustainability**.

Changing the terms of the debate

Poverty is not simply about numbers because with low income comes a denial of choice and opportunity that most people take for granted. While we have poverty in Scotland we cannot guarantee human dignity for everyone who lives here so we must redress the balance and ensure we are committed to working towards a more socially just society. We must recognise that tackling poverty is not only about economics, but also equality and social justice and in doing so we must act to deliver initiatives which aim for a fairer distribution of wealth and advantages.

At Engender we have a strong sense that a change in the terms of the debate is required, which might be achieved most effectively by using the Social Justice argument.

Gender equality

Gender equality is just and fair. It is a fundamental, universal value. We cannot pretend to advocate for poverty reduction and sustainable development if we fail to reflect the voice of women, who constitute 52% of the population and the majority of the poor.

Gender equality and the empowerment of women are internationally-agreed goals. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals set out specific goals and targets. The international community is responsible for delivering on these commitments.

CEDAW in its report on the UK's progress towards the elimination of discrimination² say that it is a matter of some concern that many UK public bodies "*have faced difficulties in developing results-based and action-oriented equality schemes and in mainstreaming gender equality into all policies and processes.*" (CEDAW, June/July 2008)

Engender will continue to monitor this situation and to challenge public bodies where we see a failure to make visible measures to promote gender equality through the duties required of the local authorities in Scotland through the ministerial GED.

The Gender Equality Duty

The Gender Equality Duty (GED) was introduced in April 2007 and requires local authorities to conduct gender impact assessments of all new policies and laws, including on employment and service delivery.

The GED should thus give more attention to why poverty affects more women than men. Public spending exercises should ensure that recipients of funding are required to demonstrate how the services they offer, whether in provision of research or a direct service provision will consider impact on women and men. Effective discharge of these duties requires political direction and leadership consistent with the SG's ministerial commitment to promoting gender equality through the policies and programmes it funds.

The evident lack of ministerial direction to make visible such measures or to promote gender equality is a matter of great concern to Engender. The fact that the SG does not have a high level outcome for equality is a fundamental issue. Given that public bodies generally budget, implement and perform towards achieving those outcomes against which they will be measured.

Engender believes that establishing a high level outcome for equality would be an effective tool in the promotion of anti poverty policy and practice.

In some policy areas, the priority accorded to gender equality has been very limited and the SG must transform the way it collects data so that it can disaggregate by gender and more accurately assess poverty risks by focusing on individuals rather than adopting a 'one size fits all' approach.

Engender holds that gender mainstreaming is essential if the SG is to fully appreciate the differential impact of its anti-poverty strategies on women and men.

² Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Forty-first session, 30 June-18 July 2008 http://www.bayefsky.com/.pdf/uk_t4_cedaw_41_adv.pdf

Gender budgeting

The practice of producing gender sensitive budgets will improve the allocations of resources between women and men; will aid in tracing, and making transparent, the relationship between policy objectives and spending and will provide a framework for more participatory policy making.

Gender budgeting is an area of high priority for Engender and we will continue our close links with and support for the work of the Scottish Women's Budget Group.

Women and multiple deprivation

Poverty is about more than just numbers and women suffer multiple deprivation. Low income lies at the heart of the problem, but along with that low income comes a denial of choice and opportunity that most people take for granted. Living on a low income in Scotland means seldom having your voice heard and being seen as having less value than others. We will only succeed in ending child poverty when we address mothers' inequality by ensuring they have access to equal pay, adequate benefits and freedom from discrimination. Existing data and studies indicate clearly that investing in women and girls provides better results. When women earn extra income, they tend to spend it for their family members and for their children's education. They save money for the future. The impact, therefore, multiplies vertically and horizontally, towards families and communities – and to the future generation. Providing women with access to and control over productive assets and resources makes a big difference in poverty reduction.

Engender holds that women's inequality must be kept on the agenda and anti-poverty policy in Scotland must take issues of multiple identity and discrimination into account. Race, ethnicity, faith/belief, age, disability, geography and sexual orientation are all aspects which combine with gender and poverty to produce different patterns of discrimination and deprivation.

Jobs and Income Inequality

It is now over thirty years since the Equal Pay Act came into force, but there is still a massive inequality between men's and women's pay. There is a 14% gap between men's and women's full-time hourly rates and a shocking 33% gap when you compare women's part time hourly rate to men's full time hourly rate.

A major factor in the gender pay gap is the presence of children (as well as the assumption that women might have children), rather than age, marriage or education.

Women are still expected to perform the majority of household chores and child care. Women are expected to cut down on their paid work, quit their jobs, take emergency leave from work, or refuse promotions, in order to care for children, elderly parents or in-laws, or disabled relatives. The whole family suffers when women are under-paid and their work is under-valued.

The Government cannot hope to meet its commitment of ending child poverty unless serious inroads are made into closing both the full-time and part-time gender pay gaps.

Engender will continue to work with Close the Gap and the STUC to campaign and lobby on this issue.

Occupational Segregation

Tackling occupational segregation plays an important part in achieving the Scottish Government's targets and objectives. Ensuring that women and men have access to the full range of careers, and taking action to address the clustering of women in low paid jobs, will progress the *Solidarity* target.

Despite this however progress has been limited and Engender remains committed to work with partners to highlight and address the problems.

In terms of 'vertical segregation' there is clear evidence that women continue not to reach management and senior positions in employment as the same rate as men. Two issues explain women's limited movement into senior positions: 'glass ceiling' and 'sticky floor' effects. The 'glass ceiling' describes the invisible barriers that women and other disadvantaged groups face in reaching the top of their chosen field. The 'sticky floor' suggests that women are stuck in low paid, low skilled jobs due to limited availability of training and promotion opportunities, and assumptions about the value of jobs such as caring. This effect is particularly acute within part-time employment.

Education, peer pressure, careers advice and childbirth/motherhood guide women into 'traditional' and often lower paid and part-time work; an inflexible working culture and rigid support services combined with expensive and inaccessible childcare push carers out of full-time jobs. This has a lifelong impact on a woman's wages, accumulation of pension benefits, and experience in her chosen occupation.

Child poverty and links to women's poverty

We are well aware of what drives poverty and much, quite rightly, has been written and stated about the need to eradicate child poverty but the link between women's poverty and child poverty is largely ignored in debates and policy-making.

Engender holds that women's poverty matters in its own right and has implications for child poverty because of women's role as 'poverty managers' as well as their disadvantaged position in the labour market.

Current government strategy – with its focus on work as the key route out of poverty – is only partially effective. 4 in 10 children in poverty are living in lone mother households and 3 in 10 are in households where the father works but the mother is on low or no income.

Lone parents

Around half of lone parents (of whom more than 90% are lone mothers) are not in a position to generate sufficient income to be above an income poverty line while still meeting basic obligations (for example, to ensure their children are still looked after, by themselves or someone else), *however long or hard they work*. Women as lone parents are particularly vulnerable to poverty. The lack of adequate and affordable childcare creates a significant barrier for lone parents in their attempts to escape poverty through employment.

Women with children also face constraints in terms of finding work that is potentially commensurate with their skills and aspirations as well as flexible and convenient in terms of their childcare and other caring responsibilities. A lack of options forces many women into part-time, low paid work.

Engender believes that a gendered child poverty strategy would reinforce the case for adequate childcare provision.

Childcare and caring

In Scotland, just under half (43%) of households with children use some form of childcare and the most common form – a relative (generally another woman), is used in 27% of cases while 10% use a nursery. The main reason given for needing childcare is to ‘enable self/partner to work’ (SHS, 2007). Despite the development of the UK’s national childcare strategy, many women experience the provision as being patchy or unaffordable. We are aware that in many places services are being closed down.

Despite shifts in attitudes over the last 10 years, there remains the assumption that caring is still, for the most part, ‘women’s work’.

Engender holds that this assumption must be challenged. We will continue to argue for childcare workers to be better paid and for the value of unpaid care of children to receive proper recognition. We believe that childcare should be shared fairly between men and women and this should be promoted through policy, programmes and practice.

More than 60% of Scotland’s 650,000 carers are women. The immediate and long term costs of caring in terms of lost education and employment opportunities, income and security leave many women vulnerable to recurrent or persistent poverty and poverty in their old age.

Engender holds that this is unacceptable and is something we will continue to challenge through campaigns and lobbying.

If the contribution of carers to society and the economy is to be fully recognised and supported, it is vital that unpaid carers are effectively supported with adequate finance, whilst also having the opportunity to participate in working life if they so choose.

Pensions

With less than 12% of women receiving the full basic state pension and with a woman's average retirement income estimated at around 53% of a man's – many women find themselves in poverty in old age.

At present, career breaks, low pay and/or caring responsibilities mean that over 4.3 million women pensioners across the UK have failed to build up sufficient National Insurance (NI) contributions to qualify for the full basic state pension. Reforms promised for 2010 should alleviate the position but with no phasing-in these reforms will happen too late for many current women pensioners and those retiring in the next few years.

Working in partnership

At Engender we recognise and value the strength in bringing different alliances and building solidarity with other women and organisations to help to show the impact of poverty. We continue to work with partners including Close the Gap, the STUC, the Scottish Women's Budget Group, Oxfam, One Parent Families Scotland, the Poverty Alliance and others to tackle equal pay, to further investigate the potential for a Citizens' Income and in general to make the issue of women's poverty more visible to the whole of Scotland.

A new discourse

There is undoubtedly room for a new discourse. At the Engender AGM in October 2008, our speaker, Professor Ruth Lister referred to a "*combined politics of redistribution – which aims to achieve a more equal society in terms of the distribution of income and wealth – and a politics of recognition and respect – which aims to achieve equal and respectful treatment and participation as fellow citizens*". This fits perfectly with the position Engender takes on women and poverty in Scotland and we will work with new and existing partners and alliances to develop such a discourse through campaigns and lobbying and indeed every aspect of our work.