

[00:00:00.060] - Emma Ritch

We cannot allow this to be a moment when we roll back on all of the work towards women's equality and rights that Engender and other women's organisations have advocated for so long.

[00:00:29.140] - Alys Mumford

Hello and welcome to On the Engender: The Briefing, your fortnightly blast of feminist current affairs in Scotland. With me, Alys Mumford and our producer, Amanda Stanley.

[00:00:37.630] - Amanda Stanley

Hello.

[00:00:38.340] - Alys Mumford

As Scotland continues to be in lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and women continue to bear the brunt of both the virus and the public health measures. We'll be bringing you news of what's happening in the Scottish Parliament, what Engender has been up to and what this all means for women's equality.

[00:00:52.480] - Alys Mumford

For this first episode, I'm joined by Engender's Executive Director, Emma Ritch.

[00:00:56.170] - Emma Ritch

Hello.

[00:00:57.100] - Alys Mumford

And our Policy and Parliamentary Manager, Eilidh Dickson.

[00:00:59.540] - Eilidh Dickson

Hello.

[00:01:00.190] - Alys Mumford

So this is our very first episode of The Briefing. So can you, briefly, tell us why Covid-19 is an issue of women's equality? Eilidh, why don't you kick us off?

[00:01:10.300] - Eilidh Dickson

Sure. So, Covid-19 is a global crisis which is exacerbating the already unequal power dynamics between women and men. So everywhere in which women already have a lesser access to things like power, safety, resources, lower standing within the economy, shouldering the greater burden of social care and caring for children, the crisis has added a layer on top of that, which is exacerbating those inequalities. So in all of those ways, women are coming out worse affected.

[00:01:41.980] - Eilidh Dickson

We're seeing that with women who have children, who are suddenly at home while they're trying to balance work and educating their children. Can't take them outside, they can't rely on maybe the care of grandparents anymore. We're also seeing it within the Social Security system. So, women who were previously not affected by things like the two-child limit, are now maybe unable to work because their children are at home and are suddenly exposed to things like the two-child limit and the benefit cap. And we're also seeing it within things like violence against women.

[00:02:10.900] - Eilidh Dickson

So it's really important to say that Covid-19 is not causing an increased exposure to men's violence against women, but it creates the perfect enabling conditions which allow for violence against women to happen unmonitored and uncaught. So things like that are all creating a more dangerous Scotland for women and a more unequal Scotland for women.

[00:02:31.410] - Alys Mumford

Thanks, Eilidh. Emma, can you tell us what Engender has been doing to try and highlight some of the issues there that Eilidh talked about?

[00:02:37.480] - Emma Ritch

Sure. So one of the things we've learned from previous epidemics and pandemics around the world, so things like Ebola, Zika, SARS and MERS, is that the response of states and public bodies and even international NGOs, can sometimes entrench and exacerbate exactly the inequalities that Eilidh was talking about. And so there's a lot of evidence that says when you switch funding to crisis response, often the programs that lose money are things around, for example, women's reproductive health and rights, or education of girls and young women.

[00:03:14.350] - Emma Ritch

And so the critical point that we've been trying to make to Scottish governments and to parliamentarians is you have to think about women when you're devising your crisis response. And also, we cannot allow this to be a moment when we roll back on all of the work towards women's equality and rights that Engender and other women's organisations have advocated for so long.

[00:03:39.310] - Alys Mumford

Thank you, I think that's a really interesting point about not rolling back rights, that has obviously something that feminists are constantly having to fight on two fronts, trying to increase equality and prevent the roll back. We've seen some bills that the women have been working on in parliament. Some projects be halted, be cancelled, for very understandable reasons.

[00:04:01.330] - Alys Mumford

But I wonder if you could just tell us, Emma, about some of those things in parliament, within government, that now maybe aren't happening as we would have expected due to the Covid-19 response.

[00:04:10.750] - Emma Ritch

Sure. So, the parliament is now sitting less often. And it's a kind of rolling response that parliament is making. So I think they're still trying to figure out how to bring legislators together in a way that is safe. And as a result, they've cut back on the programme of legislation that was going to be moving through the parliament. So some good news for women's equality and rights is that, the forensic medical examination bill is still going forward. We're really pleased that the hate crime legislation is going forward in a form that Engender, Rape Crisis Scotland, and Scottish Women's Aid advocated for.

[00:04:48.190] - Emma Ritch

But we have seen other bills just dropping off the legislative table. And one of those includes the Gender Recognition Act reform, that has been somewhat contentious over the past couple of years. So parliament is still trying to get its head around what is going to happen in terms of the bills moving through it and how it might scrutinise what the government's up to in terms of Covid-19 response.

[00:05:12.460] - Emma Ritch

What the Scottish government is doing and that's obviously separate from the parliament, is that it has organised itself into eight hubs and it's bringing civil servants together to try and respond to the crisis across a number of different areas of work, including the economy and also just the kind of crisis response questions like how do you distribute free school meals when schools are mostly closed, questions like that. So there's a lot happening very quickly. And we're also trying to encourage the bits of Scottish government that are still doing business as usual work, to carry on with their focus on women's equality and rights.

[00:05:52.950] - Alys Mumford

Amazing. Thank you. I mean, Eilidh, talking about fast-paced responses as Engender as Parliamentary and Policy Manager - probably got them the wrong way round [Laughter] - Policy and Parliamentary Manager, you were very busy during the time of the emergency legislation.

[00:06:08.376] - Eilidh Dickson

Yeah.

[00:06:09.240] - Alys Mumford

Saw a pretty amazing feat of of a bill, which would normally take well, how long? Into a day. Can you tell us a little bit about that, both in terms of what was happening in Parliament and how that all worked, and in what Engender's role was in it?

[00:06:25.880] - Eilidh Dickson

Sure. So Engender produced a briefing, the first couple of weeks as it kind of became apparent that the crisis was unfolding in quite a severe and significant way for the workload of parliament. We started to pull together everything we knew. We produced a briefing which was aimed at both Scottish government and UK government, as well as parliaments in both jurisdictions. Which focused on what we could pass out in the initial term about how this was going to impact upon women. And some of those were things that would be dropped, as we've kind of already said, but other things that we maybe didn't know enough about at that point.

[00:06:57.270] - Eilidh Dickson

So things like how the lockdown at that point was being mooted would affect women's capacity to take on paid work, or to carry on with paid work, but also things like women on the frontline in health and social care being more exposed to actually risk of catching and spreading the virus themselves, and the health and safety risks that that contains. So we wanted to talk about a lot of different things, and we definitely saw that document as a bit of a moving living document.

[00:07:21.690] - Eilidh Dickson

But we were very aware that because this crisis touches on so many different aspects, one of the key issues was going to be keeping women within the foreground of planning and Scottish government, and also local authority crisis responses. So we worked very quickly to advocate for an additional amendment to the bill, which requires the Scottish government to look for opportunities to advance equality and eliminate discrimination whenever they're making any kind of decision making in relation to Covid, and the broad sweep of powers that that bill contains.

[00:07:54.300] - Eilidh Dickson

But as you mentioned, it was quite fast paced. So we produced that briefing on, I think, that briefing went out on the Thursday - and the Tuesday, the parliament held all three stages of its scrutiny over the bill, of the Coronavirus bill, in one day. So we really didn't have very long to work out how that would work, how an amendment would work, where the duty should fall, the level of the duty and also the normal ways in which we would go about securing things like amendments as we would work quite closely with MSPs.

[00:08:21.870] - Eilidh Dickson

But as you've pointed out, parliament's sitting less frequently, but it's also restricting the number of MSPs that can take part in debates within the chamber. So, yeah, it was a very different way of advocacy that we've maybe seen before. And we worked very closely with the Scottish government and also MSPs in different parties to try and secure that amendment. But I think we were quite lucky in that - well, not lucky. I think we probably had done our jobs in just demonstrating the need for it by producing that initial briefing, which summed up everything that we knew and could predict about how Covid was going to impact upon women.

[00:08:57.440] - Alys Mumford

I mean, one thing that's becoming clear, as you say, as it becomes obvious that this is not a situation that's going to go away any time soon, even if the lockdown ends, the ramifications will continue. And we're seeing the different ways it impacts on women. So looking forward, could you run us through, Emma maybe, what's going to be the priority for advocates for women's equality in the next few weeks, through this fast-paced situation?

[00:09:24.240] - Emma Ritch

So, I think the focus remains on ensuring that women's equality and rights is entrenched in every decision that gets made. And I think we can see evolving over time, the consequences of not doing

that stuff at the beginning. And so one of the examples is that the UK government programme to fund employers where they would otherwise be making redundancies, which we're calling furlough, which is a word I think people have got used to using in the last few weeks.

[00:09:52.710] - Emma Ritch

And that programme really didn't meet women's needs when it was first designed. And we would argue still doesn't meet women's needs in that it did not allow furlough in the instance where people were providing a lot of care, particularly childcare. Now, that has now been changed. But we and other women's organisations have come together to argue that furlough should be available on a part-time basis. We're really concerned that men and women's patterns of doing unpaid care are going to default to the kind of 1950s norms under the pressure of Covid.

[00:10:25.730] - Emma Ritch

And we're going to see women be laboured with a lot of the roles of supervising schoolwork at home and just doing intensive bursts of childcare, and some of that has really come through in some of the monitoring work the Engender has been doing. So what we're going to try and do about that is to continue to advocate and speak to governments about the development of its policy work and to feed back in, where we're aware that it's just not working for women, what's happening.

[00:10:54.440] - Emma Ritch

We're also going to be doing some work on data, and trying to improve the quality of the gender sensitive, sex-disaggregated data that public bodies, including Scottish government, gathers and uses when it's making decisions about what to do on Covid. And Eilidh's written a great briefing on some of the work that's happening to try and get the criminal justice system moving during Covid-19 when it's really hard to convene juries. And so Eilidh responded to some of the proposals that Scottish government has been making about how it might try and avoid a huge backlog which would most severely impact the women who are victims of serious sexual offences and other forms of violence against women.

[00:11:38.150] - Alys Mumford

One of the things you mentioned there, Emma, was work on juries, and that's something people may well have seen in the news. Discussion of it became quite a contentious issue, about how we handle criminal justice during the lockdown. But there's been so many other issues pertinent to women's equality. We've seen stories about abortion, stories about carers rights. Eilidh, could you just fill us in on some of those things that have changed positively for women in these dark times?

[00:12:06.170] - Alys Mumford

And then also tell us a little bit about what's coming up, not just for Engender, but for the Scottish Parliament.

[00:12:12.200] - Eilidh Dickson

In terms of the positive things that have happened, there are very few things that we can directly claim as positive results of Covid. I think it's important that we frame this as, things that will make women's lives easier, but not forgetting that there's a lot of work to do. One thing that has been done is that the Scottish government has licensed early medical abortion at home, for both pills to be taken at home. So the previous rules were that you had to see your doctor, who went through the legal process of having two doctors sign off on an abortion.

[00:12:43.010] - Eilidh Dickson

One pill would be given within the clinic or the surgery, and the other pill would be taken home with the women. The Scottish government immediately saw that that was an unnecessary burden not only on the health services, but women having to access a clinical setting, so having to take public transport and leave the safety of their homes. So, now they can access both pills within their pharmacy following a tele-medical appointment and undertake an abortion at home, if that's what they choose to do, and that's what right for them.

[00:13:12.320] - Eilidh Dickson

And that is something that I think we would want to see done, even if Covid were not the reason that that was brought forward. It's definitely something that we think is going to make women's lives a lot easier and shows that these things are perfectly capable of being done in normal times.

[00:13:27.170] - Eilidh Dickson

So in terms of what's next within the Scottish Parliament, during the passage of the Coronavirus Act, the first one back at the end of March, there were quite a lot of issues that were brought to the fore within that debate. It was obviously a debate that happened in a very short time scale. It was a one day debate for all three stages of legislation. Things came up, the juries has already been mentioned, the provision for a judge only trial in solemn cases during the lockdown period.

[00:13:51.200] - Eilidh Dickson

That was something that proved particularly contentious, both within parliament and outwith parliament. So, the Scottish government has now looked to propose other options, which as Emma mentioned we've already tried to engage with via briefing. There were a couple of other things, ancillary things, like landlord payments, which the government is looking to address through a very technical bill. Which will be a second Coronavirus bill that they'll look to introduce in the next couple of weeks, we think. But I'm imagining that a lot of that, well, from what I've read, that bill is going to be incredibly technical and focus on things like statutory timetables, changing some dates, that are written into legislation in other areas that are no longer deliverable.

[00:14:31.160] - Eilidh Dickson

So it'll be things like that. We'll be looking to see what's in that legislation, obviously, but we don't have a clear sense of anything significant, but it will be looking to pick up on some of those issues. The other thing that happened during that Coronavirus debate back in March was that there were some proposals shared between MSPs around the possibility of convening a short-life Covid committee, which will scrutinise Scottish government activities because the bill obviously grants a huge amount of discretionary power to the Scottish government.

[00:14:59.150] - Eilidh Dickson

That committee will have the options to scrutinise everything the Scottish government is doing. They had their first meeting on last Friday, so that was the 24th of April, and Murdo Fraser is the convenor, and Monica Lennon is the deputy convenor. So we'll be looking at the work plan for that committee and the different ways that Engender can engage with the committee to make sure women's issues are considered throughout its scrutiny. The other committees have to some extent also decided to do some scrutiny work, so we've got the Health and Sport Committee is doing a Covid scrutiny project. Which does not take the form of an inquiry where we would submit things, but they'll be holding regular sessions remotely.

[00:15:37.100] - Eilidh Dickson

The Equality and Human Rights Committee has just announced over the weekend that it's going to be holding an inquiry. So we'll be looking to submit some things to that. The Economy, Energy and Fair Work Committee has an ongoing inquiry into the economy, following the Covid pandemic. So we'll be engaging with all of those. And equally, we'll be looking to get involved with inquiries are happening down at Westminster where relevant, so the Women and Equalities Committee currently has an open inquiry which we'll be looking to submit to.

[00:16:02.940] - Alys Mumford

So - busy, busy days ahead for everyone concerned with women's equality.

[00:16:08.100] - Alys Mumford

And we're hoping that this shorter podcast will be able to keep you informed about what's going on, what we're doing, what's happening in the Scottish parliament and government. If there's anything you want to know, you want explained, you sort of heard vaguely mentioned on the news and nothing more. Or you want to know how a certain policy is considering women, or not - spoilers. Then please do get in contact with Engender. We're on Twitter and Facebook, and we're also working to collect women's stories during this pandemic and whether that's of working from home, whether that is a

daily irritation with a partner, whether it is being furloughed, whether it is having to deal with with online harassment, anything goes.

[00:16:56.360] - Alys Mumford

We really want to know what's going on for women in Scotland. And you can submit those stories on Twitter, @WomenCovidScot , or on our website, engender.scot/covid

[00:17:06.650] - Alys Mumford

Thank you very much for listening. Thank you to Emma and Eilidh for contributing, to Amanda for producing, until next time - stay safe.