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Statement from Engender, Scotland, to the United Nations Permanent Missions, Geneva, Switzerland, 1.04.12

Esteemed Members, thank you for inviting us. We are speaking for Engender, a national feminist policy organization from Scotland. Scotland has its own parliament and government in Edinburgh, but some policy areas that particularly affect women are reserved to the UK's Westminster government.

Introduction

Today's statement focuses on areas in which inequalities are persistent and significant, and in which women's human rights are not realized. Some are directly connected to the specific recommendations made in the 2008 UPR Round, and some relate to concluding observations from HR Treaty Bodies that have not been implemented at UK or Scottish level. The statement does not repeat the recommendations that we have included in our written submission but does include suggested questions for the UK that we will not read out now.

DISMANTLING OF THE UK GENDER ARCHITECTURE

- The UK Government abolished the only UK-wide government-supported women's non-departmental public body (NDPB), the Women's National Commission, in 2009.
- The UK Government has cut the budget of the independent Equality and Human Rights Commission by 60 per cent, necessitating a significant reduction in staff. This body is responsible, among a range of statutory functions, for enforcing the public sector equality duty in England, Wales, and Scotland. The UK Government wants to reduce the powers of the Commission and has moved many of its functions into Government departments.
- The UK Government is considering whether to amend or replace the Equality Act 2010, and seeks to identify areas in which deregulation could stimulate economic growth.

- The UK Government is minded to introduce fees for individuals to access employment tribunals, and is consulting on the level of fees that should be charged.
- Slovenia's recommendation in the 2008 UPR, that the UK gender its UPR activity, has not been met; the UK mid-term report could hardly be less gendered. Nor has the concluding observation from the CEDAW sixth periodic report, that the UK develop a strategic plan for the implementation of CEDAW, been met. CEDAW has not been incorporated into UK or Scots law.

The Working Group may wish to ask the UK how it is ensuring the independence of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and its ability to perform its functions.

The Working Group may wish to ask the UK to affirm its commitment to providing legal protection against sex discrimination, including unequal pay for equal work, and to set out the ways it will ensure access to justice for individuals if they must pay to access employment tribunals.

The Working Group may wish to ask the UK when it intends to incorporate CEDAW into domestic law.

WOMEN AND POVERTY

- The UK's 'welfare reform', which has included £18 billion in cuts, has an enormously gendered impact. Benefits typically make up one fifth of women's income, as opposed to one tenth of men's, and a million more women across the UK claim housing benefit than men. Housing benefit has been slashed. The design of the new Universal Credit appears to transfer money from women to men, which will increase women's financial dependence.
- So-called welfare reform is taking place along with significant cuts to public benefits. The family type that will lose most from public sector cuts is those headed by lone parents, who are 97 per cent women. These households will lose services and benefits worth 19 per cent of their total net income.
- Governments in both Scotland and the UK have consistently failed to gender poverty policy generally and child poverty specifically, despite the fact that many poor children live in households headed by lone mothers.
- Work is seen as the key way of lifting women out of poverty, but the profound gender pay gaps, including a 32 per cent part-time pay gap in Scotland, persist. The ICESCR Committee, in 2009, concluded that the UK should conduct a review of its work to tackle the gender pay gap. This review has not taken place.

- Scottish Government's economic strategy focuses on male-dominated occupational and industrial sectors. The majority of businesses supported by state economic development agencies are owned and operated by men, and the level of women's entrepreneurship is low, even compared to other countries within the UK.
- Cuts to Scotland's large public services sector (where about 70% of employees are women) are driving the highest levels of female unemployment Scotland has seen in the last 24 years.

The Working Group may wish to ask the UK how it intends to mitigate the effect of its welfare reform plans on women and children's poverty.

The Working Group may wish to ask the UK how it intends to deliver women's economic equality, including tackling the causes of the gender pay gap and increasing women's entrepreneurship.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

- Perhaps the reason we are having so much trouble solving women and children's poverty is that so many women's voices and views are missing from the public problem solving. According to the EHRC's Sex and Power, in Scotland in 2011:
 - Women 'missing' from senior positions in Scotland include:
 - 109 missing from 614 public appointments
 - 68 missing from the 356 head teachers of secondary schools
 - 19 missing from the 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament
- The index also shows that:
 - Of Scotland's 27 senior police officers, only 4 are women.
 - Of Scotland's 32 local government leaders, only 3 are women.
- The proportion of women holding public appointments in 2011 is even less than it was in 2003.

The Working Group may wish to ask the UK when it intends to respond to the CEDAW Committee's call for temporary special measures to enable women's equal political representation, and equal participation in public life.