

## Women bear the burden of poverty

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by **Jolene Cargill**, Social Affairs Editor

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While we are up to the eyes in statistics about poverty in Scotland, reports on the latest research barely seem to scratch the surface.

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This week women's charity Engender launches a campaign to get past the rhetoric and tackle the root causes of poverty. The Who Counts? campaign was developed after research with women's groups across Scotland. Thousands reported feeling forced into poverty as a direct result of low-pay, poor health and housing or lack of access to childcare and education.

As part of the campaign, funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, Engender is asking public bodies to address poverty among women amid fears efficiency savings will drive down wages and push more women, children and families into poverty. The charity is now calling on governments and local councils to publish information on the gender-breakdown of poverty.

### **Women living in poverty**

Women's groups who took part in the initial research raised their worries about the gender pay gap, benefits and the pressures of caring roles. Local authorities have a legal duty to take account of the impact their policy decisions will have on women and men, but despite the legal obligation to ensure gender equality only just over a third of respondents thought that their local authority took account of how these issues affect women when developing policies and services.

To mark the launch of the of the national project on Tuesday 1 March, Engender ran charity run drop-in events at venues in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, Dundee, Perth and Lochgilphead where women left messages about their own experiences of poverty.

One single mother from Glasgow told Engender how losing her job led to being rehoused by the council and struggling to make ends meet because rent in the new, smaller house was double that of her original house.

The charity says looking at poverty as 'gendered' is not sexist and argues that poverty affects women in specific ways. For example, over 90% of lone parents in Scotland are women, women also account for over sixty percent of unpaid carers. Engender claim services can only be effective if the disproportionate effect of poverty on women is taken into account when delivering services. Niki Kandirikirira, Engender's Executive Director said, "We know how many children, pensioners and households are in poverty but it's the statistics themselves that reveal why the numbers are proving so hard to bring down. At no point do we recognise the gendered nature of poverty. Measures to tackle poverty will fail to deliver until we recognise that gender inequality is in itself a root cause."

### **Practical support for lone parents**

Severe poverty is defined as living on an income of less than half of the UK median income. For a lone-parent family with one child aged under 14 that's less than £7,000 a year. Engender says most lone parent families, identified by the Scottish Government as at high risk of poverty, struggle to juggle work and access affordable childcare.

Lindzi Burke is a full time mother with three children, Ellie, 7, Courtney 9 and Rachel-Anne, 10. The thirty three year old started a new job in January as a part time support worker for One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) after being out of work for sixteen months. Ms Burke, from Motherwell, lost her previous job when the training company she worked for collapsed. "I have worked in highly paid jobs in the past but can't get into those sectors. Now I have to give this my best shot. You have to start somewhere. I can't afford to think of us as poor. If I thought that way it would be hard to get out of my bed in the morning."

The pay is not much more than the minimum wage but Lindzi says it's more rewarding than living on benefits. "To be honest the pay is not much more than being on benefits. But it's good to be doing it on my own and I never know what might come out of this."

"I get upset because I have to budget for so many other things that I can't afford to give my girls treats, even just little things like credit for their mobile phones, money for a school club or trips. I am so aware that I am always saying 'no' because we can't afford it."

After separating from her husband, she had to go into hospital to have an operation on her back and doctors warned her she might not work again. She has been a single mother for four and a half years. "You need to be able to balance work with being there for your children. But it's hard because love doesn't put shoes on their feet!"

“When I was out of work and going to college I thought this constant struggle must be what life is like for a lot of parents. This month will be my first wage in over a year. I still get child tax credits and working tax credits. Child tax credits went up a bit but it’s given with one hand and taken with the other.”

With cuts to benefits and high unemployment rates, Ms Burke says lone parents need more practical support to be able to apply for and sustain jobs. She commented, “It’s only a six month contract but its fantastic to be back out there. I love the job and being a single parent myself I know what people who come to the project are going through. The amount of help and advice I get from OPFS is unbelievable. All parents no matter what their circumstances need better support and advice.”

There has been an increase in child tax credits for 2011/12 but working tax credits have been reduced. Since October 2010 lone parents with a child aged seven or older are no longer entitled to income support and child care contributions have been cut from 80 to 70%.

While the UK Government brings in the raft of welfare cuts, Engender joins the long list of organisations calling on the Scottish Government to ensure its budget and local spending decisions are protecting the poorest families.

### **The ‘low pay no pay’ trap**

For families on the breadline poverty is already damaging the children’s life chances. And the message from those at the frontline of support services is loud and clear. It’s only going to get worse with the aftermath of the recession kicking in; cuts to services, increases in VAT and inflation, record unemployment among young adults. The full effects of the ‘downstream’ effect on jobs, incomes and housing might not be seen for some time.

As part of the Who Counts campaign, Engender is calling on the public sector in Scotland to adopt progressive equal pay policies. The charity says tackling low pay has to be a priority to get women out of the cycle of ‘low pay no pay’, often compounded by unaffordable childcare.

Niki Kandirikirira noted, “Despite more women than men being employed in education, health and social work they are still more than twice as likely to be low paid as their male colleagues. It’s forty years since the Equal Pay Act but women working full time are on average paid on 12% less than men and 32% less for part time work. Tackling low pay in the public sector would have a positive ‘spread’ effect on low wages across the economy.”

### **Tackling child poverty**

By tackling women’s poverty, Engender says Scotland can improve the lives of their children, families and all of our communities. Supporting women would have a significant knock on effect and in the last decade has been a key part of both UK and Scottish governments’ strategies to lifting children out of poverty.

Research out last week was another stark reminder of the enormity of the challenges. Save the Children is calling on the UK and Scottish Government to introduce emergency plans to tackle child poverty. The charity

warned that the numbers of children in Scotland living in the most severe poverty will rise dramatically because Scots have the lowest chance of finding work in the UK. In Glasgow, there are 18 people chasing every vacancy compared to an average of 6 in similar areas in England – almost three times as many.

And it's not just unemployed families bearing the brunt. Over 25,000 children in severe poverty live in households where at least one adult works. In fact, in-work poverty is at record levels, according to a report published at the end of 2010 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which revealed that half of children living in poverty belong to working families.

Unlike in England and Wales there is no statutory duty on Scottish local authorities to tackle child poverty but the Scottish Government claims it will meet its 'ambitious' target to end child poverty by 2020.

The Child Poverty Action Group, one of over 150 member organisations of the Campaign to End Child Poverty, said the strategy to 'eradicate' child poverty by 2020 needs stronger political will to drive it. According to Head of Policy John Dickie, "More is needed to hold government at every level to account for delivering the promised action needed to end child poverty. We need firm targets to tackle the low pay, childcare barriers, advice and information gaps and additional costs of school that all undermine parents' efforts to give their children the best start in life."