

**Engender Parliamentary Briefing:
Scottish Government Debate: International Women's Day 2021:
#ChooseToChallenge**

3 March 2021

BACKGROUND

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation. We work across women's social, political and economic equality to make visible the impacts of sexism on women rights, resources, representation and safety.

We welcome this opportunity to mark International Women's Day 2021 with this briefing and the Parliament's debate, which this year coincides with a year since the introduction of public health restrictions in the wake of Covid-19. This year's theme '#ChooseToChallenge', urges people to call out and challenge gender bias and inequality. Women's inequality with men demands structural and targeted responses with the aim of disrupting women's subordination and exclusion in policy, practice, and everyday life. This means understanding the reality of women's lives, the specific barriers to equality women face, and how multiple forms of discrimination intersect with one another. There is a need to go further and faster to challenge sexism and inequality, unpaid and invisible labour, gender-based violence and harassment, and the undervaluation of women's work.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

1. Scotland, inequality and Covid-19

Over the last year Engender and other women's organisations have highlighted the multitude of ways Covid-19 threatens to roll back women's equality. UN Women now estimates that the pandemic will set women's equality back 25 years.¹ Over the last 12 months we have highlighted the wide-ranging impacts, including:

¹ See BBC (2020) 'Coronavirus and gender: More chores for women set back gains in equality'. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-55016842> citing data from UN Women (2020). Available at: <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/whose-time-care-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-during-covid-19>.

- An absence of women and gender concerns at decision-making level, leading to policy and strategy that exacerbates existing inequality;²
- The impacts on frontline workers – 77% of which are women – including greater exposure to the virus, ongoing health risks, precarity and balancing care responsibilities, all of which is likely to have significant impacts on physical and mental health;³
- The large-scale redistribution of care and childcare from the state to the household, the vast majority of which has landed on women because of gendered patterns of labour. Women tell Engender that they are struggling to cope with maintaining their position in the labour market with increased home-schooling;⁴
- That the sectors most likely to experience disruption in a Covid-related economic shock are dominated by women’s jobs, including retail, hospitality and tourism.⁵
- That Covid-19 related measures create significant risk for women experiencing domestic abuse and men’s violence, make it harder to secure safety and access support and that court restrictions delay victim-survivors’ access to justice.

The limitations of existing mechanisms to advance equality have been made highly visible in the crisis and women have been impacted disproportionately by decisions made at almost every level. We cannot afford for recovery to make the same mistakes. The Social Renewal Advisory Board’s report ‘If Not Now, When?’⁶ outlines the need to consider gender, economic and social recovery as indivisible, and makes recommendations such as designating childcare and social care as key growth sectors, and the incorporation of human rights including CEDAW.

2. Women’s Representation and Political Participation

In January 2020, Engender published Sex & Power in Scotland which found that despite women being 52% of Scotland’s population they held just 996 of the 3115 positions of

² Engender (2020) Women and Covid-19. Available at:

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-Briefing---Women-and-COVID-19.pdf>.

³ Engender (2021) Engender response to Mark Griffin MSP’s consultation on a Proposed Scottish Employment Injuries Advisory Council Bill. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-response-to-Mark-Griffin-MSP-consultation-on-Proposed-Scottish-Employment-Injuries-Advisory-Council-Bill-consultation.pdf>.

⁴ Engender (2020) Women and Unpaid Work. Available at:

https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/1594974358_Gender--unpaid-work---the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-womens-caring-roles.pdf.

⁵ Close the Gap and Engender (2020) Gender and Economic Recovery. Available at:

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Gender--Economic-Recovery---Engender-and-Close-the-Gap.pdf>.

⁶ Social Renewal Advisory Group (2021) If Not Now, When? Available at:

<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/independent-report/2021/01/notnow-social-renewal-advisory-board-report-january-2021/documents/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-boardreport/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-board-report/govscot%3Adocument/not-now-social-renewaladvisory-board-report.pdf>.

power in Scotland. Women account for just 36.4% of current MSPs.⁷ Equal and diverse representation and participation is not only important for its own sake; more women involved in decision making processes, and vitally, more women from a range of groups and experiences will result in more representative decision-making and priorities.

Women's unequal representation and the reality of political life cannot be divorced from the damaging impacts of gender stereotypes and unequal distribution of labour and resources between women and men. Women's disproportionate share of unpaid work directly affects their access to paid work as well as other activities such as leisure and taking part in community and civic life, and has major consequences for women's ability to enter and stay in political life.

3. Misogyny and violence against women in politics

In addition to institutional reform, there is an urgent need to respond to the scale of misogynistic abuse and harassment that women, particularly those in public life, experience because they are women. Abuse, discrimination and misogyny remain normalised and often without appropriate sanction. Online misogyny has also increased dramatically in recent years, with 21% of women polled in the UK reporting having experienced online abuse or harassment at least once.⁸ The upcoming 2021 Scottish Parliament elections are likely to rely on online space and virtual participation more than ever. Women are expected to meet higher standards and face more personalised, and often sexualised, forms of scrutiny and criticism as part of their participation.⁹

While increasing dependency on online communications adds a worrying visibility and ease to violence against women in politics, it is not limited to a single form or forum. Recent polling by Holyrood magazine found that two thirds of MSPs have had to contact police following a threat to them, their staff or their families – rising to 75% among female MSPs.¹⁰ A European-wide survey conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2018 found that 24.7% of female legislators had suffered sexual violence and 14.8% had suffered physical violence.¹¹

⁷ Engender (2020) Sex and Power 2020. Available at:

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engenders-Sex-and-Power-2020.pdf>.

⁸ Amnesty International (2017) Toxic Twitter - Women's Experiences Of Violence And Abuse On Twitter.

Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-3/>.

⁹ WFD (2018) Report of Conference. Available at: <https://www.wfd.org/2018/07/19/wfd-vawp-conference-report-to-un-srvaw/>.

¹⁰ Holyrood (2021) 'Death threats sent to a third of MSPs'. Available at:

<https://www.holyrood.com/news/view/death-threats-sent-to-third-of-msps>.

¹¹ IPU (2018) Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe. Available at:

<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2018-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-in-parliaments-in-europe>.

The National Democratic Institute describes violence against women in politics as a phenomenon with three distinct characteristics: “(1) VAW-P targets women because of their gender, (2) VAW-P can be gendered in its form, and (3) its impact is to discourage all women from any political activity.”¹² We must understand failure to take action to protect women who participate in politics – at any and all levels – as a failure to protect women from men’s violence and a failure to realise rights to participate in public life as set out in article 7 of CEDAW.

4. Incorporating CEDAW to Advance Women’s Rights and Equality

Advancing women’s representation and participation in public life demands action to tackle structural inequality and the impacts of sexism. The National Taskforce on Human Rights Leadership is set to develop recommendations for a new Scottish human rights statutory framework by spring 2021. Engender has long advocated for CEDAW to be given direct effect in Scots Law. Commonly referred to as the ‘women’s bill of rights’, CEDAW requires states to undertake positive steps to change cultural norms and practices which are ‘based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes’.¹³

The rights that CEDAW protects for women have never been more under threat - not only due to Covid-19 but also the removal of the EU’s underpinning for equality and employment protections following Brexit. Incorporation of CEDAW would mitigate some of the impact and demonstrate Scotland’s commitment to equality for women. There is no justification to further delay action on women’s rights.

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 level to produce research analysis and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

¹² NDI (2021) Qualitative Research Report on Violence Against Women in Politics in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, And Solomon Islands. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/violence-against-women-politics-fiji-papua-new-guinea-and-solomon-islands>.

¹³ Nicole Busby (2018) CEDAW: How can women’s rights be better realised in Scotland? Engender. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/CEDAW-incorporation-paper.pdf>.