

TACKLING CHILD POVERTY IN SCOTLAND: CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Engender's Response

Engender is a membership organisation working on an anti-sexist agenda in Scotland and Europe to increase women's power and influence and make visible the impact of sexism on women, men and society.

Scotland's economy is growing and is one of the strongest in the world, yet poverty is widespread. A combination of social, political and economic factors drive the nature and extent of family poverty – inequality, low pay, inadequate benefits, poor quality work opportunities and lack of support for those with caring responsibilities, ill health or affected by disability.

Engender welcomes the opportunity to respond to this '*Tackling Child Poverty in Scotland: A Discussion Paper*' because we agree that child poverty 'is unlikely to decrease as a function of the announced [UK] spending decisions and policy reforms' and believe a refined strategy is needed.

1. What are your views on the Scottish Government's current approach to tackling child poverty, outlined in this paper? In particular: does it capture the key areas where action is required to ensure the greatest impact on reducing child poverty, and are there any important steps to be taken by the Scottish Government that are not covered in this paper?

This discussion and the current approach to child poverty is gender neutral at best and gender blind at worst. Gendering the goals and outcomes is the only way to make a real impact on the level of child poverty in Scotland.

Tackling women's poverty is key to the success of the child poverty strategy. Women are the main managers of family poverty and the stress can undermine their maternal role. This is only amplified by the:

- Disadvantage women face in the labour market
- Inaccessible and often unclear access to services and
- Inadequate financial support for those not in paid work. For example working as carers for children, elderly parents or other loved ones.

Reductions in poverty have stalled because of a consistent failure to gender child poverty issues – 'families' and 'parents' are inherently gendered notions incorporating gendered cultural and social norms. Failure to acknowledge the relationship between child poverty and gender inequality, brought about by the lack of value given to women's social and reproductive roles, undermines strategies for change.

More than half of children that are living in poverty, are living in households where an adult works. We believe this is due to the fact, pointed out in the discussion paper that:

"Significant inequalities in employment and low pay...exist, particular among groups such as women and disabled people."

And agree with your statement that:

"Addressing these issues is crucial to tackling recurrent and persistent poverty, and meeting the child poverty targets".

Far too many women remain trapped in low paid jobs. Proportionally, twice as many female employees receive less than £7 per hour than male employees. Furthermore, for many women a job may not be an immediate or even long-term option because of sickness, disability, parenting or other caring responsibilities. The contribution of those not in-paid work must be supported and valued. Women are disproportionately represented in the 'long term unemployed' based on the situations previously described and should be included in your list of those who reside 'furthest from the job market'.

Whilst the importance of gender is mentioned, in paragraph 4 on page 6, this thinking has not been applied to the rest of the document (there is no gendered analysis). It is strange that whilst society has historical and openly social, cultural (including religious) gendered notions of family and parenthood, government appears to avoid it. Gender neutral or blind language does not reveal the issues that need to be addressed - The word 'parents' is used without any reference to social practice of motherhood and fatherhood and the word 'families' is used with out reference to the complexity of family in 2010-11, nor are the poverty implications of gendered norms, family norms etc.

What is needed? A child poverty strategy that recognizes the well being of the mother is crucial and understands that women's earnings are fundamental to keeping families, and in turn children, out of poverty. There needs to be:

- Action to address the inadequacy of benefit levels for those out of work
- A high profile, national, campaign to maximise the uptake of all welfare entitlements and tax credits.
- More resources to ensure the effective enforcement of the National Minimum Wage.
- Relevant, high quality and paid training for all those who need it, whether in or out of work.
- A strategy to tackle labour market discrimination which prevents women and black and minority ethnic groups from progressing in the labour market and earning a decent income
- The removal of the childcare barrier to work by setting out a strategy toward a universal approach to providing childcare free at the point of delivery.

If the Scottish Government's purpose is to 'create a more successful country with opportunities for all in Scotland to flourish' then they need to take into consideration the cycle of gender biases and how this effects cycles of poverty, deprivation, unemployment, health etc. Gender based discrimination puts families and children at risk.

Your focus on poverty and income inequality is reflected in the goal to 'increase overall income and the proportion of income received by the three lowest income

deciles' however, the most effective and (gender savvy way) of achieving this goal would be to address low pay in the care sector, maternity rights and flexicurity.

Engender supports the Scottish Governments 'desire to see a single progressive and more accessible means of supporting childcare costs'. We are also keen to see family friendly working practices developed and implemented in Scotland and would welcome the opportunity to work with the government on these developments.

2. We would like to hear your views on what the priority areas for action in the Scottish strategy should be:

a) What measures will make the biggest difference to reducing levels of child poverty?

b) What measures will make the biggest difference to reducing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on children?

The key areas that need to be addressed are education, benefit reform, universal free childcare, reducing occupational segregation and the gender pay gap.

Maximizing household resources will make the biggest difference in reducing levels of women's poverty, which will also reduce the amount of child poverty and the effect of socio-economic disadvantage on children. However, all of the statements made in the family income, employment, employability and employability and skills are shockingly gender neutral. It is difficult to understand, given the statement on page 6, how any progress towards addressing child poverty can be made until the relationship between women's inequality in income, employment and care provision is acknowledged openly as a factor in child poverty. Engender does not understand why mentioning gender has been avoided when there is clear and obvious evidence that it plays a key role in child poverty.

We are also curious how the discussion on childcare be so gender blind? It appears that there is a problem with using the word 'women'...97% of lone 'parents' are women, the majority of 'people' that take time out of their careers and lose opportunity because of inadequate or expensive child care provision are women, the majority of people who 'balance work, home and caring responsibilities' are women, the majority of those providing child care on low pay are women. Additionally, flexicurity will not be attained until it is safe and desirable for men to take it too without risking their careers.

Free universal childcare would reduce pressure on household budgets and enable 'parents', to manage their return to work, providing a doubly positive outcome by increasing household income.

A high quality education is not only a defence against poverty in later life, but is essential to allow the development of every individual's potential and to ensure that they are able to access the widest range of opportunities in the future. Scotland needs to do more to tackle the educational inequalities gap and to ensure that our education system not just only equips people for the labour market but supports individuals' participation in the social, cultural and democratic life in Scotland.

The section titled *Transition to Adulthood* should be amended to take into account the occupational segregation and the consequential pay gap that exist within the labour market. More Choices, More Chances has the potential to be a useful tool for school leavers but only if it attempts to address the barriers that young female students may face in the labour market. This also applies to the Modern Apprenticeships, as they too need to directly address occupational segregation. A route to 'sustainable, productive employment' for a young woman will differ than a route for a young man and we can no longer pretend that this is not the case if we want to make a real difference to the levels of poverty in Scotland.

Engender also has a desire to see more levels of parental employment, however it is important to keep in mind that that barriers to employment for men differ greatly than those faced by women. A critical factor that was left out of the list for determining the availability of employment is the role that the Scottish Government can play in enforcing equality legislation. This will improve the delivery of services, and the pay and employment of public sector workers, both of which can help tackle women's and child poverty.

Children will benefit from gains made by their mother. This is true in terms of employment, education and what this will do for their physical and mental health. We need to make work and the earnings that come with it, enough to enable a single mother to afford child care and provide for her family. This can be achieved through a developing free at the point of service childcare, family friendly working practices (that acknowledge that it may not work for all people to work from 9-5) and more support for higher education.

3. What, in your view, are the main constraints to tackling child poverty in Scotland

a) at the (Scottish) national level?

As is evidently outline in this consultation response, the greatest concern that Engender has with tackling child poverty at the Scottish national level is the general gender blindness that is apparent in poverty analysis and policy. It is impossible to separate children's well being from the well being of their mothers and fathers and consequently gender inequality. The focus on 'family' poverty fails to acknowledge the diversity family types, the impact of women's inequality on family income and the fact that the majority of lone parents are women. The focus on 'parents' as if men and women are equal does not acknowledge the poverty implications of occupational segregation, pay inequality and a mother having to hand over one third or more of their income to pay for childcare. The Scottish national level runs the risk of overlooking the crucial changes that need to be made that have the potential to make the most difference in the lives of children.

b) at local (Community Planning Partnership) level?

The main constraint at this level is the lack of people-centred and joined up services.

4. This discussion paper sets out the principles of an “assets-based approach” (Section 3). What are your views on this approach? What would help to deliver and promote it?

First, we would like to mention that the three policy frameworks listed in section 3.2.1 are or should be guided by considerations of the GED, DED, RED and Equality Act (2010).

It is important to note that whilst it will be important to carry out an EqIA during the development of the strategy, an EqIA should have been part of developing this discussion paper.

Engender agrees that an asset based approach is appropriate but believes that such an approach would require a gendered analysis to be effective, particularly regarding what assets women bring to the care economy and what assets are lost to the market economy due to limitations in child care provision.

An effective asset based approach would take account of difference/diversity – in the case of gender it would see a mothers’ provision of free care as an asset to the market economy not only a function of the social reproductive economy, which is all too often perceived incorrectly as a cost (deficit) to the market economy. Poverty for women and children is more often than not due to the undervalued role women play in our society.

A 'child centred approach' needs to take into account socially normative gender biases, such as gendered notions of family relations, and assumptions of one's role. Whilst it would be lovely to think that ‘new fathers’ took equal caring responsibilities, statistics demonstrate otherwise. (On reading this paper we have started to wonder if it has become taboo to mention gendered roles and why, when family and parenting are inherently gendered notions, discussions skirting around the gender as an ‘elephant in the room’?) Whilst it is not good to stereotype people by their gender it is important to acknowledge the current social and cultural realities and their implications and not pretend we live in some gender equality utopia.

5. What can the Scottish Government do to effectively support its partners to tackle child poverty? In particular:

- **This discussion paper notes the particular challenges for focusing public spending on early intervention and prevention in a constrained economic climate. What could the Scottish Government do to support local areas with these challenges?**
- **More generally, what can the Scottish Government do to facilitate local strategic approaches to tackling child poverty, and to support effective local delivery?**

Engage women’s organisations and gender academics in the child poverty strategy development and delivery.

6. What are your views on existing measures to monitor progress on tackling child poverty, set out in Section 5?

If the national outcomes set are to be meaningful and successful it is crucial that each be gendered. This can be done, for example, by the including the aforementioned suggestion about including gender biases to the long list of significant inequalities that Scottish society faces. Additionally, realising the 'full economic potential with more and better employment opportunities for our people' will need to take into consideration the different challenges that women face in the labour market that have all been mentioned many times above. Whilst the government has invested in tackling occupational segregation and the gender pay gap the analysis, the thinking that underpins those initiatives does not appear to have been integrated into the child poverty analysis.

Poverty indicators should be gender disaggregated. This will help illustrate to the government some of the points that have been made throughout this consultation and support a more gendered, more effective approach, to tackling the problem.