

Press Release



Sea bass, beer and a comprehensive review of gender equality

Our MPs may be under pressure with the whole expenses debacle raging on, but, at least, thanks to Twitter, we know exactly what our representatives are up to...

Marsha Scott and Emma Ritch (from Scottish Women's Budget Group and Engender) were sent to Geneva last week to the hearings of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Committee covers gender equality issues and was reviewing the UK government's progress over the last 5 years. Having read the government's submission, Engender responded with our own take on some of the missed opportunities and stalled progress of both the UK and Scottish government equalities agendas.ⁱ This is the first time a voice particularly for Scottish women has been heard at this committee or in the wider UN committee structure.

In between sipping beer on the shores of Lake Geneva and watching their sea bass being prepared by Italian waiters (all captured on www.twitter.com/swbg), our duo were able to speak to UN officials, suggesting areas that could be explored further with the UK delegation and providing overnight policy analysis for the UN committee to use in the following day's hearing.

And from a look at the UN's Concluding Observations, issued this week, it seems our voices were loud enough. The Committee urges the UK government to carry out a '**comprehensive review of its policies to overcome gender inequalities**' and urged specific action be taken in respect of the persistent gender pay gap, the disadvantages faced by women in terms of pension provision and the appallingly low rape conviction rate.ⁱⁱ

We welcome the attention to gender in the observations and look for real progress before the Committee meets again in 5 years.

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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. www.engender.org.uk

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) promotes gender equality in the Scottish budgetary process, bringing together a cross-section of women with expertise from academia, local communities, the statutory and voluntary sectors and trade unions. www.swbg.org.uk

ⁱ See Engenders Shadow Report to the Committee at: http://www.engender.org.uk/UserFiles/File/news/EngenderReport_toECOSOC6.4_09_.pdf

ⁱⁱ **Below is a Summary of the Concluding Observations for the UK in relation to gender**

1. In particular, the Committee is concerned that progress towards the eradication of the wage gap between men and women has stalled, especially in the private sector and for persons employed in part-time work. (arts. 3, 6, 7)

The Committee, in line with its General Comment No. 16 (2005) on the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights, recommends that the State party conduct a comprehensive review of its policies to overcome gender inequalities. It also recommends that the State party continue intensifying its efforts to enhance equality between men and women in the work place, particularly with regard to equal pay for work of equal value in all sectors of employment. The Committee encourages the State party to take into consideration the findings of the inquiry to be conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and to ensure that the Equality Bill contain effective provisions aimed at closing the wage gap in the private sector.

2. The Committee is concerned that pension entitlements do not provide the most disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups, including women, persons with disabilities and ethnic minorities, with an adequate standard of living. (art. 9)

The Committee encourages the State party to ensure that the State pension reform of the Pension Act 2008, which introduces a new private saving scheme to come into

effect 2012, provide sufficient flexibility to enable especially the most disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups, to benefit from both schemes and to increase their pension entitlements. It encourages the State party to carry out a targeted information campaign about the pension reforms to make people aware of their rights and responsibilities. It also recommends that the State party provide detailed information, in its next periodic report, on the impact of the pension reform, especially on the most disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups.

3. The Committee notes with concern that, despite the steps taken by the State party, domestic violence, and in particular violence against women, is still a widespread problem. It also notes with concern that the number of rape cases which are brought to courts is low. It also remains concerned that corporal punishment of children in the home is not yet prohibited by law.

The Committee recommends that the State party reinforce its measures to combat violence against women. It further recommends that the State party intensify its efforts to raise awareness of the gravity of this offence and the mechanisms available to victims of domestic violence, to improve training for police and law enforcement officials and judges in relation to rape cases, and to increase the support services for victims at the local level. The Committee further recommends that the State party take appropriate measures to ensure that complaints of rape are diligently and impartially investigated and prosecuted without any inherent bias or scepticism towards alleged victims. The Committee reiterates its recommendation that physical punishment of children in the home be prohibited by law.

The full Concluding Observations of the 42nd Session of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for the UK can be seen at:
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cescr/docs/AdvanceVersions/E-C12-GBR-CO-5.doc>