

## Keeping Women on the Agenda

Having worked across a range of equalities over the years I have spent the last year as the Executive Director of Engender focussing on the situation of women in Scotland. I arrive in particularly exciting times as we move from separate inequality strands into an equalities wide agenda that acknowledges the range and complexity of people's identities, the need to join up responses to address discrimination and create a expectation of equality across Scotland. And indeed joins feminists in the understanding that equality is not a minority business ...something we women have known for quite a while....

As an anti sexist organisation Engender's primary concern is women's inequality but any analysis of sexism acknowledges that sexism does not only affect women. It also impacts on children in many ways, and men who are discouraged from caring because they have to work to fulfil gender stereotypes as producer/provider; Poor men confined to gender stereotypes not applying for caring jobs and subaltern men such as:

- ❑ Young men who 'must' conform to sexist norms in schools and institutions
- ❑ Poor, lower class or discriminated men seeking a sense of worth in 'macho' or even toxic masculine identities,
- ❑ Gay men who are perceived as a threat because they are non-reproductive, as men that can benefit from male entitlement in the workplace but who are free from the economic 'burden' of child rearing resulting in the power of the PINK pound. Men who don't necessarily abide by the rules of the hegemonic patriarchy and could therefore pose a threat to the status quo.

And transgender people because they challenge the fundamentals of sexist gender relations and sexual identity.

Sexist notions that ascribe more importance to the market economy than the social reproductive economy disproportionately effect women both in the productive and reproductive spheres. This has impacts on lesbians who are perceived not play a reproductive role, don't produce labour [babies] or contribute to the maintenance of patriarchy. It also impacts on:

- ❑ Older people perceived as no longer 'productive'
- ❑ BME and poor people who have been historically exploited to increase profit and remain disadvantaged [slavery, racism and class hierarchies]

- ❑ Homeless and unemployed people who are seen as taking but not producing
- ❑ Disabled people who are perceived as unable, or less able to participate or produce rather than disabled by society and assumptions;
- ❑ And Gypsies and travellers who are perceived as unproductive and undermining the rules of civic and market economic patriarchies.

Much has been done to challenge discrimination in Scotland, often led by those most affected and who best understand the subtleties of social, political and economic exclusion.

The EOC recognised this when they said *“Representatives in political and public life need to reflect the communities they serve. Sex and Power 2007 shows that we are failing to respond to this challenge. Our economic success and social wellbeing are being undermined.”*

Women in particular, through their experience of institutional sexism and as 50% of many of other discriminated groups, can play a significant role in developing a broader understanding of the intersections of sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, hetero sexism, able bodyism etc.

Indeed research in Scotland<sup>1</sup> has shown that women’s representation increases the focus on equalities. This may or may not be because women are ‘nicer’ so more concerned about such things, it is more likely that as a non homogenous group making up half the population they have experienced multiple oppression as black women, older women, gypsy women, disabled women, lesbians etc. Women activists and women in power have had to develop an understanding of the systemic nature of sexism so that they can manage it to achieve their goals.

Research evidence in Scotland shows that:

- ❑ Having women in power changes both the agenda and the way issues are explored and decisions made.
- ❑ Women feel that women MSP’s hear them e.g. the high profile given to domestic abuse and sexual violence in both the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive.
- ❑ Women are less likely to engage in adversarial political processes and are more willing to work cross party and seek consensus to effect change.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Fiona Mackay

- ❑ Having women in parliament broadens the debate, for example women have introduced fresh perspectives to debates on enterprise, transport, rural development and environment.
- ❑ Women ministers improve working practices, for example, family friendly working hours and school holidays are observed.
- ❑ Women ministers are recognised as champions of equality issues and domestic abuse.

In this light, increasing women’s engagement and representation is more than a numbers game, it suggests that an increase in women’s representation and participation will change the focus of the debate, the way decisions are made and impact on poverty social exclusion, equality, care and caring, pensions and old age, child poverty, criminal justice, gender violence, sexual exploitation among many others.

Yet... *“ progress on women’s representation [in Scotland] across a wide range of professions and sectors has stalled and in some cases it has gone into reverse. This indicates that there is a lack of concerted action to address this issue, and suggests that achieving equality at the top cannot be left to chance.”* <sup>i</sup>

<b>Currently women in Scotland make up only:</b>	
33.3%	of MSPs
18.8%	of local authority council leaders
23.8%	of health service chief executives
34.7%	of public appointments
12.5%	of local authority chief executives
11.6%	of senior police officers
11.8%	of senior judges
20.9%	of secondary head teachers
27.3%	of FE college principals
23.1%	of University VCs

Women in power bring a new perspective to what is important, they acknowledge the social relations and the social reproductive economy as equally as important as the market economy. By having more women in power, more women will be encouraged to participate in public life bringing with them a shift in focus on what matters and therefore what is measured as success – resulting in indicators to measure [and value] social relations [equality], social reproductive assets, and wellbeing. These will influence what is done and how public money is spent and result in policy that acknowledges that the nations sense of wellbeing is not dependent on GDP or even income per capita. *[Research from the New Economics Foundation indicates that the UK economy as measured by*

*GDP has doubled since 1973, but that people's satisfaction with life has hardly changed.]*

Women pay a heavy price for the current focus on the market economy. By monitoring our countries' success, development and or failings solely in terms of GDP rather than the health and wellbeing of its people we fail to recognise the importance of the social reproductive economy. The market economy that confines and defines people and groups by their economic relationship to its purpose – to generate wealth - only acknowledges the social reproductive roles of women and men in so much as they provide happy, healthy labour and environments for the generation of wealth, and accords less value to their roles as carers.

Women's traditional role in ensuring the health and wellbeing of families and thus society has not diminished even though their role in the market economy has increased. They pay the price if they chose to care, they pay the price if they chose to work and they certainly pay the price if they have to, or chose to do both.

- Women still deliver most of the unpaid care in Scotland, making up 66% of the 650,000 unpaid carers and are still the most likely to take time out to care for young children. And more than half of the female population will take time out of their working life to look after elderly relatives. This impacts on their careers, their pay, assumptions about their potential and eventually their pensions. The average woman retires on 53% of the average man's pension. Only 12% of women access a full state pension. Women are more likely to be and remain poor.
- 90% of lone parents are women. Lone parents are among the poorest people in our country.
- Women's poverty leads to vulnerability, to poor health and wellbeing, violence and sexual exploitation for themselves and their children.
- Women fall foul of assumptions about their potential to participate fully in the workplace. Graduates earn 15% less than their male peers within 4 years of leaving college, and that is before they have children.
- Less than 10% of senior managers in the private sector are women and is only slightly better in the public sector at 20%. Those few women who do climb the ladder often do so at less pay or in the charity/voluntary sector where pay is lower.

We need to contradict myth that gender equality is done and dusted. Despite many gains in gender equality, gender inequality in Scotland persists.

All around us there are people publishing insightful research and analysis of sexism in the 21st century and the consequences for women and society; Not least, Fiona Mackay's research on political participation, Raewyn Connell's on masculinities and Evan Stark's research on coercive - all confirming a need for anti sexist approaches. Yet, we struggle to keep women's inequality on the agenda. It is often wrapped up as child poverty etc.

There is a silence about the cause and consequence of gender inequality that needs to be broken. We need to work with people to engage them in thinking about gender equality and its relationship to poverty, violence and other equality issues.

It has been nearly 100 years since the Suffragettes set out to achieve equality for women and 32 years since the Sex Discrimination Act. Yet gender inequality still exists. We need to consider the cost of gender inequality to us as individual women and men, on our families, on our communities and on Scotland's development and in doing so provoke thought about other inequalities and what needs to change

Increasingly we are told that working on a so called "women only" agenda, is no longer a policy or funding priority, that the focus now is on gender equality, that now it is about men and women. But, I can't help but notice that whilst it would be deemed inappropriate [quite rightly] to challenge a demand for action to stop discrimination against BME, disabled or LGB people by asking "what about discrimination against white, able bodied or heterosexual people?" respectively, it is not deemed inappropriate to respond to demands made to stop discrimination against women with "what about men?".

So as we say goodbye to the EOC and hello to the EHRC it is ever more important that policy makers and the public are not detracted from the reality that gender inequality disproportionately affects women.

Why is it so difficult to get support for anti sexist agenda to address the systemic nature of women's inequality and the constructs of masculinity and femininity and their consequences for society - violence, poverty, insecurity, injustice and limitations on freedom?

I am reminded of the struggles I had in Africa getting support to challenge structural inequalities [racism and economic exploitation] that led to poverty, war, HIV etc, and how easy it was to get aid for starving black babies. I used to call them 'sticking plaster' approaches that covered the wounds and eased the guilt by doing something without having to

acknowledge culpability. Whilst there is some support to deal with the consequences of sexism such as women's refuges and rape crisis centers there is rather less enthusiasm for supporting processes that address the causes, women's inequality and men's expectation of entitlement.

The very fact that we need refuges for women is an outrage. Last year in England they built safe rooms in women's homes so they a place to run with direct lines to the police should their partner get violent. Yet another sticking plaster! We don't build safe rooms for black people to protect them from white racists, or for gay people to protect them for homophobic attackers; we invest in campaigns to challenge racist, heterosexist and homophobic thinking, we work with BME and LGBT communities to address it at a societal level, we equality proof policy and practice across our public institutions and we develop policing strategies and legislation. Yet if we ask for support to address sexism we are declined because it is for 'women only'.

Despite the agreed need for a Gender Equality Duty it seems that it is still fundamentally hard for people to acknowledge that the reason we for that need one is because of the persistence of women's inequality let alone that sexist norms don't serve many men or LGBT, BME, disabled, young or old people either. Whilst young men may be the primary victims of violence it is the hands of other men living and is the result of sexist constructs of masculinity.

Just as there is increasing support for an anti racist agenda, we want to encourage popular support for an anti sexist agenda; An agenda that says that it is not OK for women to be paid less or be penalised in work and pensions for being mothers or caring for others; that it is not OK that women live under the coercive control of men continually limiting and adjusting their behaviour in order to feel safe in public and domestic spaces; that it is not OK that we should have to teach our girls to submit to such control ; and that it is not OK that men be penalised for wanting flexible working to manage work and family; an agenda to make freedom and justice for all reality.

An anti sexist agenda that will impact way beyond making life fairer for women, it will in the longer term make Scotland a happier, healthier and fairer place for everyone.

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<sup>i</sup> Sex and Power. Who Runs Scotland 2007 EOC