



Engender response to the Scottish Labour Policy Forum consultation

January 2025

1. INTRODUCTION

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation. We work to increase women's social, political, and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes at Scottish, UK, and international levels.

The 2026 Holyrood Election is a chance for Scottish Labour to show meaningful commitment to women's equality and for the party to be bold in creating a manifesto that will improve their lives materially. We ask that Scottish Labour ensure that their proposed policies recognise and actively address the deep fault lines of intersectional gender equality, which are alive and well in Scotland.

Our response covers the following areas:

- Closing the gender pay gap
- Sexual and reproductive healthcare
- Decriminalisation of abortion
- Women's physical and mental health inequalities
- Women's paid and unpaid caring
- Improving childcare as a gender equality issue
- The gendered impacts of housing and homelessness
- Tackling the gendered nature of poverty and the cost-of-living crisis
- Improving equality outcomes of the Scottish Government
- Equal representation in politics
- Reforms to social security
- Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls
- Equality in Culture, Music and Sport

2. CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

Commission 1: Becoming an Economic Powerhouse to Improve Lives Workforce

1. Fifty years after Barbara Castle's Equal Pay Act and 14 years after Harriet Harman's Equality Act, women are still fighting for equality in the workplace. What devolved measures can be taken to help close the gender pay gap and ensure women have opportunities across the employment sector?

Engender has undertaken extensive work on women's income inequality.¹ Scottish Labour policies targeting the gender pay gap and women's employment must include broader actions that look at the factors driving women's lower average earnings. The previous Gender Pay Gap Action Plan² was an excellent example of these broader factors being acknowledged in Government strategy, and we would look to the next Government to create stronger leadership on this issue.

An overview of drivers of women's income inequality:

- Significant issues with women's lower access to highly paid, secure and flexible jobs.
- The persistence of occupational segregation, where sectors that are underpaid and undervalued employ a larger proportion of women.
- The impact of caring responsibilities of children, older and disabled people in society and gender roles that reinforce this.
- A lack of affordable, appropriate, high-quality and flexible childcare.
- A reduction in funded social care packages and formal social care support, leading to women taking on more unpaid caring work without appropriate financial support.
- The negative and endemic impact of sexual harassment and workplace sexism in women's employment, including on career progression.
- A lack of economic planning and investment by the Government in sectors which predominantly employ women, including as part of Just Transition planning to create green jobs.
- Labour market inequality is severe and has particular impacts on BME women, disabled women and other groups of women impacted by intersecting forms of

¹ Engender (2022) Women and The Cost of Living Crisis.

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Women-and-the-cost-of-living---updated-copy.pdf>

² <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2019/03/fairer-scotland-women-gender-pay-gap-action-plan/documents/fairer-scotland-women-gender-pay-gap-action-plan/fairer-scotland-women-gender-pay-gap-action-plan/govscot%3Adocument/fairer-scotland-women-gender-pay-gap-action-plan.pdf>

marginalisation. This must be reflected in approaches to tackle the gender pay gap.

Address the crisis of incomes for women:

Women, particularly those facing intersecting marginalisation, pay the price in times of crisis because there is very little safety net when the fault lines of deep inequality in the UK are exposed. This is mainly due to a gendered 'crisis of incomes' across the UK that ensures women do not have equal access to financial resources compared with men.

Women continue to experience profound labour market inequality with men. The gender pay gap in Scotland persists. Women make up 60 per cent of those who earn under the living wage, with a fifth of women in paid work falling within this bracket, compared with 14 per cent of men.

Women's labour market inequality with men ensures that women are more exposed to economic shockwaves. In Scotland, women are the majority of those in temporary work and on zero-hours contracts. This means that they are disproportionately exposed to worry about reduced hours, unemployment, or underemployment associated with precarious work as small and medium-sized businesses begin to struggle with rising overheads.

BME women are almost twice as likely to be in insecure work as white women. 'The UK insecure work index' found that disabled women are more likely to be in 'severely insecure work' than both non-disabled women and disabled men, though a bigger gap is seen between disabled men and disabled women. The gender pay gap on disabled people's earnings currently sits at 13%. 48% of young disabled women workers experienced severely insecure work in 2021.

ONS data shows that real wages for women in the public sector have fallen in real terms over the last decade. Women represent around two-thirds of public sector workers, accounting for one-third of women's paid employment. Women make up 74% of the local government workforce and are overrepresented in lower-paid positions. Therefore, public sector wage stagnation over the last decade undermines women's economic security. The STUC calculate that "public sector workers in Scotland have had a real term loss in wages of 15% in the last ten years."

Deep-rooted occupational segregation that sees women clustered into undervalued roles and sectors is a key part of this, as well as systemic issues with returning to work after providing unpaid social care or extended periods of leave to care for children. This is a cause and consequence of harmful assumptions and stereotypes about women and men's capabilities regarding paid and unpaid (care) work, resulting in a concentration of women in low-paid underemployment. This substantially diminishes women's earnings over their lifetime.

Gender equality in economic planning:

The current National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) framing underestimates women's contribution to Scotland's economy. The NSET upholds a biased understanding of what constitutes a national economy and, as a result, disproportionately benefits men.

In addition to women's role in paid employment, our unpaid care work props up the economy in Scotland. Scottish Government research estimates the value of unpaid care to be around £36 billion annually.

The NSET relies on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary way to measure the success of our economy. As a result, this skews investment towards male-dominated industries and sectors. For example, we have been dismayed to see the continued lack of focus on the importance of Scotland's 'care economy' from NSET. This is despite the paid care sector contributing around £3.9 billion annually, accounting for around 3.2% of the overall economy.

The exclusion of the care economy has continued despite the sector's increasing significance to an ageing population. The care economy is a vital part of the welfare state. It includes activities that support the physical, social, mental, and emotional well-being of those who need care, such as children, disabled people, older people, sick people, and teenagers. The care economy is vital for keeping society healthy and functioning well.

Childcare costs in the UK are among the highest in the world. Access to affordable childcare is a significant barrier to women's ability to work, study, and receive vocational training. Further details on the issues and solutions are detailed in the section on 'Childcare.' Scotland's lack of affordable quality childcare takes on new meaning in the current climate. Research One Parent Family Scotland highlights the lack of available places, prohibitive prices squeezing women out of work and the urgent need for more options for school-age children when school holidays vastly outstrip annual leave entitlements. Coupled with the cost-of-living crisis, these issues are deepening women's inequality in Scotland and undermining progress towards closing the gender pay gap action plan.

Sexist and Sexual Harassment:

Research by the Trades Unions Congress revealed that over 50% of women had experienced sexual harassment (SH) at work³ and that a staggering 80% of those affected did not report this. The incidence of workplace SH in the UK is even greater for disabled, young and LGBT women, and BME and Muslim women routinely experience racialised or Islamophobic sexual harassment. A primary prevention approach is manifestly needed. To achieve this, employers should adopt both a standalone sexual harassment policy and a workplace anti-sexism strategy that includes a focus on intersectional discrimination.⁴ Chronic underreporting is partly

³ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/SexualHarassmentreport2016.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Enough-is-Enough---tackling-workplace-sexual-harassment-policy-in-Scotland.pdf>

driven by the prevalence of perpetrators who are workplace managers and in positions of power. This requires the development of independent reporting mechanisms that are developed in line with best practices on accessibility.

The UK's Health and Safety Executive does not consider sexual harassment within its remit. Yet, workplace sexual harassment is associated with serious physical and mental health impacts.⁵ Whilst employment law is reserved to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Government should do all it can to ensure that SH is understood as a health and safety issue within its Fair Work agenda.

We also point Scottish Labour to the expertise of [Close the Gap](#), a women's organisation specialising in increasing women's participation in the labour market when creating specific asks on closing the gender pay gap.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. A 'refresh' of Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET). This should be used to embed gender analysis that recognises women-led growth sectors, including the care economy, to ensure women benefit equally in Scotland's economy.
2. Invest in and be ambitious about providing fully funded, flexible childcare. This must include developing a roadmap to deliver 50 hours of high-quality, flexible childcare to all children aged 6 months and over.
3. Valuing unpaid care via social security and other financial supports is a significant barrier to women's access to highly paid and secure work.
4. Protect public sector wages to ensure they rise in line with the inflation rate.
5. Create action to address endemic sexist and sexual harassment in the workplace, including:
 - a. Develop, adopt and promote the use of a standalone sexual harassment policy and a workplace anti-sexism strategy to prevent SH at places of employment
 - b. Create and fund an independent expert body to receive SH complaints, provide accessible advice, and offer structural recommendations to employers.
 - c. Address sexual harassment as a health and safety issue.

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30285071/>

Commission 2: A modern NHS and social care system that puts people at the centre

Introduction

1. The Scottish Government has taken lots of one-off steps but what would a longer-term plan for health and social care look like?

Sexual and reproductive healthcare

Access to safe abortion and wider sexual and reproductive healthcare are essential for the realisation of women's economic and social rights. Abortion is routine care that is accessed by around one in three women in their lifetime in the UK.⁶

Women's reproductive rights guarantee the freedom to decide if and when to have children and access to the highest attainable standards of sexual and reproductive healthcare. However, women in Scotland have no legal right to end a pregnancy, and access to abortion is subject to unnecessary legal restrictions and politicisation.⁷ This causes harm to marginalised and vulnerable groups, including survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, women in remote and rural areas, and those who face barriers due to age, income, immigration status, race, disability, LGBT identity or religion.

Decriminalisation of abortion

Reform of abortion law in Scotland is long overdue. The current legal framework that governs when abortion is permitted is a patchwork of laws stemming from as far back as the 17th century.⁸ These laws largely reflect the eras in which they were introduced and attitudes towards women's rights at the time. The law which criminalises abortion is out of step with the modern clinical reality of abortion as routine healthcare.

In recent decades, international human rights bodies have consistently recognised access to abortion as a fundamental component in the realisation of women's rights. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), for example, has been explicit in its criticism of barriers to abortion access, including criminalisation. The World Health Organisation has assessed global evidence and set out guidance on rights-based regulation of abortion. This includes detailed recommendations for states to meet human rights obligations and to act in line with best practices. It makes clear that abortion should be removed from the criminal law and should be available on request.⁹

However, this is not the case in Scotland, England or Wales. Two doctors must authorise the request for an abortion, adding unnecessary complexity to service delivery and creating delays and barriers for women. Without this permission and compliance with other rules set out in the Abortion Act 1967, abortion is illegal across

⁶ <https://www.rcog.org.uk/media/ujmfhg0h/national-service-specification-for-abortion-care-nov-2022.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/ENGENDER--FINAL-DECRIM-REPORT---21-05-24.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/ENGENDER--FINAL-DECRIM-REPORT---21-05-24.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240039483>

Britain. These restrictions create a drain on capacity within an NHS under extreme pressure. For instance, abortion care could be effectively managed by midwives and nurses, in line with miscarriage care.

The current legal framework in Scotland is:

- Outdated and non-compliant with international human rights standards
- Out of step with guidelines from global and national health bodies
- Impeding access to quality abortion care
- Perpetuating abortion stigma, harmful gender stereotypes and inequality
- Preventing healthcare practitioners from providing the highest standards of care
- Causing trauma and lasting harm that is most pronounced for marginalised women and those in situations of vulnerability.

Full decriminalisation of abortion, as recommended by the WHO, would ensure that no one is punished for accessing abortion, for providing safe abortion, or for assisting someone to have an abortion with their consent. Issues such as malpractice or unsafe abortion would be dealt with through medical regulation and existing general law.

In England, there has been a sharp increase in prosecutions for abortion-related offences. Women are being subjected to invasive and traumatic investigation, sometimes following miscarriage or stillbirth. Marginalised and vulnerable women, whose access to ESC rights is already poor, are most affected. Full decriminalisation is needed to future-proof against further attacks on women's reproductive rights. In the interim, the WHO recommends that governments act to "stop arrests, investigations and prosecutions for abortion"¹⁰ as part of a suite of measures to support quality abortion care.

The Scottish Government has recently established an Abortion Law Review Expert Group, with the remit of recommending legal reform to make abortion 'first and foremost a healthcare matter.' This means removing abortion from the reach of the courts, policing and politicians.

We urge the next Scottish Government to bring forward ambitious proposals to decriminalise abortion fully and to repeal the Abortion Act 1967 and Concealment of Birth (Scotland) Act 1809.

[Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare \(SRH\) services](#)

Abortion is currently not available to the legal limit of 24 weeks gestation in Scotland. This is forcing some women to travel to England to access vital healthcare, which can be prohibitive. Those most likely to need access to later abortion experience significant barriers to travel; for instance, young women and girls, learning disabled women,

¹⁰ <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240039483>

women with physical impairments, women experiencing domestic abuse, and survivors of sexual violence.

Progress has been made towards the provision of later abortions, but not at the pace that is required to prevent further harm to women and pregnant people. For both safety and patient choice, new services in Scotland must include both medical and surgical abortion provisions.

Practical barriers and knowledge gaps may also undermine equality of access to sexual and reproductive healthcare (SRH).¹¹ These include language barriers, misinformation, and the lack of intersectional data collection for diverse groups. We need to understand more about women's experiences of SRH and abortion, specifically young, BME, LGBTI, disabled, rural, migrant and asylum-seeking women and pregnant people in Scotland. Women routinely travel long distances to access SRH and maternity care in remote and rural areas, often necessitating overnight stays that are only partially reimbursed. In some areas, women are required to travel up to four hours whilst in labour to access maternity services in hospital.¹²

Since the pandemic, capacity gaps across SRH services in Scotland have widened. This is limiting access to contraception, particularly long-acting reversible contraception, gynaecological surgeries, and later and surgical abortion in some areas. Women are struggling to access contraception through primary care, one of the most common routes to provision. Scottish Government must invest in these vital services that underpin women's ESC rights.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Fully decriminalise abortion in Scotland to ensure no one is prosecuted for having, providing or assisting with safe and consensual abortion.
2. Repeal the Abortion Act 1967 and Concealment of Birth (Scotland) Act 1809 to modernise the law and confirm abortion as a healthcare matter.
3. Work with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and Police Scotland to develop a non-prosecution policy for crimes related to abortion.
4. Mandate Health Boards to provide both medical and surgical abortions up to the legal limit in Scotland, either locally or through regional networks.
5. Close knowledge gaps and address equality of access to NHS abortion, Sexual and Reproductive Health and maternity services for marginalised groups.
6. Determine the scale of capacity gaps across sexual and reproductive healthcare and provide sufficient resources to ensure women's rights to Sexual and Reproductive Health are met.

¹¹ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/MATFinalNEW.pdf>

¹² https://www.scottishhumanrights.com/media/2884/main-report_economic-social-and-cultural-rights-in-the-highlands-and-islands.pdf

2. What reforms need to take place so that spending money on the NHS does not result in the same poor outcomes?

Creating high-level strategies such as the Women's Health Plan is essential in raising the profile of women's health inequalities and ensuring leadership and action to tackle them.¹³ However, such strategies require significant investment to create systemic change. They are also most effective when linked to accountability measures, including effective monitoring and evaluation of progress.

The next Scottish Government must provide greater detail on the funding levels that have followed or been utilised to deliver the Women's Health Plan and what accountability measures, monitoring, and evaluation are in place to ensure it is being taken seriously and delivered across the country.

We ask that Scottish Labour look at the level of investment required to effectively implement a Women's Health Plan approach when considering the level of spending for the NHS to ensure adequate funding to create the systemic change required. We also need further accountability, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms to assess the scale of successful implementation.

Prevention

1. What would a greater focus on prevention look like and require to make it a reality?

Addressing women's health inequalities

Improvements to public services, including the NHS, must include action to reduce health inequalities and improve women's access to health services.¹⁴ Women and girls continue to experience inequalities in health, well-being and access to services compared with men and boys. This is largely due to gender inequality across our society and 'medical misogyny.'

Marginalised women, including women of colour, disabled women, unpaid carers, LGBTI+ women, younger and older women, and migrant women, also experience further inequalities in health outcomes. Health issues that disproportionately impact women or affect women differently from men have historically attracted less funding and focus, meaning that they are not equally prioritised and understood across health services. We have also seen strain since the pandemic on sex-specific health areas, such as women's reproductive and sexual health, and we need proactive work to improve these areas of our health services.

The significant gender health gap women experience in Scotland is a result of generations of biased and exclusionary medical research and ungendered health approaches. Addressing this issue will require time and sustained system change. We

¹³ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Parliamentary-Briefing---Womens-Health-Plan-2021-24.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-briefing-on-womens-health-inequalities-for-Health-Social-Care-and-Sport-Committee.pdf>

need action beyond short-lived, one—to two-term strategies to tackle women’s health inequalities. This work will need to be a core part of the Scottish Government and Parliament’s work on health policy for years to come.¹⁵

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Maintain the profile and prioritisation of work to address women’s health inequalities, understanding that this will require long-term and sustained work from the next Scottish Government.
2. Commit to implementing and supporting a second phase of the 2021-24 Women’s Health Plan.
3. Understand how Covid-19 has impacted women’s health outcomes and the implementation of the first 2021-24 Women’s Health Plan, including whether this has limited the scale of change delivered.
4. Future work on women’s health needs to take an intersectional approach, recognising and addressing minoritised and marginalised women’s health experiences. This must include a wider focus on issues, including mental health.
5. Explore what funding and investments have been made to assist in implementing the plan and what accountability measures, monitoring, and evaluation are in place to ensure its delivery across the country.
6. Support our call for a new Scottish Institute for Women’s Health to drive changes to policy, guidance and medical training on the basis of sex and gender medicine, as well as provide funding to dedicated research into women’s health.

Social Care

1. The Scottish Government’s National Care Service has been widely discredited and is not real reform: what do you believe is the best way of delivering social care in the future?

Social care is a vital infrastructure that supports people in Scotland in enjoying their right to participate fully in all branches of society. It can prevent isolation, poor health and wellbeing, and poverty – all gendered issues. Care itself is undervalued culturally and financially precisely because it is associated with women. In turn, this cultural undervaluation and the lack of investment attached to social care support limits understanding of the role it plays in the well-being of society. The provision of care, both paid and unpaid, is closely interlinked with systemic and harmful gender roles that constrain women’s lives.

The provision of care, both paid and unpaid, is closely interlinked with systemic and harmful gender roles that constrain women’s lives. Women are the majority of social care service users, the majority of unpaid carers, and the vast majority of the social

¹⁵ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Parliamentary-Briefing---Womens-Health-Plan-2021-24.pdf>

care workforce in Scotland. Women's access to paid work, leisure time, and power remains heavily constrained by the provision of care and gendered expectations regarding its value and delivery.

Social care is vital infrastructure that supports people in Scotland to enjoy their right to participate fully in all branches of society and can prevent isolation, poor health and wellbeing, and poverty – all of which are gendered issues.

Care itself is undervalued culturally and financially precisely because it is associated with women. In turn, this cultural undervaluation and the lack of investment attached to social care support perpetuate a limited understanding of its role in society's social and economic well-being.

One of our key concerns with the National Care Service is that the consultation, design, and development process was completely ungendered.¹⁶ The heavily gendered dimensions of the formal and informal care workforce were invisible in the issues identified, and no equalities approach was taken when proposing the service.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Investment in a care economy, which values caring work in pay and conditions, is reflected in levels of capital investment.
2. A 'refresh' of Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET). This should be used to embed gender analysis that recognises women-led growth sectors, including the care economy, to ensure women benefit equally in Scotland's economy.
3. Ensure that the future development of a national care service takes a gendered approach to policy design.

2. Unpaid carers often end up burnt out and unable to continue – what would better support look like to ensure unpaid care is sustainable and valued?

Unpaid care work is a significant cause of gendered poverty, undermining financial security for women and girls across generations.¹⁷ Unpaid carers from BME communities, in rural areas, and those caring for disabled people face specific challenges and added costs.

These groups are struggling more than ever following the pandemic and the cost of living crisis but are routinely excluded from forms of government support.¹⁸ Please see our answers to the section on Social Security for further details on financial solutions and reform for unpaid carers.

¹⁶ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/ENGENDER-RESPONSE-TO-SCOTTISH-GOVERNMENTS-CONSULTATION-ON-A-NATIONAL-CARE-SERVICE-FOR-SCOTLAND.pdf>

¹⁷ Engender (2022) Women and The Cost of Living Crisis.

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Women-and-the-cost-of-living---updated-copy.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-response-to-the-Scottish-Governments-Scottish-Carers-Assistance-consultation.pdf>

Scottish Labour must commit to:

- Commit to a real living wage for unpaid carers through the Scottish Carer Supplement, which does not reduce income for those they care for.
- Publish plans to expand access to Caregiver Support Payment for education, employment, and multiple caring roles.
- Pay the proposed Additional Person Payment at least at the same rate as the Carer Support Payment.
- Extend eligibility for Carer Support Payment for 16 to 19-year-olds in full-time non-advanced education.
- Introduce a specific recognition payment for older unpaid carers who cannot be paid Carer Support Payment because they receive a State Pension.

Mental Health

1. How can we improve the mental health of the population?

We ask that Scottish Labour actively recognise the gender mental health gap that exists in Scotland.¹⁹ Women and men experience mental health in vastly different ways. Women and girls are diagnosed with depression and anxiety disorders in greater numbers and experience differences in diagnosis, treatment and access to health and support services.

The experiences and specialist needs of minoritised groups of women, including Black and minority ethnic women (BME), disabled women, LGBT women and victim-survivors of violence against women, are distinct but are underexplored and understood. Evidence also shows that poor mental health is on the rise among women and girls and that this trend preceded the pandemic.

Women's mental health is and will be disproportionately impacted as a result of poverty, economic insecurity, constrained opportunities and choices, and reduced autonomy in relation to domestic abuse and coercive control. Within this, Black women and women from specific ethnic minority communities, disabled women, lone parents, unpaid carers and women with insecure immigration status are particularly disadvantaged.

Scotland's recent census showed that young women are twice as likely to have a mental health condition compared with men of the same age.²⁰ Depression and anxiety in women are significantly higher among unpaid carers in Scotland, low-income and LGBT women, lone parents, survivors of men's violence, and women in the criminal justice system. Data is lacking for BME and disabled women at the Scottish

¹⁹ <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/the-mental-health-gap-for-women-in-scotland>

²⁰ <https://www.youngwomenscot.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Young-womens-experiences-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis-in-Scotland.pdf>

level. However, wider evidence suggests that they are also more likely to experience poor mental health.

Scottish public services are currently not equipped to meet the mental health needs of women and girls. Investment in gendered mental health services and intersectional data collection is urgently needed. Scottish Government strategies related to mental health are largely ungendered. These include the Mental Health and Wellbeing, Self-Harm, and Suicide Prevention strategies. Efforts have been made to build equalities competence and to retroactively address gender inequality within the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy delivery plan. However, understanding of how to meet women's mental health needs is still extremely limited.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Refresh the Mental Health and Wellbeing, Self-Harm, and Suicide Prevention strategies to embed and resource intersectional gender equality objectives
2. Take specific steps to address escalating poor mental health in young women and girls, unpaid carers and other marginalised groups of women
3. Build the evidence base regarding disabled and BME women's mental health within a programme of work to improve intersectional equalities data collection and usage
4. Include intersectional women's mental health as a priority area within the next iteration of Scotland's Women's Health Plan.

Life Sciences

1. Should the Scottish Government be doing more to work with academia and industry to improve health outcomes?

Yes. Engender has been actively campaigning for creating a 'Scottish Institute for Women's Health' because there are major gaps in data and research on women's health outcomes in Scotland. We also have major gaps in research on key areas of health, which we lay out in more detail in our briefing on women's health inequalities.²¹

This includes a lack of gendered and intersectional research on women's experiences of auto-immune disease, mental health, chronic post-viral symptoms, bone health, and dementia and is missing in much public health research more broadly.

Gender-sensitive data collection and disaggregation by sex is patchy²², not just in Scotland but globally, making key trends and comparisons in women's health difficult. This refers to gaps in prevalence data and evidence around socio-economic determinants of gendered health issues. The WHO has recommended that states ensure the "collection, analysis and use of data disaggregated by sex and age and

²¹ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-briefing-on-womens-health-inequalities-for-Health-Social-Care-and-Sport-Committee.pdf>

²² <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/policy-areas/health>

cross-sections with other variables, such as income, education, and urban or rural residence”.²³

Establishing a ‘Scottish Institute for Women’s Health’ was an action that failed to be delivered via the Scottish Government’s Women’s Health Plan 2021-24. The commitment was to ‘support the development of a new Scottish Institute for Women’s Health to drive changes to policy, guidance and medical training on the basis of sex and gender medicine as well as provide funding to dedicated research into women’s health.’

The Women’s Health Plan 2021-24 had committed to developing a new Scottish Institute for Women’s Health to drive structural change and create a fund dedicated to much-needed research. Creating this Institute is still critical to ensure we maintain the momentum created by the Women’s Health Plan and that women’s lives and health are positively changed.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

- Develop a ‘Scottish Institute for Women’s Health’ to drive changes to policy, guidance, and medical training on the basis of sex and gender medicine, as well as fund dedicated research into women’s health.

²³ <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/332324/9789289051910-eng.pdf>

Commission 3: From cradle to career to give young people the best start in life

Childcare

1. What is the purpose of childcare: is it about the development of the child, or about education, or about allowing parents to go to work – or all/a combination of those things?

Women's access to paid work, leisure time, and power remains heavily constrained by the provision of care and gendered expectations regarding its value and delivery. In Scotland, women provide between 60 and 70% of unpaid care.²⁴, and many are speaking out about the impact of rising costs on their finances and mental health, as well as anger at feeling abandoned by the Government. Intersectional data and evidence are lacking, and we know little about minoritised women's experiences of care and their escalating needs.

Childcare costs in the UK are among the highest in the world.²⁵ Access to affordable childcare is a significant barrier to women's ability to work, study, and access vocational training. Due to the high cost of childcare, a third of parents living in absolute poverty in Scotland have given up work, and a further 25 per cent have not been able to take up education or training.²⁶

Though these statistics depict a grim picture of provision in Scotland, the situation worsens for services inclusive of disabled children as well as those living in rural areas with limited access to affordable, high-quality and flexible childcare. Polling by the TUC found that BME and disabled parents (many of whom are single mothers) are twice as likely to spend more than a third or more than half of their income on childcare.²⁷

Scottish Government's expansion of free early years education to 30 hours per week for all children aged three and above, and for some two-year-olds in low-income households, is a welcome step in the right direction. However, the pandemic has obstructed delivery, and the offer falls short of the wrap-around childcare services that women require to enable them to participate in the labour market equally and to train and study equally. The implementation of free universal childcare elsewhere has been shown to lead to a sharp and persistent increase in women's labour market participation, reduce the attainment gap, and decrease income inequality.

Scotland's lack of affordable quality childcare takes on new meaning in the current climate. Research One Parent Family Scotland highlights the lack of available places,

²⁴ The last Census figure was 59%, however women are less likely to self-identify as carers due to cultural gender roles and expectations. Carers organisations have estimated an actual figure of around 70%.

²⁵ OECD (2022) Net childcare costs (indicator). Available at: <https://data.oecd.org/benwage/net-childcare-costs.htm> (Accessed on 01/10/22 - data is updated)

²⁶ Save the Children, (2017) Soaring Childcare Costs Push Parents out of Work in Scotland.

²⁷ TUC "TUC poll: 1 in 3 parents with pre-school children spend more than a third of their pay on childcare". Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/tuc-poll-1-3-parents-pre-school-children-spend-more-third-their-paychildcare>

prohibitive prices squeezing women out of work and the urgent need for more options for school-age children when school holidays vastly outstrip annual leave entitlements. Coupled with the cost-of-living crisis, these issues are deepening women's inequality in Scotland and undermining progress towards closing the gender pay gap action plan.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

- Invest in and be ambitious about providing fully funded, flexible childcare. This must include developing a roadmap to deliver 50 hours of high-quality, flexible childcare to all children aged 6 months and over.

Commission 4: More equal and safer communities so we can all thrive

Housing

1. Business as usual is not an option; what should a Scottish Labour government do across all government portfolios to tackle the housing emergency?

Women's access to housing is fundamentally shaped by structural gender inequality and other intersectional forms of marginalisation. Specific groups of women are more likely to experience housing instability, poor housing, homelessness, or adverse treatment by services.²⁸

This includes women in poverty, disabled, women of colour and refugee women, LGBTI women, older and younger women, women who sell sex, single parents and women who are unpaid carers. Women's access to safe, secure and affordable housing is restricted and directly shaped by their experiences of economic inequality, unequal access to power and resources and male violence. Housing and homelessness services often have not been designed to respond appropriately to women's specific needs. They can fail to address the additional barriers for women accessing these services, leading to their housing rights not being realised.

Scotland's housing system is not just broken; it is also biased. It profoundly entrenches gender inequality and reflects broader social structures of oppression.⁵ Groups with protected characteristics, such as women, are disproportionately affected by the housing emergency and experience additional barriers to accessing safe, secure and affordable housing.

To improve women's access to safe, secure, and affordable housing, the supply of social homes must increase. This requires a particular focus on the supply of larger social homes, reflecting the fact that women often have dependent children living with them.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Gender the current homelessness action plan and develop a strategy to ensure broader housing policy meets the needs of diverse groups of women.
2. Encourage the acquisition of larger properties as social homes specifically for households with children trapped in temporary accommodation (TA).
3. Work with local authorities to ensure their Strategic Housing Investment Plans explicitly consider the needs of larger households trapped in TA for over a year when making decisions about social housing delivery.
4. Tackle women's economic inequality and poverty with targeted measures and social security reforms to improve their access to safe and quality housing.

²⁸ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Shelter-Scotland-and-Engender-Report.pdf>

5. Work with the UK Government to unfreeze Local Housing Allowance Rates and ensure LHA covers the cheapest third of rents in an area as a minimum.
6. Address the gaps in support for women experiencing domestic abuse. This will allow for increased protection against eviction and reduce the risk of homelessness.
7. Fully realise the Domestic Abuse (Protection) (Scotland) Act 2021 provisions, which will help victim-survivors escape abuse and stay in their homes and ensure implementation progresses.
8. All landlords (both social and private) should have a domestic abuse policy and have to consider if domestic abuse has played a role in rent arrears before seeking eviction.
9. Implement all the recommendations from the 2021 working group report 'Improving housing outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse.' These focus on improving the practice of social landlords to reduce domestic abuse-related homelessness.
10. Work to address Scotland's housing emergency must be aligned with the Scottish Government's Equally Safe Strategy, which adopts a primary prevention approach to combatting violence against women and girls.
11. Prohibit aggressive public debt collection practices and develop debt recovery policies that recognise the impact of domestic and economic abuse on victim-survivors.
12. Ensure that women can access homelessness services that meet their needs and uphold their homelessness rights.
13. Local authority homelessness services must improve gender competence and take a gendered approach to the design of their services. This must include developing policies, protocols and procedures in relation to domestic abuse.
14. Work with Local Authorities and third-sector organisations to develop print and online resources for women experiencing domestic abuse, which detail their housing options and signposts to sources of support.
15. Update the Housing Options Training Toolkit to focus on structural gender inequality, including access to resources and safety, and women's diverse experiences of housing and homelessness.
16. The Housing Options Guidance should also be reviewed and updated accordingly.
17. Fully fund local authority homelessness services to ensure they can respond to the needs of people, including women, presenting as homeless.
18. Provide appropriate, safe housing and accommodation solutions for women who have 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF).

19. Allocations and supply of temporary accommodation (TA) by local authorities need to be carried out with a gendered approach, taking into account women's needs, particularly regarding gender-based violence and childcare responsibilities.
20. Local Authorities must seek to increase the supply of Temporary Furnished Flats to prevent the use of B&Bs, hotels, and hostels as TA for women and their children.
21. Recognise the urgent need for gendered TA in Scotland, including for women with children, and work with local authorities to ensure this type of TA is available.

2. What can be done to prevent people becoming homeless?

Addressing the causes of women's homelessness in prevention

There is increasing recognition that different structural and individual factors push men and women into homelessness. These include the health, safety and wellbeing impacts of homelessness, gendered experiences with homelessness support services, and different barriers to resolving housing crises.

Gendered factors such as women's poverty, health, responsibilities for unpaid caring, experiences of violence, abuse and exploitation, bereavement, imprisonment, pregnancy and motherhood all heavily influence women's journeys into, through and out of homelessness.

Much of the available research²⁹ also suggests that women tend to have shorter episodes of 'absolute homelessness', or sleeping rough, than men - in part because they take additional, and at times, extreme, measures to avoid street sleeping. However, many women have been homeless on multiple occasions, moving in and out of homeless services over prolonged periods.

These structures and experiences are also heavily influenced by other intersecting inequalities. For example, women from minority ethnic groups are overrepresented among hostel and B&B residents, the proportion of BME women turned away from domestic violence refuges is higher than for white women, and trans women are vulnerable to adverse treatment and harassment when accessing housing services.

We have long argued that policies that seek to prevent women's homelessness must take a broader approach to address gender and intersecting inequalities.³⁰ We know that a lack of access to employment opportunities, women's higher likelihood of financial insecurity, delayed and inadequate social welfare payments, long waiting lists for specialist services (e.g., mental health, drug and alcohol treatment), and societal attitudes towards women all have particular impacts on women's risk and experiences

²⁹ Engender (2020) A Woman's Place: Gender, Housing and Homelessness. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/A-WOMANS-PLACE---GENDER-HOUSING-AND-HOMELESSNESS-IN-SCOTLAND.pdf>.

³⁰ Ibid.

of homelessness. We need further research to help establish how homelessness prevention can be improved for diverse groups of women and made more responsive to their needs.

Gender-sensitive approaches and services

As outlined, part of effective homelessness prevention for women is providing services designed with their needs in mind, which understand and address gendered experiences of homelessness. For example, recent research and best practice guidance published by the Homeless Link charity show how to design homelessness services to respond to women effectively.³¹ The 'Gendered Lens Framework' is just one example of the resources available to build better approaches to supporting women at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Recent research³² outlines the current failures of support services and contains solutions for improving support for women facing homelessness. Women are repeatedly failed by support services, which are often poorly coordinated and unable to meet complex needs. The report details how many women hid their difficulties until hitting the crisis point due to fear, stigma, and a lack of trust, and this creates further barriers to seeking support. Even when women in the study engaged with support, they were often moved between services catering to different issues, with no access to expertise to support their overlapping challenges.

Homelessness prevention must address domestic abuse

We also know that while domestic abuse is often cited as a cause of women's homelessness, rarely do we see policy responses which look to understand why women become homeless when they leave an abusive partner. When developing approaches to homelessness prevention, there must be an understanding of the wider economic and social constraints that can leave women dependent on a male partner, as well as the nature of the housing system and services provided.

For example, most women in a 2015 study by Scottish Women's Aid in Fife³³ described that they not only felt like they had no choice about moving out but also that their abusive partner held control over the situation and a sense of entitlement to the home.

This same study also found that local authority staff questioned the validity of women's experiences of abuse and homelessness and failed to challenge their partner's entitlement to remain in the family home or offer safe alternatives to moving out (e.g., tenancy transfer or additional home security).

³¹ Homeless Link (2024) 'The Gendered Lens Framework for Homelessness Services'. Available at: <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/the-gendered-lens-framework-for-homelessness-services/>.

³² Johnsen, S and Blenkinsopp, J (2024) *Hard Edges: The reality for women affected by severe and multiple disadvantage*. Heriot-Watt University. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17861/6nrm-jb28>.

³³ Scottish Women's Aid (2015) *Change, Justice, Fairness: Why should we have to move everywhere and everything because of him?* Available at: <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Change-Justice-Fairness.pdf>

There continues to be a lack of resources and change in culture in local authorities, meaning that knowledge about domestic abuse amongst housing sector staff remains a critical issue, both in generic and specialist services. We point Scottish Labour to evidence from Scottish Women's Aid to understand how best to prevent homelessness for women and children experiencing domestic abuse.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Recognising the gendered drivers of women's homelessness as distinct and in need of different approaches to be addressed effectively.
2. Invest in a research programme on women's housing and homelessness. We recommend that such a programme include an overarching focus on structural gender inequality and its intersections with other forms of inequality and discrimination.
3. Support shared responsibilities for addressing women's homelessness across health, housing, justice and women's sectors so women are not passed between services.
4. Create an environment where services are adequately equipped to respond to the gendered trauma and abuse affecting women. There is a need for more women-only services.

Social Justice

Equal representation in politics

A missing area from the Scottish Labour Policy consultation is the need to increase equal representation of diverse women in politics. Too often, those whose lives are most impacted by government policies are furthest removed from decision-making processes and policy development. This includes women and people from other marginalised groups, who often face an array of structural inequalities which impact their daily lives. At present, the diversity of Scotland's communities is not represented in our democratic institutions.

The situation is most concerning at the local government level, where women are just 35% of local councillors, and this is even more acute for BME women, disabled women, women who are carers and those on low incomes. Women are disproportionately impacted by decisions made at a local level (education, social care, public transport) but are less likely to have a voice in how these services are run. This is a major democratic deficit and risks increasing political disengagement and mistrust of public institutions. Everyone should be able to participate in politics and public life.

Political parties are not currently subject to enough equalities regulation. Internal action plans are not routinely published or accessible to the public or often the general membership. Support should be given to hold them accountable.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

- Create a new fund to help individuals from underrepresented groups overcome barriers to political participation. This would build on the success of the Access to Elected Office Fund, which supports the equal participation of disabled people in politics.³⁴
- Introduce political party equality action plans, as is being currently consulted on in Wales.³⁵
- Work with the UK Government to enact Section 106 of the Equality Act and amend it to cover local authorities, at which level the gendered democratic deficit is greatest.

1. What immediate devolved actions could a new Labour Scottish government do to reduce poverty and tackle the cost-of-living crisis in Scotland?

In the next section, we have detailed significant social security changes, which would significantly improve women’s poverty and the disproportionate impact of the cost-of-living crisis on marginalised women.³⁶ It is vital for Scottish Labour to recognise the crucial role of social security investment in reducing poverty.

Abolish social care charging

Given low rates of social security support, the cost-of-living crisis is pushing hundreds of thousands of unpaid carers into extreme financial hardship. Carers Scotland found that 50% of carers were unable to manage expenses back in March 2022³⁷, before the height of the crisis. Subsequent energy and transport price hikes had devastating impacts on older and disabled people and their carers – many of whom are disabled women themselves.

We continue to call for the abolishment of non-residential social care charges. These are costs that a person must pay to get certain types of social care support at home. The impact of these charges on someone’s financial security can be devastating, both for those receiving support and for the unpaid carers who are often responsible for managing restrictive budgets. Social care charging is damaging to women’s social and economic equality. Women are the majority of disabled and older people, of those living in poverty, and of those providing unpaid care for people unable to access formal care services. As women’s incomes continue to be impacted by austerity policies, the legacy of Covid-19, and the cost-of-living crisis, income inequality is dictating who has or doesn’t have access to social care.

³⁴ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender---Scottish-Elections-Representation-and-Reform-Bill---Call-for-Views---March-2024.pdf>

³⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/diversity-and-inclusion-guidance-for-registered-political-parties>

³⁶ Engender (2022) Women and The Cost of Living Crisis.

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Women-and-the-cost-of-living---updated-copy.pdf>

³⁷ <https://www.carersuk.org/media/n3kdro3j/state-of-caring-in-scotland-a-cost-of-living-crisis-for-carers-final.pdf>

The current Scottish Government has committed to removing fees for social care support received in the home. This would bring urgent relief to low-income groups receiving social care and their unpaid carers. However, delivery has been repeatedly delayed.³⁸

In the immediate term, the Scottish Government should make it a statutory requirement for all local authorities to consider Disability-Related Expenditures (DRE) when calculating total client contributions for non-residential care. In England, such a requirement is accompanied by a more expansive definition of DRE within statutory guidance.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Realise the long-standing commitment to abolish non-residential social care charging.
2. Create statutory guidance requiring local authorities to consider clearly defined DRE when calculating social care contributions.
3. Invest in devolved social security targeted to reducing women's poverty, including:
 - a. Invest in the Scottish Welfare Fund and create targeted streams of the fund to support marginalised women, including migrant women, women with no recourse to public funds and unpaid carers.
 - b. Create a permanent national 'fund to leave' for women experiencing domestic abuse.

2. How can the Scottish Government measure equality outcomes?

To improve policies and public services for women and effectively measure equality outcomes, we recommend acting on existing commitments to embed intersectional gender equality at the heart of Scottish Government decision-making.

These existing commitments include:

- Strengthening and reforming the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- Acting on the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG) recommendations.
- Introducing and resourcing an 'Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy' across government.

If Scottish Government policies are not designed to recognise and respond to structural inequality, then the positive impact they could have on Scotland's most marginalised people will be limited. Currently, the value and potential of mainstreaming equality are poorly understood and underinvested across the Scottish Government.

³⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-202300387766/>

Reform of the Public Sector Equality Duty

The public sector equality duty (PSED) is the key lever for gender mainstreaming in Scotland's public sector. However, the current set of duties is not fit for their intended purpose: to improve the lives of protected groups. The Scottish Specific Duties (SSDs) of the PSED are currently under review, but proposals for change are extremely limited.

Resourcing

Original proposals from the Scottish Government have been scaled back significantly, partly due to financial and human resources cutbacks. This is a routine occurrence—equalities work is seen as dispensable. In fact, intersectional equalities mainstreaming is all the more urgent in times of crisis. The Scottish Government must invest in staffing, leadership, and capacity building for PSED. This is especially important given the significant delays to the Human Rights Bill.

Reform of the Scottish Specific Duties

Reform of the PSED has huge potential to reposition equality at the heart of public sector operations. However, the proposal put forward by the Scottish Government in September 2023 is hugely disappointing. Earlier proposals had more substance but had been collectively criticised for their lack of ambition by 26 equalities organisations.³⁹ Scottish Government analysis has rested too heavily on public bodies' resistance to change at the expense of lived experience, and equalities expertise focused on better outcomes for protected groups. We are calling for an Advisory Group of equality experts to co-produce a set of revised regulations.

New legal duties on public bodies

The First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls has recommended new requirements for public bodies to gather, use, and publish intersectional gender data and implement intersectional gender budget analysis. The Scottish Government has accepted these in principle. Analysis demonstrates that a lack of equalities competence drives poor performance under PSED. We therefore recommend a new duty on capacity building and an obligation on public bodies to prevent workplace sexual harassment.⁴⁰

Gender mainstreaming: twin track approach

International best practice on gender mainstreaming, an evidence-based methodology to support the realisation of women's rights, requires a twin-track approach. This means that the aim of securing gender equality goals must be integrated across all policymaking and resource allocation and explicitly targeted via high-level gender strategies and outcomes.

³⁹ https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/1649685255_PSED-review-equality-stakeholders-common-concerns-April-2022.pdf

⁴⁰ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-response-to-PSED-consultation.pdf>

The Scottish Government is exploring the introduction of a national gender equality strategy,⁴¹ which could help tackle the glacial pace of change in closing gender gaps that systemically violate women’s ESC rights. Such a strategy would be strengthened by a National Outcome on Gender Equality within Scotland’s National Performance Framework (NPF).⁴² This has been a significant omission since the development of the Framework, which failed to mirror targets set out in the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. A new National Outcome on Gender Equality would support the Scottish Government’s ambition regarding SDG 5 while strengthening policy coherence across government.⁴³

The Scottish Government is also developing an equality and human rights mainstreaming strategy. However, this has been significantly under-resourced. The proposed methodology is untested, incorporating human rights and all equality strands under one strategy. We advocate strongly for intersectional approaches. However, there is a high risk that this methodology will be too poorly defined and overextended in focus to deliver the strategy’s aims.

In 2017, the Scottish Government established the First Minister’s National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG).⁴⁴ The leadership shown by successive Scottish First Ministers in appointing the Council and the NACWG’s relatively high-level remit to scrutinise and drive forward change within government structures has been immensely valuable. With the current phase ending in 2026, the next Scottish Government should commit to continuing to build on steady—but slow—progress on mainstreaming women’s equality and rights.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Determine and invest significant resources in Public Sector Equality Duties reform, including dedicated human resources and a capacity-building programme for leadership and local authorities.
 - a. Revisit and expand on proposals to reform the Scottish Specific Duties, focused on improved outcomes for protected groups instead of public bodies’ concerns with compliance.
 - b. Co-produce revised regulations with a PSED Advisory Group of equalities experts.
 - c. Create new duties on intersectional gender data, gender budget analysis, equalities competence and sexual harassment prevention.
2. Commit to a national Gender Equality Strategy in line with international best practice on gender mainstreaming.

⁴¹ <https://www.generationequal.scot/app/uploads/2024/05/NACWG-Report-May-2024.pdf>

⁴² <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/National-Outcomes-Review---Engender-Call-for-Evidence---Final.pdf>

⁴³ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Response-to-FPA-Committee-Inquiry-on-proposed-National-Outcomes-2024.pdf>

⁴⁴ <https://www.generationequal.scot/phase-two-priorities/the-nacwg/>

3. Determine and allocate sufficient resources to implement the Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy and invest in developing its methodology.
4. Create a National Outcome on Gender Equality within the revised National Performance Framework.
5. Commit to a third phase of the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls.
6. Improve alignment of the National Performance Framework with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.
7. Strengthen policy coherence across existing and forthcoming Scottish Government policies and strategies, particularly the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), the Human Rights Bill, the Equality Mainstreaming Strategy and the Equally Safe Strategy.
8. Allocate adequate resources to improve gender competence and other equalities-competence across the public sector.
9. Improve gender-sensitive statistical indicators across all of the National Outcomes.
10. Strengthens the NPF's capacity to promote a 'Scottish Approach to Gender,' as the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG) recommended.

3. Marginalised women, including women of colour, disabled women, unpaid carers, LGBTI+ women, younger and older women, and migrant women, experience wide disparities in health outcomes – how can that be addressed?

Please see our answers for full details on planning, funding, and prevention under 'Commission 2: A Modern NHS and Social Care System that Puts People at the Centre'.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Fully decriminalise abortion in Scotland to ensure no one is prosecuted for having, providing or assisting with safe and consensual abortion.
2. Repeal the Abortion Act 1967 and Concealment of Birth (Scotland) Act 1809 to modernise the law and confirm abortion as a healthcare matter.
3. Work with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and Police Scotland to develop a non-prosecution policy for crimes related to abortion.
4. Mandate Health Boards to provide both medical and surgical abortions up to the legal limit in Scotland, either locally or through regional networks.
5. Close knowledge gaps and address equality of access to NHS abortion, Sexual and Reproductive Health and maternity services for marginalised groups.

6. Determine the scale of capacity gaps across sexual and reproductive healthcare and provide sufficient resources to ensure women's rights to Sexual and Reproductive Health are met.
7. Maintain the profile and prioritisation of work to address women's health inequalities, understanding that this will require long-term and sustained work from the next Scottish Government.
8. Commit to implementing and supporting a second phase of the 2021-24 Women's Health Plan.
9. Understand how Covid-19 has impacted women's health outcomes and the implementation of the first 2021-24 Women's Health Plan, including whether this has limited the scale of change delivered.
10. Future work on women's health needs to take an intersectional approach, recognising and addressing minoritised and marginalised women's health experiences. This must include a wider focus on issues, including mental health.
11. Explore what funding and investments have been made to assist in implementing the plan and what accountability measures, monitoring, and evaluation are in place to ensure its delivery across the country.
12. Support our call for a new Scottish Institute for Women's Health to drive changes to policy, guidance and medical training on the basis of sex and gender medicine, as well as provide funding to dedicated research into women's health.

4. Increasing parental employment is a key driver for tackling child poverty, giving families more opportunities into secure, flexible work to support themselves and their children. How can the Scottish Government better work with local communities and employers to increase parental employment and reduce child poverty?

Please see our answers in the childcare section for solutions to increasing parental employment. Strategies to address parental employment and reduce child poverty must recognise the inherently gendered nature of these challenges. Women are the vast majority of single parents, are most likely to experience barriers to the labour market due to caring responsibilities and are profoundly impacted by the reduction in social security support packages.

We also have a submission on parental employment and child poverty [available on our website here.](#)

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Make the link between gender inequality, women's poverty and child poverty explicit, and design integrated solutions.

2. Invest in and be ambitious about providing fully funded, flexible childcare. This must include developing a roadmap to deliver 50 hours of high-quality, flexible childcare to all children aged 6 months and over.
3. Understand the gendered dynamics of in-work poverty and precarious work and ensure childcare policies are developed alongside action to address these challenges.
4. Value the workforce delivering childcare.

Social Security

1. Is there anything you would change about the current social security system in Scotland?

Yes. Current social security policy and programmes in the UK drive women's poverty and undermine the realisation of many of the human rights enumerated in ICESCR. These failures are being gravely exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, particularly for diverse groups of women.⁴⁵

Social Security is a vital tool to address inequality in Scotland, particularly intersectional gender inequality. Women have borne the brunt of cuts to social security entitlements and public services due to austerity policies.

Women are twice as dependent as men on social security due to lower earnings, unpaid care responsibilities, violence against women and other systemic inequalities. Payments most often awarded to women are too low and drive women and their children into poverty. Some women are denied social security and other state support (No Recourse to Public Funds), placing them at greater risk of destitution and violence.

The Scottish Welfare Fund

The SWF needs reform to meet the needs of marginalised women and other minoritised and low-income groups, whose rights to social security, an adequate standard of living, good health and well-being, and many others have been systemically breached by government austerity.⁴⁶

A recent independent review of the SWF found significant investment shortfalls, gaps in equalities data, and the need for revised statutory guidance.⁴⁷ Additional Scottish Government funding for the SWF is highly welcome, but it is vital that this is sustained in future budgets, alongside action to ensure the funds reach those most in need.

'Fund to leave' for women experiencing domestic abuse

Women experiencing domestic abuse are often unable to leave an abusive partner due to financial consequences and economic coercive control. Research from Women's Aid

⁴⁵ Engender (2022) Women and The Cost of Living Crisis.

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Women-and-the-cost-of-living---updated-copy.pdf>

⁴⁶ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2024-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>

⁴⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/review-scottish-welfare-fund-final-report/>

England has shown that the cost of living crisis is condemning women to violence⁴⁸, with 73% saying it has prevented them from leaving their abusive partner or would make this harder to do. Two-thirds of survivors said the cost of living crisis and concerns about finances are being used by abusers as a “tool for coercive control”, including restricting access to their money, and 83% said the crisis was having a negative impact on their well-being and mental health.

Domestic abuse is linked with financial precarity and intersectional inequality. Women are disproportionately likely to live in poverty, and financial dependence on an abusive partner is a critical constraint when survivors seek safety. The Office for National Statistics found that disabled women were more than twice as likely to report having survived domestic abuse compared with non-disabled women.⁴⁹ Women with insecure immigration status and other minoritised women and children suffer state-generated and perpetrator-generated economic abuse.

The piloted ‘Fund to Leave’ administered by Scottish Women’s Aid in the first half of 2024 has been highly successful in supporting women to leave an abusive partner. The fund supported a total of 1109 women and children. Survivors utilised the fund to prevent homelessness, replace items lost when fleeing their homes and increase safety for themselves and their children.⁵⁰ Following evaluation, the Scottish Government should now commit to a permanent national fund. However, its Budget for 2025/26 does not allocate any funding to this vital safety net for women unable to afford to leave an abusive partner and stay separated.

Social Security for unpaid carers

Unpaid care work is a significant cause of gendered poverty, undermining financial security for women and girls across generations. Unpaid carers from BME communities, in rural areas, and those caring for disabled people face specific challenges and added costs. These groups are on their knees following the pandemic and the cost of living crisis but are routinely excluded from forms of government support.⁵¹

The value of unpaid care to Scotland’s economy is estimated at £15.9 billion, approximately a quarter of the national budget.⁵² Crucial unpaid care work props up the economy, saving billions in health, social care and other public services. However, the Scottish Government’s ‘Carer Support Payment’ (CSP) and ‘Carer’s Allowance

⁴⁸ https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Womens_Aid_cost_of_living_survivor_survey_July_22.pdf

⁴⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/disability/bulletins/disabilityandcrimeuk/2019>

⁵⁰ Scottish Women’s Aid (*forthcoming*) Fund to Leave: The Evaluation.

⁵¹ Until recently carers were not prioritised for ‘safety net’ support within the Scottish Welfare Fund, they did not receive vital Cost of Living Payments from the UK Government and were not eligible for Covid-19 vaccine in 2024.

⁵² https://www.carersuk.org/media/l5sa1sq4/valuing_carers_scotland_web.pdf

Supplement' amount to a maximum of £2.66 per hour⁵³ for essential and skilled care work. The Real Living Wage in the UK is currently £12.60. CSP's 'earnings threshold' is set at £196 per week, restricting unpaid carers to low-wage employment and increasing the risk of poverty into retirement.⁵⁴ This egregiously inadequate support discriminates against women, who are 70% of those in receipt of carers' social security payments and twice as likely to give up paid work to provide unpaid care.⁵⁵

With the new Carer Support Payment (CSP), the Scottish Government can rectify this historic failure of support for unpaid carers. We are resolute in calling for a Real Living Wage for carers to reflect the value of unpaid care and to enable the realisation of carers' ESC rights. The Scottish Government's longer-term proposals to improve access to education and employment are welcome, as is an Additional Person Payment (APP) for those with multiple caring roles. However, timescales for this are unclear, and the APP is proposed at £10 per week for a minimum of 20 hours of care – a maximum rate of 50p per hour and a quarter of the basic rate of CSP. This is demeaning and damaging to women's economic and social rights.⁵⁶

Currently, there are restrictions on access to Carer Support Payment for both younger and older people who are providing unpaid care. This discriminates against young women and girls, who are the majority of young carers, and older women, who are more likely to experience 'pension poverty' than men.⁵⁷ We are calling for the CSP eligibility period to be extended for 16- to 19-year-olds in full-time non-advanced education and for a new support payment for older carers. Carers' contributions should be recognised regardless of age, educational status, or separate income through employment or social security.

Reform of Universal Credit

The UK social security system has been heavily critiqued for its misogynist design and inequitable impact. In 2018, the UN's Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights described Universal Credit by saying, "If you got a group of misogynists together in a room and said, 'how can we make a system that works for men but not women?' they wouldn't have come up with too many other ideas than what's in place." Action to address this ingrained gender injustice is urgently needed for women and their children.

The policy of single household payments of Universal Credit (UC) assumes that resources are shared equally within households. It undermines women's access to an independent income and greatly increases the risks of poverty and domestic abuse for

⁵³ Carer Support Payment is £81.90 per week for a minimum 35 hours of caring, or £2.34 an hour. The Scottish Government's supplement is £288.60 twice a year, or £11.10 per week – a maximum rate of £0.32 per hour.

⁵⁴ https://www.carersuk.org/media/15sa1sq4/valuing_carers_scotland_web.pdf

⁵⁵ <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Accompanying-paper-FINAL.pdf>

⁵⁶ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-response-to-the-Scottish-Governments-Scottish-Carers-Assistance-consultation.pdf>

⁵⁷ <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2021/new-age-uk-analysis-finds-one-in-five-uk-women-pensioners-now-living-in-poverty/>

women and children.⁵⁸ The Scottish Government has committed to individual UC payments. Still, delivery depends on the UK Government's impact assessment, and both governments have failed to prioritise achieving this in a timely fashion.

The two-child limit within UC and Child Tax Credit systematically discriminates against women, penalising them for their reproductive and family circumstances. We must see work to scrap the pernicious two-child limit by the UK Government.⁵⁹

Minimum Income Guarantee

The Scottish Government has committed to exploring a Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG). In 2025, its MIG Expert Group is due to report on what a MIG could look like and recommend steps towards delivery. However, women's organisations are concerned that specific gendered and intersectional impacts need greater consideration in the design process. This policy, if well designed, holds great potential to lift marginalised women out of poverty and destitution. However, issues including ingrained misogyny and bias within the current social security assessment process and potential impacts on women's labour market participation need to be addressed. These mustn't be replicated in the design of a new payment.

Unpaid carers are under-recognised and undervalued in public policymaking. A MIG in Scotland must be designed to ensure their needs are met. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government established a Social Renewal Advisory Board that recommended modelling a MIG for unpaid carers. We back calls for carers to be prioritised in any piloting or initial rollout of MIG and for the impact on carer poverty to be evaluated.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Ringfence increased Scottish Welfare Fund funding by an additional £20m per annum, increasing it annually in line with inflation.
2. Expand access for marginalised groups of women with dedicated funding streams to support unpaid carers, migrant women and women with NRPF when possible.
3. Work with the UK Government to remove the Scottish Welfare Fund from the list of restricted public funds set out under paragraph 6 of its immigration rules.
4. Create a permanent national 'fund to leave' for women experiencing domestic abuse.
 - a. Ring-fence funds within this for women and children with no recourse to public funds.
 - b. Ensure the payment is increased to match rising related costs and inflation.

⁵⁸ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Gender-matters-in-social-security---individual-payments-of-universal-credit.pdf>

⁵⁹ <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/the-two-child-limit-to-means-tested-benefits/>

5. Commit to a Real Living Wage for unpaid carers through the Scottish Carer Supplement that does not lead to income reductions for those they care for.
6. Publish plans to expand access to Carer Support Payment regarding education, employment and multiple caring roles.
7. Pay the proposed Additional Person Payment at least the same rate as the Carer Support Payment.
8. Extend eligibility for Carer Support Payment for 16 to 19-year-olds in full-time non-advanced education.
9. Introduce a specific recognition payment for older unpaid carers who cannot be paid Carer Support Payment because they receive a State Pension.
10. Engage with the UK Government in a timely manner to enable the delivery of automatic, individual payments of Universal Credit.
11. Work with the UK Government to fast-track approval of the Scottish Government's policy proposal on 'split payments' of Universal Credit and implement individual payments for all UC claims
12. Work with the UK Government to abolish the 'two-child limit' within Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit.
13. Undertake and resource a comprehensive review of the potential intersectional and gendered impacts of a Minimum Income Guarantee in Scotland.
14. Prioritise unpaid carers in any piloting or initial rollout of MIG and evaluate the impact on carer poverty.

2. What evidence does the Scottish Government need to collect to show the impacts of its social security spend?

The impacts of social security on improving equality in Scotland must be measured robustly to understand how social security supports the groups most in need of welfare assistance and protection. This requires better implementation and design of the Public Sector Equality Duty and Scottish Specific Duties in Scotland. Further details of our views on this are included in our answers to the 'Social Justice' questions in this consultation.

For example, the SWF has been increasingly accessed by women since its creation in 2013, reflecting the gendered nature of poverty and insecurity in Scotland.⁶⁰ Women are around 60% and 54% of those who access the Community Care Grant and Crisis Grants.

However, a systematic gender analysis of SWF demand, use, parameters and guidance has never been undertaken. The 2023 review and subsequent Scottish Government

⁶⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-welfare-fund-statistics-update-to-31-december-2022/pages/gender-balance-of-applicants-for-swf-awards/>

Action Plan have a very limited focus on gender and do not address intersectionality.⁶¹ Gender analysis is needed to equip the SWF to support marginalised groups of women, including unpaid carers, migrant women and – when possible - women with the ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’ (NRPF) status.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Ensure the Public Sector Equality Duty is adequately implemented to collect and analyse the necessary equalities data on social security systems to ensure impacts can be understood and policy improvements made.
2. Revise statutory guidance in line with intersectional gender analysis of the Scottish Welfare Fund’s structures and delivery plan, focusing on improved data collection and use.

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

1. How do we address the root causes of abuse and violence?

The root cause of all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) is gender inequality. This inequality sustains unequal power relations between men and women, rigid gender stereotypes that subordinate women and harmful social norms that tolerate men’s violence.

In Scotland, this inequality continues to exist, with women having less access to:

- **Power and decision-making:** Women hold only around a third (1,222) of the 3,382 identified positions of power in Scotland, with men overrepresented in 33 out of 38 sectors and industries examined.⁶²
- **Money and resources:** Women are more likely to be in poverty, experience labour market inequality (such as the gender pay gap), be on lower incomes and rely more on social security than men.⁶³
- **Respect:** 3 in 10 people in Scotland believe a woman is at least partly to blame for being raped if she is either very drunk or wearing revealing clothing.⁶⁴

This inequality also interacts with intersecting forms of discrimination and systems of oppression, such as racism and ableism, which exacerbate this inequality and create unique additional barriers to equality for marginalised women and girls.

The result of this pervasive gender inequality is endemic levels of VAWG in Scotland across all settings, including in women’s:

⁶¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-welfare-fund-action-plan/>

⁶² Engender (2023) Sex and Power in Scotland 2023. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SP2023NEW.pdf>

⁶³ Engender (2022) Women & the Cost of Living. A crisis of deepening inequality. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Women-and-the-cost-of-living---updated-copy.pdf>

⁶⁴ Scottish Government (2020) Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2019: attitudes to violence against women. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-attitudes-violence-against-women-scotland/documents/>

- **Homes:** Police in Scotland recorded 63,867 incidents of domestic abuse in 2023-24 and 955 incidents of honour-based abuse between 2015 and 2021. Since 2014-15, 41% of female homicide victims in Scotland were killed by a partner or ex-partner, while a fifth were killed by a relative.⁶⁵
- **Workplaces:** A poll by the TUC found that 3 in 5 (58%) women in the UK have experienced sexual harassment, bullying or verbal abuse at work.⁶⁶
- **Educational institutions:** Figures obtained in 2015 suggest one rape per day is reported on school premises during the school year in the UK.⁶⁷ More than half (58%) of girls and young women aged 14-21 in the UK have been sexually harassed in their school, college or university.⁶⁸
- **Public spaces:** 7 in 10 women in the UK have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space.⁶⁹
- **Online spaces:** More than one in six women (17%) in Scotland have experienced online violence against women and girls, while over a third (35%) have witnessed it.⁷⁰

Within these settings, intersecting inequalities cause different groups of women and girls to experience this violence differently, with marginalised groups also at a greater risk of experiencing it.

Primary Prevention of VAWG

Despite what these figures suggest, this violence is not inevitable. It is preventable. The only way to end VAWG once and for all is to prevent it before it occurs; this is the aim of a primary prevention approach⁷¹. This approach focuses on stopping VAWG before it happens by addressing its root cause: gender inequality. Primary prevention is distinct from other prevention approaches which deal with violence after it happens, such as early detection and harm minimisation initiatives.

⁶⁵ Scottish Government (2024) Homicides in Scotland 2023-24. Available at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/homicide-scotland-2023-24/>

⁶⁶ TUC (2023) New TUC poll: 2 in 3 young women have experienced sexual harassment, bullying or verbal abuse at work. Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/new-tuc-poll-2-3-young-women-have-experienced-sexual-harassment-bullying-or-verbal-abuse-work>

⁶⁷ BBC News (2015) School sex crime reports in UK top 5,500 in three years. Available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-34138287>

⁶⁸ Plan International (2021) More Than Half of Girls Have Experienced Sexual Harassment on School, College or University Grounds. Available at: <https://plan-uk.org/press/half-of-girls-have-experienced-sexual-harassment-in-a-learning-environment>

⁶⁹ All Party Parliamentary Group for UN Women (2021) Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces. Available at: https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf

⁷⁰ Open University (2023) OU research reveals shocking level of online violence experienced by women and girls across Scotland. Available at: https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf

⁷¹ <https://www.engender.org.uk/primary-prevention/>

Primary prevention has been a key component of Scotland’s approach to VAWG for more than a decade through the Scottish Government and COSLA’s Equally Safe Strategy. Equally Safe is widely commended for prioritising primary prevention and is one of the only national VAWG strategies in the world to recognise gender inequality as the root cause of this violence.⁷² This approach is also in line with Scotland’s human rights obligations under various international treaties and agreements, such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Council of Europe’s Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women (the Istanbul Convention).

The emphasis on primary prevention has led to pioneering work on VAWG in Scotland, including in schools, workplaces, and the media, and therefore, should be maintained. However, more must be done to improve this approach to ensure it delivers the transformative change required to end VAWG. This is supported by the 2023 Irving Review, which found that across Scotland, there is “widespread agreement that primary prevention of VAWG is urgently required” but that this work ultimately needs to be strengthened, mainly through a shift in funding towards prevention.⁷³

The Irving Review particularly highlighted the urgent need for a more coordinated multi-sectoral approach to VAWG that works across all levels of society and challenges the gender inequality that drives this violence. One way to achieve this is by embedding primary prevention into all areas of public policy, including those beyond justice and education, where work to end VAWG is often siloed.

Public policy affects every aspect of life, meaning it is a powerful tool for addressing inequality and ultimately preventing VAWG. However, despite being a core component of the Equally Safe Strategy, key policies are still being developed without cognisance of primary prevention or basic equalities issues. From social security systems based on outdated gender roles and the failure to invest in childcare as economic infrastructure to planning policies that overlook women’s needs in public spaces and transport systems that don’t accommodate women’s travel patterns. Gender-biased policies entrench the gendered norms, structures and values that sustain gender inequality and contribute to an enabling environment in which VAWG occurs.⁷⁴

This is a critical gap in Scotland’s approach to VAWG and undermines all other efforts to prevent it. For example, working with children and young people to challenge harmful gender norms and attitudes is vital for preventing VAWG. However, these

⁷² Engender (2021) Delivering Equally Safe – How Can We Prevent Violence Against Women?. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/delivering-equally-safe---how-can-we-prevent-violence-against-women/>

⁷³ Scottish Government (2023) The Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls Services. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/violence-against-women-girls-independent-strategic-review-funding-commissioning-services-report/>

⁷⁴ Engender (2023) An Overview of VAWG and the Role of Public Policy in Scotland in Prevention. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/VAWGbriefingNov23.pdf>

initiatives will fail if not accompanied by the broader societal change required to address systemic and structural gender inequality.

To deliver this transformative change, Engender calls on the next Scottish Government to commit to taking a primary prevention approach to policymaking. Such an approach requires:

1. Women are equally and fairly represented in policymaking and decision-making roles

Despite making up 51% of the population, women continue to be underrepresented across Scotland's democratic bodies, meaning that their perspectives are missing from the majority of decisions taken in Scotland's public realm at every level of politics and policymaking. This exclusion is even more pronounced for minoritised women who are less likely to be promoted to positions of power, face higher risks of discrimination and harassment in the workplace, and experience additional and multiple barriers to elected office.⁷⁵

Women who do enter politics are also subject to toxic levels of abuse and harassment that ultimately force them to leave public life. Black and minority ethnic women politicians are significantly more likely to experience threats to their personal safety, which creates a chilling effect on diversity within the decision-making and policymaking spheres.

The exclusion of women's perspectives and a lack of diversity in policymaking contributes to the creation of policies developed without consideration for women's distinct needs, especially marginalised women's needs. This ultimately entrenches gender inequality in these policies, which creates the context in which VAWG continues to occur.

To address this, we call on Scottish Labour to create a new fund to support individuals from underrepresented groups in overcoming barriers to political participation. This would build on the success of the Access to Elected Office Fund, which supports the equal participation of disabled people in politics. To tackle violence against elected politicians, we recommend Scottish Labour commits to fulfilling the recommendations set out by the Jo Cox Civility Commission.⁷⁶

2. Policymakers apply intersectional gender analysis to their work

The Scottish government and local authorities are still developing key public policies without considering basic equalities issues. Intersectional gender analysis is a tool that enables policymakers to assess how a policy might advance or obstruct progress towards gender equality.

⁷⁵ Engender (2023) Sex and Power 2023. Available at:
<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SP2023NEW.pdf>

⁷⁶ The Jo Cox Foundation (2024) Jo Cox Civility Commission Recommendations. Available at:
<https://www.jocoxfoundation.org/our-work/respectful-politics/commission/recommendations/>

UN Women describe this analysis as an “essential starting point” for gender mainstreaming, a legal requirement for the Scottish Government and local authorities under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED).⁷⁷ Yet intersectional gender analysis is still inconsistently used in public policy development; many policymakers fail to recognise it as integral to the policy process.

Failing to address equality issues at the outset of the policy process facilitates the continued development of gender-biased policies that uphold the norms, values and structures that enable VAWG.

Reform of the PSED is urgently needed to make it fit for purpose and improve equality mainstreaming. While the Scottish Government was previously committed to this reform, they have since significantly scaled back their proposals for change.

Therefore, we are calling on Scottish Labour to commit to reforming the PSED and working with equality organisations to co-produce regulations that will improve outcomes for people with protected characteristics. Engender has already developed our own model draft regulations, including new duties on collecting intersectional data and carrying out ‘gender budget analysis’.⁷⁸

3. Policymakers promote women’s safety in all of their work

VAWG is widespread and has become normalised in Scotland. The 2019 Scottish Social Attitudes found a significant minority of people continue to hold problematic views on VAWG. Furthermore, despite reported sexual crimes reaching their highest levels on record, rape and attempted rape have had the lowest conviction rate of all crimes for the last decade.⁷⁹

The root causes of this violence are not well understood. One-third of adults in the UK don’t view domestic abuse as a societal problem but as one caused by individual perpetrators just being ‘bad people’,⁸⁰ and over a quarter (28%) of adults in Scotland believe rape is the result of men ‘being unable to control their need for sex’.⁸¹ Research commissioned by Scottish Women’s Aid also shows that less than half (47%) of the

⁷⁷ UN Women (2022) Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming for Gender Equality Results. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Handbook-on-gender-mainstreaming-for-gender-equality-results-en.pdf>

⁷⁸ Engender (2022) Draft regulations for the Scottish Specific Duties of the Public Sector Equality Act. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/engender-draft-regulations-table-of-changes.pdf>
Engender (2022) Engender response to the Scottish Government’s consultation on the operation of the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-response-to-PSED-consultation.pdf>

⁷⁹ Rape Crisis Scotland (2024) Conviction rate for rape is the lowest for any crime type in Scotland. Available at: <https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/news/news/conviction-rate-for-rape-is-the-lowest-for-any-crime-type-in-scotland/>

⁸⁰ Women’s Aid (2022) Women’s Aid releases new research on how UK public attitudes ‘tolerate’ domestic abuse. Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/womens-aid-releases-new-research-on-how-uk-public-attitudes-tolerate-domestic-abuse/>

⁸¹ Scottish Government (2020) Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2019: attitudes to violence against women. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-attitudes-violence-against-women-scotland/>

population identify power dynamics between men and women as a key cause of VAWG, with just 51% saying the same about gender norms.⁸²

This normalisation of VAWG is also present in policymaking environments where opportunities to problematise this violence are being missed. For example, VAWG is a major health and safety issue but is rarely framed this way in key public policies. In particular, although the latest National Planning Framework (NPF4) briefly mentions “prioritising women’s safety”, this is not mentioned in the Health and Safety section. Experiences of this violence influence the way women and girls navigate public spaces, with 71% of women in the UK experiencing sexual harassment in public spaces (rising to 97% amongst 18 to 24-year-olds).⁸³ Furthermore, how public spaces are designed impacts women’s sense of safety. This includes dark spaces, poor lighting, and the layout of streets.⁸⁴

Therefore, women’s safety must be actively embedded into all areas of public policy, including those beyond the justice and education domains. A starting point must be building public awareness of the root causes of VAWG through national prevention campaigns, as called for in the Irving Review. Within the public sector, there is also an urgent need to build gender competence, so policymakers have the skills and expertise to design policies that address intersecting inequalities and challenge VAWG.

4. Violence Against Women in Politics

Women often reference experiences of toxic levels of abuse and harassment as a reason for leaving public life. Women in politics are at an increased risk of receiving sexist abuse - a risk which is heightened further for Black and minoritised politicians - and are currently facing unprecedented threats to their personal safety.

This creates a chilling effect on diversity, sending a signal that electoral politics is not safe for women, particularly for women of colour and other marginalised groups.

We encourage consideration of how the recommendations of the Jo Cox Civility Commission can be realised. This includes a call for any costs associated with candidate safety to be an exemption to election spending limits.⁸⁵

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Invest in national prevention work on VAWG, as recommended by the Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls Services

⁸² Scottish Women’s Aid (2020) Shifting attitudes and changing the future for women and girls. Available at: <https://womensaid.scot/shifting-attitudes-and-changing-the-future-for-women-and-girls/>

⁸³ All Party Parliamentary Group for UN Women (2021) Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces. Available at: https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf

⁸⁴ ARUP (2022) Cities Alive: Designing cities that work for women. Available at: <https://www.arup.com/insights/cities-alive-designing-cities-that-work-for-women/>

⁸⁵ <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender---Scottish-Elections-Representation-and-Reform-Bill---Call-for-Views---March-2024.pdf>

2. Embed a primary prevention approach to policymaking in all areas of policy development, including by:
 - a. **Improving women’s representation in policymaking by** creating a new fund to support individuals from underrepresented groups in overcoming barriers to political participation and fulfilling the recommendations of the Jo Cox Civility Commission.
 - b. **Ensuring all public policies are gender-sensitive by** reforming PSED and improving equality mainstreaming in the public sector.
 - c. **Promoting women’s safety in all public policies** by building public awareness of the root causes of VAWG through a national prevention campaign and developing gender competence, including expertise on VAWG, across the public sector
3. Consider how the recommendations of the Jo Cox Civility Commission can be realised to address women’s safety in political office. This includes a call for any costs associated with candidate safety to be exempt from election spending limits.

Culture, Music and Sport

1. Given that it has been the aspiration of many governments to widen access to culture, how can a future Scottish Labour government change this in the long-term?

[The Equal Media and Culture Centre for Scotland](#) is a hub hosted by Engender that provides research, monitoring and advocacy for gender equality in the media, creative and cultural industries across Scotland Based on the National Advisory Council for Women and Girls’ 2018 recommendation that Scotland should have its Women in Media Body, Engender received funding for a development project to identify what shape this might take.

Media and culture help shape societal attitudes and behaviours and have the power to transform the world around us. However, there remains a persistent lack of representation of women and diverse voices in positions of power in Scotland’s arts, media, cultural, and sports industries. Structural barriers, such as lack of access to funding, inflexibility of roles, and a lack of consistent, well-paid work, continue disproportionately affecting women’s representation and participation in Scotland’s creative and cultural sectors. Men’s over-representation across the media, culture and creative industries is reflected in widespread stereotyping of women and lack of gender balance in print, on the airwaves and our screens.

Women in Scotland do not have the same access to work and career progression in the culture sector as men. Lack of access to funding, inflexibility of roles, and a lack of consistent, well-paid work continue disproportionately affecting women’s representation and participation in Scotland’s creative and cultural sectors. There remains a persistent lack of representation of women and diverse voices in positions

of power in Scotland's arts, media, cultural, and sports industries, with men's over-representation at over 75% of leadership positions in these sectors.⁸⁶

A future Scottish Labour Government must acknowledge and address these structural barriers to improve women's access to culture. The Government should integrate gender budget analysis (GBA) in the cultural sector's budget designs and funding plans. The Government must also ensure that fair work for freelance workers and EDI remain priorities for public spending in the cultural sector.

The Government must also address how intersectional forms of discrimination hinder BME women's access to job opportunities, permanent positions and funding in the cultural sector. By addressing these structural barriers, a future Scottish Labour government can ensure women have equal access to culture.

We invite the next Government to work with the EMCC to identify the most significant issues impacting women's access to culture across levels of participation, leadership and ability to access paid work in the culture and creative sectors. We create research and reports on gender equality in the arts, culture, media and sports sectors. We want to work with Scottish Labour to shape clear policy solutions to see tangible change for women in Scotland's creative and cultural sectors.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Action that recognises and addresses women's unequal representation in the creative and culture sector workforce, especially in leadership positions, as vital to progressing gender equality in Scotland.
2. Ensure fair work and conditions for freelance workers and prioritise Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in the culture sector.
3. Work with the EMCC to design future solutions to ensure long-term change to women's access to culture, particularly for marginalised women.

2. Does there need to be a reform of how funding is distributed?

Yes. To account for women's lack of access to participation in the cultural sector, the government must integrate gender budget analysis in funding designs and distribution plans. A key priority of any budgeted funds for culture in Scotland must consider how funding can actively progress minoritised women's participation in cultural activity, who are even less well represented in the sector's workforce.

The Government must ensure that public bodies such as Creative Scotland are scrutinised for the impact of their EDI priorities by reviewing who and what they have previously funded. The Government should also review whether public bodies' funding priorities adequately address the significant barriers marginalised women face in the creative sector and work to improve EDI in the workforce and leadership of these bodies.

⁸⁶ Engender (2023) Sex and Power in Scotland.
<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SP2023NEW.pdf>

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Ensure that any reforms to culture funding include integrating gender budget analysis (GBA) into funding designs and distribution plans.
2. Strengthen public funding bodies, such as Creative Scotland, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) priorities and review whether these adequately address the significant barriers marginalised women face in the culture and creative sectors.
3. Utilise funding to improve the culture workforce's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), including working to diversify the leadership of public bodies.

3. How can culture, music and sport be supported in local communities e.g. how do we ensure live music venues remain open etc?

Culture, music, and sports hubs in local venues must be a priority in the Scottish Government's funding of local authorities and local authority spending. Local authority services have experienced significant real-term budget reductions.

Research commissioned by Creative Scotland, Sport Scotland and Community Leisure UK finds that non-statutory local authority services have particularly experienced significant real-time budget reductions. For culture and leisure services, this amounts to a real-terms decrease of 20% between 2010/11 and 2022/23.⁸⁷ A future Scottish Labour government must increase its funding to local authorities to ensure local culture and leisure services remain accessible to their communities.

Culture and music industries are still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis, and years of austerity policies. The Scottish Government must financially support venues, organisations, and workers in these sectors as this recovery continues.

Creative Scotland's new Multi-Year Funding Programme will run from 2025-2028. Creative Scotland has previously described the Scottish Government's funding for this programme as 'extremely limited', resulting in a 'highly competitive process where difficult decisions need to be made.'⁸⁸ A future Scottish Labour government must ensure that the Multi-Year Funding Programme has increased funding, or risk culture and music organisations in local communities losing their funding, resulting in losing jobs and opportunities.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Increase funding for local authorities to ensure local culture and leisure services remain accessible to their communities.

⁸⁷ Engender and EMCC (2024) Response to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee Pre-budget Scrutiny. <https://emcc.engender.org.uk/publications/engender-and-emcc-response-to-constitution-europe-external-affairs-and-culture-committee-call-for-views-on-its-pre-budget-scrutiny-2025-26-final.pdf>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

2. Ensure the Creative Scotland Multi-Year Funding Programme sees an increase in investment to safeguard against significant job losses in culture and music sectors in local communities.

4. How can we ensure that our people get the skills they need for creative industries and support a pipeline of talent? How can this be done while taking into account the impact of AI and technology on these industries?

The Scottish government must increase its funding of the culture sector to support its pipeline of talent or risk losing this talent. Women are particularly at risk of leaving the culture sector due to structural barriers and societal expectations. A Creative Scotland survey found that almost three times the number of women to men cited caring responsibilities as a significant barrier to their work in the arts.⁸⁹ An increase in culture funding, with gender budget analysis (GBA) integrated, will increase job and training opportunities and open avenues for career progression.

The impact of Artificial Intelligence poses a significant risk to the culture sector. The Scottish government must legislate on AI to ensure its use does not risk cultural sector jobs or perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Women are currently underrepresented in the development of AI technologies, and the Scottish Government must address this gender gap in AI and technology development or risk AI perpetuating harmful stereotypes of women and gender.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Address the underrepresentation of women working in Artificial Intelligence and related sectors and safeguard against the loss of creative and cultural jobs from AI technologies.
2. Recognise the specific gendered risks of AI to perpetuate violence against women and girls and work to address this.

5. What lessons can we learn from other sectors and countries regarding supporting our creative industries?

Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) pilot scheme⁹⁰ has been running for three years. It is an attempt to address the financial instability many working in the cultural sector face. An initial impact assessment has found that the BIA pilot scheme has positively impacted recipients' well-being, creative practice, and quality of life.⁹¹

The Irish government's BIA pilot has been a significant step forward in supporting artists and addressing the precarity of working in the arts. The Scottish Government should follow Ireland's example and similar BIA programmes for artists in the US to learn from their findings.

⁸⁹ <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/cost-of-living-crisis-how-are-rising-costs-affecting-women-in-the-arts/>

⁹⁰ <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/ireland-extends-basic-income-artists-scheme>

⁹¹ <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/2023/12/19/basic-income-for-the-arts-first-results/>

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Developing a Basic Income for the Arts in Scotland, following examples of international best practices.

6. How can fair work principles be better integrated and enforced within the creative industries to ensure that freelance and contract workers receive equitable pay, job security, access to union representation and recognition and access to essential benefits?

A future Scottish Labour government must address the structural barriers that freelance and contract women workers face in its funding designs. This should include action to address the structural drivers of the gender pay gap, and future priorities for Fair Work in the culture sector must recognise and actively address the intersectional gender inequality entrenched in Scotland's culture sector. Many of these factors are addressed in the question related to addressing the persistent gender pay gap in Commission One—and they apply just as much to women trying to access paid work within the culture and creative sectors.

The government and public bodies such as Creative Scotland should implement GBA in their funding designs to ensure that fair work principles are integrated and enforced for women in the cultural sector. Public bodies must scrutinise their priorities around fair work and ensure that these Fair Work priorities are being enforced in organisations that receive public funding. This should include all workers, including freelancers, having access to union representation and benefits and receiving equitable pay and contracts.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Ensure future priorities for Fair Work in the culture sector recognise and actively address the intersectional gender inequality.
2. Public culture funding becoming better aligned with Fair Work priorities and enforced via funding conditions for organisations successfully securing funds.
3. Ensure that all workers, especially women, in creative industries have access to appropriate union representation and equitable pay and conditions.

7. How do we meaningfully build on hosting big sporting events such as the men's UEFA European Football Championship and the Commonwealth Games in terms of sporting legacy and economic opportunities?

Sporting events like the Commonwealth Games should allow the Government to scrutinise its sports sector. Sport Scotland research indicates 24% lower participation in sport by women compared to men, with even lower rates for disabled women, women of colour, and LGBTQ+ women who face steeper barriers.⁹²

⁹² Equal Media and Culture Centre (2023), The Gendered Coverage of Scottish Sport. <https://emcc.engage.org.uk/publications/gendered-coverage-scottish-sport.pdf>

Women's sports remain secondary to men's in many ways, including societal status, media exposure, prizes, wages, and sponsorship.

Scottish Labour must commit to:

1. Improve women's access to sports and work to transform attitudes in Scottish society on gender and sport.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international levels to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.