



## WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE DEBATE ON WOMEN AND SOCIAL SECURITY

### ENGENDER BRIEFING, NOVEMBER 2015

*In respective budgets since 2010, between 70% and 85% of cuts to public spending on benefits, taxation, pay and pensions have come from women's incomes.*

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Engender welcomes this parliamentary debate and the Welfare Reform Committee's report on women's social security. In partnership with other women's organisations, we have worked to highlight discrimination against women within the austerity agenda.<sup>1</sup> 'Welfare reforms' and wider austerity measures are undermining progress towards gender equality, and have a major impact on women's lives.

Since the Welfare Reform Committee held its inquiry into women and welfare, the context for women has worsened. The House of Commons Library estimate that 70% of the £34 billion worth of cuts announced in the UK Government's 'summer budget' will fall on women. Further extensive cuts will have been announced in the Spending Review and Autumn Statement by the time this debate takes place. As a result of structural gender inequality,<sup>2</sup> a similar gender profile can be expected. Certain groups of women, including lone mothers, refugees, disabled women, unpaid carers and women experiencing domestic abuse face multiple and particularly extreme impacts as a result.

The role of the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament to protect social security for women is therefore more vital than ever. Strategic action is manifestly needed, or else existing commitments and political ambition on gender equality will not be achieved. Along with Scottish Women's Aid, Scottish Refugee Council and Close the Gap, we are calling for a high-level summit on women's social security, to develop such an approach.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Engender (2015) [A Widening gap: women and welfare reform](#)

<sup>2</sup> Structural issues that see women twice as dependent on social security as men include women's caring roles, low-paid, insecure employment, domestic abuse, stigma, discrimination and multiple inequalities.

<sup>3</sup> Engender (2015) [www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engenders-Gender-Matters-Manifesto---Twenty-for-2016.pdf](http://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engenders-Gender-Matters-Manifesto---Twenty-for-2016.pdf)

This briefing sets out the current context for women and our proposals regarding forthcoming and existing powers over social security and related policy areas.

## 2. CONTEXT

Women, and therefore their children, bear the brunt of public spending cuts. This is because of systemic issues that see women twice as dependent on social security as men. Women are twice as likely to give up paid work in order to become unpaid carers and four times as likely to give up paid work to provide 'sandwich care'.<sup>4</sup> Women are 92% of lone parents and 95% of lone parents on Income Support. The pay gap persists at 33.5% for women's part-time work in Scotland,<sup>5</sup> and women have less access to resources, assets and occupational pensions than men. Women's economic independence is undermined by endemic domestic abuse and violence against women.

Meanwhile, many women experience multiple inequalities. Disabled women, older women, women from minority ethnic communities, rural women, and refugee women are all impacted by policy changes and cuts to services in particular ways.

In our recent report, [A widening gap: women and welfare reform](#), we set out detailed ways in which women have been, and will be, impacted by specific recent policy changes. This covers a breadth of gendered issues related to the labour market, unpaid care work in the home and community, domestic abuse and the multiple discrimination faced by disabled women and refugee women. We point to case studies that illustrate how women's experiences of welfare reform are linked to existing gender inequality, provided by frontline organisations that report their services are stretched to breaking point.

Policy to improve social security for women in Scotland must reflect this reality. This means that any attempt to develop a new approach in Scotland with forthcoming powers within the Scotland Bill and ongoing efforts to mitigate the worst impacts of UK Government policy must be tailored to the support needs of different groups of women. Otherwise sexist patterns of inequality within the current system will be replicated and reinforced.

## 3. NEW POWERS

There are clear opportunities to embed objectives regarding gender and other equality areas within the engagement of newly devolved powers. Since the outset of the Smith Commission process we have worked closely with third sector and community organisations to develop our recommendations as to how this could be achieved.

The following proposals have also been informed by a recent series of workshops held with women who have lived experience of different issues, as part of the Scottish Government's

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<sup>4</sup> Carers UK (2012) [Sandwich Caring: Combining childcare with caring for older or disabled relatives](#)

<sup>5</sup> Figures for 2015, which were [released last week](#), show the part-time pay gap has increased by 1.1%.

Fairer Scotland engagement programme.<sup>6</sup> These would help to ensure that any steps taken by the Scottish Government to create a fairer, more equal Scottish social security system address the structural gender inequality at the heart of the current model.

### Design

1. Improve the quality of equality impact assessments and ensure that they are not post hoc, but shape design of any new legislation, policies and programmes.
2. Directly involve different groups of women in the design of any new legislation and delivery systems, so that services are fit for purpose.

### Financial autonomy

3. Introduce default split payments of Universal Credit.
4. Create a 'bridging benefit' between the immigration and social security systems for refugees newly granted leave to remain in the UK.
5. Work towards the introduction of a Citizen's Income in Scotland over the course of the next parliamentary term.

### Valuing unpaid care

6. 'Top up' Child Benefit with a Scottish Child Premium to increase women's financial autonomy and support women to access training and employment.
7. Ensure that carers in employment and education, and carers of all ages are entitled to a new Living Wage for Carers.

### Employment support

8. Use powers over employment support to mitigate impacts of conditionality, sanctions and services delivered by Jobcentre Plus, where possible.
9. Introduce targeted employment support services for women, including for carers, refugees, lone parents and women experiencing domestic abuse.
10. Innovate with devolved work programmes to diverge from employability models that replicate gender segregation in the labour market.

## **4. EXISTING POWERS**

As set out in our advocacy work on welfare reform,<sup>7</sup> there are also opportunities within the existing context to support the realisation of women's social security, and to prioritise

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<sup>6</sup> Focus groups on employment support, domestic abuse, refugee and asylum issues and unpaid care were held in collaboration with Scottish Women's Aid, Carers Scotland, Scottish Refugee Council and Close the Gap.

<sup>7</sup> Engender (2015) [A Widening gap: women and welfare reform](#)

gender equality issues. The following proposals are envisaged as part of a holistic package of policies, which would underpin and better enable the use of new powers to advance women's equality.

1. Hold a summit on women's social security to determine what strategic action should redress the gender impact of welfare reforms and public spending cuts.
2. Use the Scottish Welfare Fund to support women, by mainstreaming gender issues in the statutory guidance, targeting uptake and ensuring that women's choices and dignity are respected within the process.
3. Increase and improve training for frontline staff on gender equality issues, including the impact of domestic abuse and trauma.
4. Ring-fence funding for women's community-based organisations to provide support services and for gender-sensitive advice, advocacy and welfare rights services in the Draft Budget 2016-17.
5. Extend childcare provision to match mandatory job-seeking requirements and to ensure women's equal access to training opportunities.
6. Hold local authorities accountable over the delivery of Discretionary Housing Payments to ensure access to safe accommodation for women.
7. Guarantee protection and financial support for women whose immigration status is dependent on their partner.
8. Ensure women are able to access refuge accommodation regardless of their entitlement to housing benefit.
9. Extend the Domestic Violence Rule to ensure EU migrants are able to apply for a Destitution Domestic Violence Concession (DDV).
10. Review how devolved services impact on women's equality before new powers are enacted.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The evidence clearly supports the need for urgent targeted action in order to secure social security for women and their children in Scotland. We are therefore calling on the Scottish Parliament to consider the recommendations set out above as the Scottish Government develops its plans for use of new powers and continues its programme of work to mitigate the worst impacts of welfare reform.

We welcome the Welfare Reform Committee's ongoing scrutiny of the gendered implications of public spending with its call for evidence on the Scottish Draft Budget 2016-

17. We urge the Scottish Parliament to adopt a gender budget analysis (GBA) as it scrutinises the Draft Budget and Equality Budget Statement over the coming months.

### **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

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### **ABOUT ENGENDER**

Engender has a vision for a Scotland in which women and men have equal opportunities in life, equal access to resources and power, and are equally safe and secure from harm.

We are a feminist organisation that has worked in Scotland for 20 years to advance equality between women and men.