

Scottish Parliament debate on welfare, August 2014

ENGENDER BRIEFING

Since 2010, 74% of cuts to benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions have been taken from women. This rises to 81% of the 'savings' realised by the Treasury in 2014-15.¹

1. KEY MESSAGES

- Social security and gender are interlinked. Benefits comprise 20 per cent of the average women's income, compared to ten per cent for men.²
- Women are also more reliant on key public services and bear the brunt of public spending cuts as they undertake the majority of unpaid caring work. The gender impact of 'welfare reform' on women and their children is therefore enormous.
- Before 'welfare reform' women already experienced deeply-entrenched gender inequality that limited access to resources, decision-making and physical safety. 'Welfare reform' has exacerbated this.
- Despite women's different experience of 'welfare reform', women and gender issues have been all but invisible in the political debate, public discourse and policy response to mitigate 'welfare reform' in Scotland.
- A radical overhaul of our social security system is needed to enable it to address women's income inequality.

2. GENDER AND SOCIAL SECURITY

Cuts to public spending on the benefits and taxation system under the banner of 'welfare reform' have predominantly been taken from women's incomes. Analysis by the House of Commons Library shows that of the initial £8 billion raised in changes to taxes and benefits by the UK Government £5.8 billion will be paid by women and £2.2 billion by men.³

These statistics are in the public domain, yet have not been particularly problematised, as if women's disadvantage is somehow natural or has become an accepted fact of life.

¹ [The impact on women of Autumn Financial Statement 2012 and Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill 2013](#)

² The Fawcett Society (2013) [Budget 2013: Helping or hurting women?](#)

³ House of Commons Library (2012) [How have Coalition budgets affected women?](#)

2.1 WOMEN'S EXISTING INEQUALITY

It is not incidental that women are hugely disadvantaged by 'welfare reform' on account of their gender. Women did not enjoy equality with men in Scotland before these policy changes and a complete roll back would not secure equal access to resources, decision-making, and physical autonomy and safety for women. It is vital that this is not forgotten in the context of such a pernicious and extreme agenda as 'welfare reform'.

In March 2014, Engender published a joint position paper on gender and social security, in response to the lack of gender analysis within the political debate on welfare reform in Scotland.⁴ It presents women's experiences across a spectrum of gender issues, to unpick why different groups of women are being penalised in so many different ways, to explain the huge gender imbalance and to highlight that 'welfare reform' exacerbates rather than creates women's inequality.

Key reasons for the gender impact include:

- Women have fewer financial assets and less access to occupational pensions than men and there are considerably more women than men in the lowest income decile in the UK.⁵
- 92% of lone parents are women, and women make up 95% of lone parents dependent on Income Support.⁶
- Women make up nearly 60% of care providers within the home and 64% of care providers in the wider community.⁷
- The gender pay gap in Scotland is 13% for full-time work and 34% for part-time work,⁸ signifying persistent and widespread differences in women's experience of the labour market.

Evidently, this gender profile puts women at greater risk of deeper and sustained poverty. In addition to meeting basic needs, impoverishment means an undermined ability to participate in society, relative to others and to cultural norms.

2.2 DIVERSE GROUPS OF WOMEN

It is vital to recognise that various groups of women are impacted by 'welfare reform' in different ways. Disabled women, BME women, refugee women and older women are all at risk of multiple discrimination and have particular gendered needs within the social security system.

⁴ Engender (2014) [Gender and 'welfare reform': A joint position paper](#). With Close the Gap, Scottish Refugee Council, Scottish Women's Aid, Scottish Women's Convention and Zero Tolerance.

⁵ The Women's Budget Group (2013) *The impact on women of Budget 2013: a budget for inequality and recession*

⁶ Engender (2012) [Multiple Jeopardy: The impacts of the UK Government's proposed welfare reform on women in Scotland](#)

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Office for National Statistics (2013) [Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2013 Provisional Results](#)

Other women that rely on social security also have specific collective needs that should be addressed in policy responses and across services. Lone mothers, rural women, women affected by violence, women struggling to access the labour market, and refugee women with newly granted status are particularly discriminated against by the policy changes under 'welfare reform'.⁹ The 'welfare reform' agenda not only fails to take these needs into account, but is set to further inscribe patterns of inequality and multiple discrimination.

3. SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT AND WELFARE REFORM

Social security is reserved to Westminster, but much more could be done within the existing settlement to safeguard women and children from social exclusion. Engender recognises that Scottish Government capacity to address 'welfare reform' is undermined by limited resources. We also welcome the broad commitment to mitigate the worst impacts and progressive policy divergence on issues such as the Bedroom Tax and the Scottish Welfare Fund. However, the overarching objective to protect the most marginalised people and communities in Scotland will not be achieved unless mitigation activity is adequately gendered.

To date, this has not been achieved. This is in spite of a Scottish Government analysis paper that identifies many of the gender impacts as well as underlying reasons for these.¹⁰ Failure to explicitly acknowledge this discrimination against women in the top-level policy response to 'welfare reform' makes women's inequality invisible within the process and risks compounding it. This includes where discretionary decisions are made at different levels of government and across support services.¹¹

Whilst acknowledging that responsibility for harm lies with the UK Government, Engender has called for concrete action to redress policies that put women in Scotland at risk (see Annex). Without targeted action to support groups of women, patterns of inequality and discrimination that explain the gender imbalance of 'welfare reform' will be further entrenched and expose women further to future 'shocks'.

3.1 WHY TAKING A GENDERED APPROACH IS ESSENTIAL

A gendered response to 'welfare reform' is also imperative in terms of wider Scottish Government policy. The broad range of existing commitments to advance gender equality in Scotland stand to be undermined by the severe impacts of 'welfare reform' outlined in this briefing and in our position paper.¹² Hard-won incremental gains made by gender advocates over the last decades on the gender pay gap, occupational segregation, women's

⁹ For details of policy changes, see Engender (2014) [Gender and 'welfare reform: a joint position paper](#)

¹⁰ Scottish Government (2013) [The gender impact of welfare reform](#)

¹¹ For more details please contact Engender

¹² Engender (2014) [Gender and 'welfare reform' in Scotland: A joint position paper](#)

participation in politics and public life, and gendered violence against women and girls have been compromised and Scottish Government targets will be harder to achieve as a result.

Equally, a gendered approach chimes with the prevention agenda. Tailored initiatives would help to support women face to juggle the challenges of low-paid work, unpaid childcare and caring work, lack of financial autonomy and financial abuse and jobseeking activities, which are exacerbated greatly by 'welfare reform'. They would protect more women and their children from cumulative pressures of 'welfare reform' and austerity measures, including on mental health and wellbeing, child poverty, and increased risk of domestic abuse. These impacts are already adding a significant strain on services and government-funded third sector projects.

There are also evident links with the impact of 'welfare reform' on children and progress against the Scottish Government's diverse commitments on related issues. Where women's disposable income is reduced, spending on children decreases.¹³ Engender has advocated for greater policy coherence between efforts to address women's and children's poverty and the need for this is becoming even more pronounced in the current climate.

3.2 ASSET BASED APPROACHES

Engender has concerns about the Scottish Government's emerging 'asset-based' approach to welfare policy. An approach to social protection that places the onus on individuals' ability to cope with hardship, as opposed to the barriers that they face in accessing resources and financial security, will fail to address the systemic drivers of women's economic inequality and therefore the gender impact of 'welfare reform'. Inherently, such measures can only serve to provide temporary, stopgap solutions for low-income women and families in Scotland.

Existing asset-based models also fail to account for dynamics within the household.¹⁴ Assumptions that assets are shared and controlled equally by women and men are extremely dangerous. Many women and their children will be at increased risk of physical and financial abuse as a result of cuts to benefits primarily collected by women and changes to the payment system under Universal Credit.¹⁵

Meanwhile, policies that rest on the 'resilience' of individuals to develop their own coping strategies underestimate interlinked impacts or trauma experienced by many groups of women who depend on social security. Women at the margins already display extreme resilience, and evidence shows that they tend to put needs of family and children before their own, including in abusive relationships.¹⁶ They are resilient in facing a social security

¹³ The Women's Budget Group (2005) [Making the links: Women's and children's poverty](#)

¹⁴ Friedli, L. (2012) ['What we've tried hasn't worked': The politics of an assets based public health](#)

¹⁵ For details of policy changes, see Engender (2014) [Gender and 'welfare reform: a joint position paper](#)

¹⁶ The Women's Budget Group (2005) [Making the links: Women's and children's poverty](#)

system that does not treat them with dignity and a public discourse that stigmatises their poverty and blames them for it.

4. SOCIAL SECURITY IN AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND

In the event of a Yes vote in September, it will be imperative that any new institutions, systems, policies and programmes mainstream gender concerns from the outset.¹⁷ A radical overhaul of our social security system is desperately needed, and embedding structures that reflect both the gender dimensions of the current benefits and tax credits systems and the gendered realities of daily life in Scotland will be vital to avoid replicating patterns that disadvantage women.

Any such system should seek to tackle social injustice and different forms of inequality, as well as ending poverty. It should aim to transform understanding and public perception of social protection, addressing the stigmatisation of claimants and moving away from 'benefit' and 'welfare' models, towards a social investment approach.¹⁸

Such a system would be tailored to meet the diverse needs of service users, including those of lone mothers, carers, disabled women, refugees and older women. An equitable social security system should also be structured explicitly to support members of society who are unable to 'work'. Key to this is addressing the false dichotomy between paid and unpaid work in the public and private spheres.

For example, childcare undertaken by parents is not counted towards GDP and is categorised in economic models as 'leisure'. Childcare provided by paid workers contributes to GDP and is categorised as 'work'. The fact that much of women's work is misread and uncounted has obvious and far-reaching implications for policy formulation, and therefore on women's lives. An inclusive conception of social security could help to erode this.

Engender is also a member of the Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform and endorses the principles for a transformed social security system set out in *Manifesto for Change*.¹⁹ Human rights and dignity must be at the heart of any such system.

4.1 SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT WHITE PAPER ON INDEPENDENCE

In principle, Engender supports the broad strokes outlined in the proposals for social security in *Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland*. We agree that a social investment approach that promotes fairness, equality and social cohesion should underpin long-term reform, that individual payments should be restored and that the earnings

¹⁷ For more detail on mainstreaming see Engender (2014) [Gender equality and Scotland's constitutional futures](#)

¹⁸ McKay, A. (2013) [Welfare to Work or a Welfare System that Works? Arguing for a Citizens Basic Income in a new Scotland](#)

¹⁹ Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform (2013) [A Manifesto for Change](#)

disregard between first and second earners should be equalised. All of these policies would benefit women.

Effective social protection for women also relies heavily on accessible, affordable and quality childcare. Childcare and social security are fundamentally interlinked and we welcome proposals for development of a universal system of childcare provision, the recent cross-party focus on childcare, and increased debate around public provision of childcare in the mainstream political debate and media, including the Every Step campaign. SPICe's analysis of the childcare proposals in the white paper raises a set of useful points about the complexity of modelling the relationship between women's work, income, and the provision of childcare²⁰.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT ENGENDER

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

www.engender.org.uk

²⁰ Kidner, C., Marsh, R., and N. Hudson *SPICe briefing: Early learning and childcare* (2 April 2014) The Scottish Parliament

ANNEXE A

Recommendations to the Scottish Government on ‘welfare reform’ by Engender, Scottish Women’s Aid, Close the Gap, Scottish Women’s Aid, Scottish Women’s Convention and Zero Tolerance.²¹

Social security is reserved to Westminster, but much more could be done within the existing settlement to safeguard women and children from social exclusion. Whilst acknowledging that responsibility for harm lies with the UK Government, we are calling for concrete action to redress policies that put women in Scotland at risk.

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT SHOULD:

- Develop a broad action plan to mitigate the impacts of the UK’s ‘welfare reform’ programme on women.
- Monitor emerging impacts, to ensure that women’s needs are met, including those of rural, disabled, older, refugee and BME women, lone mothers and unpaid carers.
- Ensure that the Welfare Funds (Scotland) Bill and related guidance mainstream gender issues.
- Ensure delivery of the Scottish Welfare Fund respects women’s choices and dignity.
- Provide specific funding for community-based women’s organisations to provide gender-sensitive advice and support services.
- Invest in employability and related support services for women forced into or out of the labour market due to the UK’s welfare and tax reform policies.
- Urgently address the increased risk of gendered violence and destitution for marginalised groups of women following changes to Housing Benefit.

CALL ON THE UK GOVERNMENT TO:

- Conduct a Cumulative Impact Assessment of key policies implemented under the banner of ‘welfare reform’.
- Include risk and equality impact assessments in all further ‘welfare reform’ policies and ensure that gender analysis is robust.
- Extend the Tax-free Childcare scheme to include low-income and single-earner families, and guarantee equality of access for all women.

²¹ In our joint position paper

- Ensure that all refuge and temporary accommodation is exempt from Benefit Cap and Bedroom Tax calculations.
- Address the specific needs of lone mothers seeking work, through design and delivery of Jobcentre Plus services and training of staff.
- Monitor the Mandatory Work Activity Scheme to ensure that women's needs are taken into account, including those of rural, refugee and BME women, lone mothers and unpaid carers.
- Implement the UN CEDAW Committee's recommendation to the UK "to mitigate the impact of austerity measures on women and services provided to women"