



Expert Working Group on Welfare, call for evidence Engender Response, December 2013

Introduction

Engender is a membership organisation working on gender equality agendas in Scotland and Europe, to increase women's power and influence and to make visible the impact of sexism on women, men and society. We provide support to individuals, organisations and institutions who seek to achieve gender equality and justice.

Social security and gender are intricately interlinked. Women are more reliant on the welfare system, with benefits comprising 20 per cent of the average women's income, compared to ten per cent for men.ⁱ In parallel, due to caring responsibilities and gender segregation, women are more reliant on key public services and consequently bear the brunt of public spending cuts. Since 2010, 74 per cent of the £14.9 billion worth of cuts to benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions has been taken from women's incomes.ⁱⁱ

This profile is the result of entrenched structures of gender inequality that limit women's access to resources, decision-making and physical safety. The UK's social security system is a facet of this, as demonstrated by the highly gendered impact of the current government's 'welfare reform' programme.ⁱⁱⁱ

An equitable social security system must help to combat this sexist discrimination, or else women will remain excluded from full citizenship. We advocate a rights-based approach to social security in Scotland, which not only provides the basic social protections that are currently lacking for so many, but is fundamentally designed as an instrument to achieve social inclusion, equality and gender equality goals.

Q1: What should be the high level purpose(s) of the benefits system in an independent Scotland? What key outcomes should such a system aim to achieve?

Any new benefits system should seek to tackle social injustice and inequality, as well as ending poverty. The system should aim to transform understanding and public perception of social protection, addressing the stigmatisation of claimants and moving away from "benefit" and "welfare" models, towards the social investment approach that underpins proposals for a Citizen's Basic Income.^{iv}

Such a system would be tailored to meet the diverse needs of service users, including those of lone mothers, carers, disabled women, refugees and older women.

Q2: What are the main principles that should underpin the benefits system?

Engender is a member of the Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform and endorses the key principles and calls for a transformed social security system set out in *A Manifesto for Change*.^v Human rights and dignity must be at the heart of any such system.

It is also clear that without embedded structures to redress gendered flaws in existing welfare models, social security will continue to fail women in Scotland. An equitable system must therefore also be specifically underpinned by gender equality as a core principle.

Q3: Which areas of policy are fundamental to the delivery of a system that meets the principles you have set out? What evidence do you have to support that view?

Effective delivery of such a system would rest on much greater congruence between social and economic policymaking. Gender and other equalities areas, must be mainstreamed across government structures. Mechanisms such as the Equality Budget Statement and Public Sector Equality Duty must be linked strategically to overarching frameworks, including the National Performance Framework and Government Economic Strategy. Without this, progressive approaches to social security will be undermined from the outset.

Substantively, equalities, anti-poverty and child poverty, employability, mental health and social care policy are fundamental to social protection. In terms of equalities, gender, disability, race, marriage and age are particularly relevant.

Policy to tackle violence against women (VAW) and their children is also intricately connected to any social security system that serves to protect citizens from harm. Women's lack of financial autonomy and economic inequality are both cause and consequence of domestic abuse. In order to eradicate these systemic links, social protection and VAW strategies must be explicitly integrated.

The transition between immigration and social security systems for refugees with newly granted status must be joined up. Presently, this is far from the case and the risk of destitution, homelessness and increased vulnerability is high, especially for women and their children.

Q4: Which areas of welfare should be delivered as services and which through cash transfers, and why?

Where possible, cash transfers would be optimal within a system that aims to enable full participation in society for all. In particular, support for parents and lone mothers, disabled people and older people should be geared towards securing financial independence. Without this autonomy, many people, particularly women, are left at risk of abuse.

Q5: Of these services and/or transfers which should be means-tested support and which should be universal provision?

Child Benefit, or equivalent transfers for parents, should be provided universally. Resources are often not controlled or shared equally within the household and, as unpaid carers for children, women often lack financial independence. For many women, including where partners are high earners, Child Benefit is their only source of income.

Pensions should be provided universally, not least as access to occupational pension schemes is unequal and gendered. Under the status quo, two thirds of the 2 million pensioners living in poverty across the UK are women and it is anticipated that single pensioners, the majority of whom are women, will be the most affected by current public spending cuts.^{vi}

Broadly, there are inherent risks where means-testing is calculated at the household level. As second earners, often in low-paid insecure jobs and as unpaid carers for children, disabled and long-term sick relatives, many women are left without independent income. This results in increased women's and children's poverty, and increased risk of violence.^{vii}

Q6: How important is it that benefits relate directly to the contributions paid by an individual, and if important, which benefits and why?

Any contributions-based system must be designed to reflect so-called 'informal' economies, including the unpaid work of carers, mothers and grandmothers.

Q7: When considering the cost of welfare in the future, what are the most important considerations which Governments in an independent Scotland should take into account, and why?

The imperatives of tackling poverty, social injustice and pervasive gender inequality in Scotland should be prioritised in any cost-benefit analysis of a new welfare system.

Q8: How should benefits be delivered in this system? (E.g. Through a new or existing national public body? Through existing public or third sector organisations? Localised delivery based on national guidelines?) What would this entail? Are there barriers to such a structure?

Localised forms of delivery, supported by national structures would be best suited to meeting the needs of service users. Operational practicalities, demographics and the contours of demand differ vastly across local authority areas.

For instance, in rural areas, access to services and to infrastructure such as childcare, internet and public transport are major issues with significant gendered dimensions. Ethnic minority and refugee communities, concentrated in certain localities, have particular support needs factored by dynamics such as education and employment patterns, linguistic barriers, cultural gender roles and limited support networks.

Local delivery would facilitate tailored implementation of policy objectives and overarching equality aims and enable integration with other services targeted at particular groups, including lone mothers, BME, older, rural or refugee women.

Q9: What are the advantages and challenges of the delivery system you propose? What should its relationship be with e.g. 'job centres', work preparation programmes, and members of society who are unable to work but wish to play a full role in society?

There are challenges attached to local delivery in terms of consistency and equality of outcomes. In part, this should be addressed through comprehensive equalities training for public sector staff, including job centre and employability service employees. Such training should be particularly focused on the needs of groups most marginalised by current reforms, including lone mothers and disabled people.

An equitable social security system should be structured explicitly to support members of society who are unable to 'work'. Key to this is addressing the false dichotomy between paid and unpaid work in the public and private spheres. For example, childcare undertaken by parents is not counted towards GDP and is categorised in economic models as 'leisure'. Childcare provided by paid childcare workers contributes to GDP and is categorised as 'work'. The fact that much of women's work is misread and uncounted has obvious and far-reaching implications for policy formulation, and therefore on women's lives. An inclusive conception of social security could help to erode this.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The Fawcett Society (2013) *The Budget: Who Benefits* (<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Budget-2013-Helping-or-Hurting-women.pdf>)

ⁱⁱ House of Commons Library (2010) *How have Coalition budgets affected women?* (docs.google.com/spreadsheets/ccc?key=0AonYZs4MzIZbdHA1M2JJVF8tZTBvYWUzeFRnRU1yOHc#gid=0)

ⁱⁱⁱ Scottish Government (2013) *The gender impact of welfare reform* (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00432337.pdf>)

^{iv} McKay, A. (2013) *Welfare to Work' or a Welfare System that Works? Arguing for a Citizens Basic Income in a new Scotland*. David Hume Institute (http://www.scotlandfutureforum.org/assets/library/files/application/Research_Paper_5-McKay.pdf)

^v Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform (2013) *A manifesto for change* (http://povertyalliance.org/userfiles/files/campaigns/SCoWR_manifesto_2013.pdf)

^{vi} Engender (2012) *Multiple Jeopardy? The impacts of the UK Government's proposed welfare reforms on women in Scotland* (<http://www.engender.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Multiple-Jeopardy-Briefing-paper.pdf>)

^{vii} Women's Budget Group (2005) *Women's and children's poverty: making the links* (<http://www.wbg.org.uk/documents/WBGWomensandchildrenspoverty.pdf>)