



**8 STEPS**  
**TOWARDS**  
**WOMEN'S**  
**EQUALITY**  
**IN SCOTLAND**

# 8 STEPS TOWARDS WOMEN'S EQUALITY IN SCOTLAND

Engender is a leading feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to secure women's social, political and economic equality and realise women's rights in Scotland. We aim to make visible the impact of structural inequality on women and wider society and work at Scottish, UK and international levels to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

Ahead of the next Programme for Government for 2024-25, we have put together a series of asks we want to see the Scottish Government act on to secure women's rights and progress intersectional gender equality in Scotland. We have shaped eight asks across three overarching areas needing change:

- **Embed gender equality across all Scottish Government policy**
- **Address women's poverty and financial inequality**
- **Tackle women's health inequalities and protect reproductive rights**

# OUR ASKS

- 1: REFORM THE PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY**
- 2: REFRESH SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION**
- 3: INVEST IN THE SCOTTISH WELFARE FUND TO SUPPORT MARGINALISED WOMEN**
- 4: ABOLISH NON-RESIDENTIAL SOCIAL CARE CHARGES**
- 5: IMPLEMENT A 'FUND TO LEAVE' FOR WOMEN EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC ABUSE**
- 6: MODERNISE SCOTLAND'S ABORTION LAW**
- 7: DEVELOP THE NEXT PHASE OF THE WOMEN'S HEALTH PLAN**
- 8: DEVELOP A SCOTTISH INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH**

# EMBED GENDER EQUALITY ACROSS ALL SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT POLICY

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

These existing commitments include:

- Strengthening and reforming the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- Revisiting Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation to improve gender mainstreaming.
- Acting on the recommendations from the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG), **available to view here**.
- Introducing and resourcing an 'Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy' across government, which we know is due to be published soon.



**Intersectionality** means that people's identities, like race, gender, and class, overlap and affect how they experience discrimination and inequality. For a policy or programme to be intersectional, it needs to acknowledge that different women face inequality in different ways and to varying extents.



**Gender mainstreaming** is a way to achieve gender equality by considering gender in every step of creating and carrying out policies and programmes. This includes planning, designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating them.

Improving 'gender mainstreaming' is vital for realising the four stated Scottish Government priorities: eradicating child poverty, growing the economy, tackling the climate emergency, and improving public services. These issues impact women and men differently, especially if women are impacted by other forms of marginalisation.

If policies in these areas 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.

Despite this reality, the value and potential of mainstreaming equality is not well understood or invested in across the Scottish Government. As part of addressing this gap, progressing intersectional gender equality should be prioritised in the Programme for Government each year as one of its key goals from the outset.

**For more information, see:**

**What Works for Women: Improving Gender Mainstreaming in Scotland**

---

**Engender response to the Scottish Government’s call for evidence on the National Outcomes**

---

# 1: REFORM THE PUBLIC SECTOR EQUALITY DUTY

**Revisit existing commitments to reform the Public Sector Equality Duty and work with equality organisations to co-produce regulations that will improve outcomes for people with protected characteristics.**

The **public sector equality duty** (PSED) is one of the main ways the Equality Act (2010) is supposed to ensure that public authorities and organisations carrying out public functions think about how they can improve society and promote equality in every aspect of their day-to-day business. The PSED is currently not fit for purpose, and organisations and public services that are meant to improve outcomes for people with protected characteristics are not currently being supported to improve so that they can meet these legal duties.

Engender has campaigned to reform the PSED in Scotland for many years. In 2022, we jointly responded to a Scottish Government consultation about reforming the PSED with 25 other equalities organisations. We shared concerns that proposals for change were not ambitious enough and called for the Scottish Government to work with equality experts to create new duties.

We have also developed our **own model draft regulations**, including new duties on collecting intersectional data and carrying out 'gender budget analysis'. These new regulations would also ensure recommendations made by the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls are better realised.

Recent Scottish Government proposals have been scaled back significantly. However, given the deeply negative impacts of the cost of living crisis, the pandemic and austerity on women's lives, the need for improved equality mainstreaming is urgent. This must include targeted



**Gender budget analysis** (GBA) is a method that looks at how public spending decisions affect women and men differently, aiming to promote gender equality. It reveals any gender bias in budgeting, which is often thought to be neutral, and works to improve gender equality in all public spending and government departments.

solutions to issues for women who experience other forms of discrimination, including women of colour and disabled women.

We also know a new ‘Human Rights Bill’ is under development, which may introduce more legal duties for Scotland’s public bodies to uphold women’s human rights. It is vital that the Scottish Government revisit the weaknesses of the PSED so that lessons can be learned from current failures to improve outcomes for groups with protected characteristics. This is critical not only to improve how PSED works, but also for any new law protecting human rights in Scotland to have a real impact on the ground for the most marginalised people.

**For more information, see:**

**Engender response to the Scottish Government’s consultation on the operation of the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland**

---

**Engender Model Draft Regulations for the Scottish Specific Duties of the Public Sector Equality Act**

---

# 2: REFRESH SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

**Commit to 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.**

The current framing of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) underestimates women's contribution to Scotland's economy. The NSET upholds a biased understanding of what is included within 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 main way to measure the success of our economy. As a result, this skews investment of money 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 and accounting for around 3.2% of the overall economy. The exclusion of the care economy has continued despite the care sector's increasing significance to an ageing population and how vital caring roles were during the pandemic. It makes even less sense when you factor in that the care sector's growth has outperformed the economy as a whole in recent years.



The **care economy** is a vital part of the welfare state. It includes activities that support the physical, social, mental, and emotional wellbeing of those who need care, like children, disabled people, older people, sick people, and teenagers. The care economy is vital for keeping society healthy and functioning well.



Recently, we were told that the lack of gender in the NSET would be addressed in a planned review of the strategy. This is why we are continuing to call on the Scottish Government to commit to a 'refresh' of NSET and to use the opportunity to understand the gendered impact of the current strategy and take action to rebalance it. This is crucial to ensure women can benefit equally from Scotland's economy and that our current national ten-year strategy doesn't ultimately work to worsen gender inequality.

**For more information, see:**

**Gender & Economic Recovery**

---

# ADDRESS WOMEN'S POVERTY AND FINANCIAL INEQUALITY

Eradicating child poverty is the First Minister's number one priority. For this to be successful, the Programme for Government must make the link between addressing women's poverty and children's poverty. This must include targeted actions which tackle the disproportionately negative impacts that the cost of living crisis is having on women's lives, especially for women who experience other forms of marginalisation.

We know that women's incomes are lower than those of men. Women have less access to well-paid and secure work, are more reliant on social security, have less access to pensions, and do not have equal access to resources within households. Women also make up the majority of one-parent families and are more likely to be primary caregivers for children and unpaid carers for disabled and older people. Women tend to manage households and act as shock absorbers of poverty, particularly for children, in our communities.

There is an urgent need to get financial support to the most vulnerable families in Scotland, and targeting women's economic inequality is often the most effective way to do this. This Programme for Government must invest in women's financial security. This must include investing in the Scottish Welfare Fund to support marginalised women, including unpaid carers, migrant women and women experiencing domestic abuse. We also need to see the long-standing commitment to abolish social care charging realised and a national fund which supports women experiencing domestic abuse.

**For more information, see:**

**Women & the Cost of Living: A Crisis of Deepening Inequality**

---

**Securing Women's Futures: Using Scotland's new social security powers to close the gender equality gap**

---

# 3: INVEST IN THE SCOTTISH WELFARE FUND TO SUPPORT MARGINALISED WOMEN

**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.**

The Scottish Welfare Fund includes crisis and community care grants run by local authorities, which have, in recent years, been increasingly accessed by women. From when the fund was created until the start of the pandemic, more men were awarded Crisis Grants than women, but this has changed, with 54% of recipients being women.

The Fund needs a significant funding boost and for its purpose to be broadened out so it can be used to support minoritised women who are particularly impacted by poverty. For example, access to the Fund has been unfairly limited for unpaid carers. We continue to join carers organisations in calling for targeted financial support for unpaid carers, including through a dedicated 'Carers Hardship Fund' that could be delivered in the Scottish Welfare Fund.

Migrant women and women with no recourse to public funds are also at acute risk of deep poverty. The experience of 'no recourse to public funds' is highly gendered; women are 85% of those applying to have the NRPF condition removed. Gendered barriers to a secure income for women subject to immigration controls include institutional racism and xenophobia, anti-refugee stigma, physical and mental health issues due to experiences of trauma, and a lack of support networks, including childcare. These women and their children are in urgent need of financial support.



**'No recourse to public funds'** is a condition that restricts benefits for people under immigration control, such as those who have been allowed to enter the UK for a limited period only or who have no leave to remain in the UK. They can't get regular benefits but might receive limited help from local authorities in specific situations.

# 4: ABOLISH NON-RESIDENTIAL SOCIAL CARE CHARGES

**Implement the long-standing commitment to abolish non-residential social care charges.**

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. The cost of living crisis has pushed many carers into extreme financial hardship. Carers Scotland found that 50% of carers were unable to manage expenses back in March 2022, with many skipping meals, rationing their use of electricity and unable to put on heating.

The Scottish Government has already committed to removing non-residential care charging by 2026, but this will come too late for those currently paying up to £100 per week for vital social care. These charges must be removed urgently.

# 5: IMPLEMENT A 'FUND TO LEAVE' FOR WOMEN EXPERIENCING DOMESTIC ABUSE

## **Create a permanent national '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 England shows that the cost of living crisis is condemning women to violence, with 73% saying it has prevented them from leaving their abusive partner or would make it harder to do so.

Scottish Women's Aid highlights links between domestic abuse and financial precarity, as well as intersectional inequality. The Office for National Statistics figures show that women in households earning less than £10,000 were more than four times as likely to experience abuse from a partner than those in households earning over £50,000.

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. We are now calling for the evaluation of the pilot to be built upon and for the Scottish Government to commit to a permanent national fund.

# TACKLE WOMEN'S HEALTH INEQUALITIES AND PROTECT REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

The First Minister has prioritised improvement to public services, including the NHS. This must include action to reduce health inequalities and improve access to health services for women. Women and girls continue to experience inequalities in health and wellbeing and in 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.



**Medical misogyny** means sexism or gender bias in healthcare, affecting medical practices, communication, consent, and diagnoses. This can include delays in diagnosis or ignoring or dismissing women's pain and symptoms because of gender bias and stereotypes.

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 must see proactive work to improve these areas of our health services.

# 6: MODERNISE SCOTLAND'S ABORTION LAW

**Reaffirm commitments to bring forward proposals to modernise Scotland's abortion law before the end of this parliamentary term.**

The legal framework that currently controls abortion in Scotland is made up of a patchwork of laws that stem from as far back as the 17th century. This does not meet the needs of women in modern-day Scotland, where abortion is routine healthcare and will be accessed by around one in three women in their lifetimes. The current law also does not uphold international human rights standards and health guidelines.

Recent changes across the UK and internationally have made clear the time is now to modernise abortion law in Scotland. We welcome the fact the new First Minister has already publicly recognised the need for action in this area. However, this Programme for Government must restate the commitment to bring forward proposals to modernise abortion law before the end of this Scottish Parliament term in 2026.

Our **recently published report** explores potential models for reform and sets out the case for decriminalisation of abortion. The findings are widely supported by professional health bodies and legal analysts. The report includes recommendations for the Scottish Government and other key decision-makers on the next steps towards a modernised regulatory framework.

**For more information, see:**

**[Outdated, Harmful and Never in the Public Interest – The urgent need to modernise Scotland's abortion law and prevent prosecutions](#)**

---

# 7: DEVELOP THE NEXT PHASE OF THE WOMEN'S HEALTH PLAN

**Develop the next phase of the Women's Health Plan 2021-24, including further focus on the intersectionality of women's health inequalities, sexual health services, pain, chronic conditions and mental health.**

We have greatly welcomed the creation of the Women's Health Plan 2021-24, which aims to improve health inequalities women experience in Scotland. We have seen a positive focus on inequalities for women in areas such as cardiovascular health and



**Gender-sensitive data** are statistics and other information that show the gendered differences and inequalities between women and men in all areas of life.

recognition of how gender impacts rehabilitation. This first plan has also seen work to improve gender-sensitive data and research in health, with actions to embed gender expertise across all health and healthcare policymaking.

However, the Women's Health Plan 2021-24 is the first step in a long journey to tackle health inequalities. It has also been delivered during a challenging time for the NHS post-pandemic. It is vital the Scottish Government commits to the next phase of the Women's Health Plan and gives the Plan a further opportunity to create positive changes.

We are asking for the next version of the Plan to look at health inequalities for women in additional areas such as mental health, treatment of pain, autoimmune disease, chronic post-viral conditions, bone health, dementia and public health. This should include workstreams focusing on intersectional gender inequalities in health outcomes for LGBTI+ and disabled women, especially in sexual health, and the impact of racism and other structural inequalities.



# 8: DEVELOP A SCOTTISH INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

**Progress the development of a 'Scottish Institute for Women's Health' as committed to in the 2021 SNP manifesto and Women's Health Plan 2021-24.**

The 2021 SNP manifesto included a commitment 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.'

This was then added as an action in the Women's Health Plan 2021-24, which 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 to ensure women's lives and health are positively changed.

**For more information, see:**

**[Engender briefing on women's health inequalities](#)**

---

## **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

Contact: Catherine Murphy, Executive Director, Engender

Email: [info@engender.org.uk](mailto:info@engender.org.uk)




Engender  
Suite 540-541  
Baltic Chambers  
50 Wellington Street  
Glasgow  
G2 6HJ

[info@engender.org.uk](mailto:info@engender.org.uk)

[www.engender.org.uk](http://www.engender.org.uk)

 @Engender

 @EngenderScot

 @engender.scot

 @engender-scot