

[00:00:22.410] - [VO]

Scottish Women and the Vote.

[00:00:23.080]

[Jingle]

[00:00:30.070] - Alys Mumford

Hello and welcome to this fourth episode of our miniseries, Scottish Women and the Vote with me, Alys Mumford. If you've been listening to the past episodes, you'll know that we've heard from Esther Breitenbach, Ruth Boreham and Mukami McCrum about the Scottish Campaign for Votes for Women, some of the tactics that were used and about the voices that are missing when we talk about social movements. Over the next two episodes, we're going to be exploring some of the groups in Scotland who are still excluded from democratic processes, including refugees and asylum seekers, trans people and people in prison. And celebrating some of the progress which has been made in Scotland by looking at the Campaign for Votes at 16 and anonymous voter registration. But first, I thought we should take a step back and explore why we're talking about the right to vote at all. So I'm here with Eilidh Dickson and Engender's Policy and Parliamentary Manager, whose master's thesis was all about the right to vote. Hi, Eilidh.

[00:01:15.970] - Eilidh Dickson

Hello.

[00:01:16.570] - Alys Mumford

So you've done loads of work on voting and human rights. Can you just tell us - why is voting an issue of human rights?

[00:01:22.330] - Eilidh Dickson

Well, so early democracy obviously didn't include every citizen or everybody who lived in the community. But as soon as the right to democracy or the benefits of democracy started being written about and the concepts of individuals having human rights back with John Locke and Mary Wollstonecraft and other writers, we start to see a real link between the ability to participate in your public life, of your state and your human rights. Within human rights law that kind of expanded in the 1940s, when international human rights treaties began to be drafted, the 1940s saw the Universal Declaration of Human Rights being written. The papers that we still have access to from around that time show that all of the drafters were really aware of the ways in which political rights could prevent the rise of totalitarian governments having just come out of the First World War. We also have actionable rights to vote from the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights, which each protect a right to participate in elections via voting and standing as a candidate. They're all framed in slightly different ways, but they all come out of the same idea that if you have a right to vote, you can then go on and claim other human rights, and they're very closely linked to freedom of expression, the right to assemble, and all the human rights that we have relied on in other forms for many, many years now.

[00:02:42.910] - Alys Mumford

Great. So sort of ignoring, I guess, discussions about whether an individual should be voting or not, why is it important that the groups of people aren't excluded from the voting process, which we know is still happening in some circumstances in Scotland?

[00:02:55.690] - Eilidh Dickson

So first, if you consider voting as a human right, which international law and human rights treaties do, everyone's entitled to it on the same basis. So any exceptions that the state thinks are appropriate have to apply to everybody fairly and be justified under strict criteria. So that includes age - you can't vote until you're 18 and some argue that that should be lower, but it's justified on a very equal basis. If the state has the right to just decide who and when people can vote at a whim, they can just choose to exclude people that might not vote for them whose interest may not align with their policies. All of that. Secondly, there's a need to remember that the right to vote requires the state to do something proactive. They have to provide elections and opportunities to vote within a particular set of

frameworks, so they have to provide you a right to vote at secret ballot, at regular intervals. So it's also really important that the state reaches out proactively to make sure that people understand what their right to vote entails, when they can vote. It provides them opportunities to register, but also gives them the information that they need so that they can make use of that right in a meaningful way. Enfranchising and engaging people from different backgrounds is really important if you're going to go on to claim the second part of that right, which is the right to stand as a candidate. We know that women are still really underrepresented in Scottish Parliament, and even more so at local levels. So too are people from BME backgrounds or disabled people who are even more underrepresented currently. So it's really important that any of the proactive measures that the state takes recognises the need to engage all of these people, too, so that their interests can be first responded to but then also progressed by their own representation in parliament. We see a lot of research that's been done, a narrative around the right to vote, acting as the first stage of gaining other rights. So we saw this with the suffragette movement when women got the right to vote. What followed next was equality protections, equal pay protections. And then that took a long time. But the right to vote acted as a very first step to later protection.

[00:04:55.930] - Alys Mumford

I think that's super interesting how the right to vote isn't just about governments making sure people have an opportunity to vote, but is that proactive? And I think we've seen some really bad illustrations of where people are technically allowed to vote. But you know, we see this in the American South an awful lot - people are technically allowed to vote, but actually there's no way practically they can vote at all. So looking at that sort of second part of it, of actually making sure that people are able to vote. How could people's right to vote be better facilitated in Scotland, do you think?

[00:05:27.490] - Eilidh Dickson

Well, I suppose some of it could come down to giving information in a really accessible way that includes information about how to register, how to access manifestos. It's not just about the news coverage, but actually giving people the ability to engage themselves in the process from the first points. Automatic registration is something that other countries do really well. So when you register to pay your council tax, for example, you could just be automatically entered into the register, and it takes away one of the barriers that already exist. We've also talked before at Engender about the need to expand anonymous registration for people who are at risk of abuse or violence, harassment, who may not want their family to know that they're exercising their right to vote. There's also a lot of conversations happening at the moment about how to make voting easier, and they're really interesting, complicated conversations. So we see a lot of people who are really in favour of electronic voting because it said that if you can vote at home and you're more likely to actually make use of your right to vote. I have some concerns about that on a personal level. I think that because the right to vote has to be so protected and secret so that it's absolutely free of coercion. The second you take that into the home setting, it's really difficult to know whether that's happening. So I think there's other things we could look at, like extending polling day to a whole week to enable people to fit voting into their lives or the ability to vote from any polling station, things like that that make people who may not otherwise have the time or means to get to the polling station on polling day can still do so and can still utilise their rights to vote in a kind of secret, genuine, free way.

[00:07:00.970] - Alys Mumford

Fantastic. So that's given a bit of background about why voting is a human right. And next up, we're going to hear from a discussion with members from the Refugee Women's Strategy Group. I talked to Binta Ditchburn, Mhurai Dzingisai, and Mubina Irfan, in a chat which covered a whole host of issues, including housing, representation and discrimination. But I also asked them about their views on the right to vote. So here's what they were chatting about.

[00:07:21.380]

[Jingle]

[00:07:28.190] - Alys Mumford

So this year in the UK, it's been 100 years since some women were given the vote in the UK, and there's been lots of celebrations. But what's been really ignored in all of this is the fact that lots of

women, including refugees and those seeking asylum in Scotland, still can't vote. How do you feel about that? Do you think - I presume you do think that people should be able to vote?

[00:07:47.150] - Binta Ditchburn

Of course, I think men can do this. So women have the right to vote. We all have right to vote. We are women. We are the face of the wall. A woman is the face of the wall. Sorry, anyway a man is going great. They will say, where is the woman behind him? So I think we all have right to vote. We are women. We are here to vote.

[00:08:15.350] - Alys Mumford

One thing that the Scottish Government is keen to do is to extend the right to vote to anyone that lives in Scotland. So that would include refugees. It would include migrants. It wouldn't include asylum seekers. But what difference do you think it would make to Scotland, to politicians, if refugees and migrants were able to vote?

[00:08:34.610] - Mubina Irfan

I think they should give the right to vote to everyone who lives in Scotland. That will be great, I would say who live in England. No, just in - I mean, they should give the right to vote to everyone. And what difference it would make? I mean, asylum seekers will feel the part of the community if they will be given the right to vote and they will feel you know like - we've been heard. They will feel like we've been a useful person. And I mean, they are the people, I think who are mostly free, don't do any work. So, they know better than those who are just busy in their work and don't know what's been happening around. So they should be given the right vote. I think.

[00:09:33.850] - Alys Mumford

Do you think politicians currently in Scotland represent refugee women? I mean, you talked about Humza Yousaf coming to visit your apartment. Did anything change after that? Do you think politicians are doing a good job for refugee women?

[00:09:46.510] - Mhurai Dzingisai

For me, I was just impressed because he made his effort to come to see how scary it was. But for the right to vote - me, I don't think it is a good idea. What I think is right to work first before right to vote. There we can start from somewhere, going somewhere. Right to work and we can vote later. Also, we have... if they can do that, honestly, I will be over the moon. Right to work first and voting later.

[00:10:25.810] - Alys Mumford

I think that's a good message for the Government.

[00:10:27.910] - Mubina Irfan

No, Mhurai, I think we should have the right to vote. They should listen to us as well.

[00:10:40.670] - Binta Ditchburn

If it is parliament election or how do you call your election? I don't know much about it, but you can see all of them want to come to Refugee Council, to meet asylum seekers, to meet groups, because they want to stand for their - how do you call it? No - for their areas. How do you call them?

[00:11:04.470] - Alys Mumford

Constituency.

[00:11:04.470] - Binta Ditchburn

Constituency - ahhh. You will see them, the faces you never see, you will see them. But after that, that's it. That's done. That's me, done.

[00:11:11.150] - Mhurai Dzingisai

The right to work is.... than the right to vote. [Laughter]

[00:11:20.570] - Alys Mumford

I think maybe we should be ambitious - let's have both, you know! We're all laughing here, but I think that's a really interesting point because when we started this, we were talking about it's a 100 years since some women in Britain were given the vote. And that was the argument a lot of people were making at the time that it's great to vote. It's great to be able to have a say in your politicians. But when women are still treated badly in so many other areas of life, so still facing violence, still not having equal rights at work. Actually, voting is important, but is it the most important thing for women? So I think that's a really good contribution.

[00:11:58.830] - Binta Ditchburn

When people vote to say - right, when we vote, maybe that can change. They will give us right to work. So we need to vote. They need to hear our voice because vote is something very important. If you don't vote, it's like you are not part of the country because you cannot say nothing. So when you vote, you are part of it. So you vote, your voice would be heard. So then they can change the right to work. That can help right to work to come as well. You need to vote, vote is important.

[00:12:32.890] - Mhurai Dzingisai

Me I'm a destitute - let's say me I'm a destitute and you say you've got right to vote. What I was just saying to you, I was just saying, what is right to vote? I don't have anywhere to sleep. I don't have anywhere - blah blah blah. And I will tell you loads of lists. I will work first, then I will vote - later.

[00:12:55.970] - Binta Ditchburn

Let me tell you, I understand what you are coming from - when we vote, maybe a lot of little change.

[00:12:59.170] - Mhurai Dzingisai

It will take time. Not just like that [clicks fingers]. It will take time.

[00:13:00.370] - Binta Ditchburn

No this country - this country everything takes time -

[00:13:01.570] - Mubina Irfan

I can understand both of you, yeah. [Laughter]

[00:13:08.370] - Alys Mumford

This is possibly a chicken and egg argument that might go round and round. So I'm going to end by just saying, thanks so much to the three of you for joining us.

[00:13:16.120]

Thank you.

[00:13:17.320]

[Jingle]

[00:13:19.030] - Alys Mumford

Next up, we're going to hear from Vic Valentine, who chatted to me about the barriers which can exist for trans people trying to exercise their right to vote.

[00:13:24.810]

[Jingle]

[00:13:28.130] - Alys Mumford

I'm sitting here with Vic Valentine, the Policy Officer at Scottish Trans Alliance. Vic, thanks so much for coming to talk to me. For a lot of folk listening to the podcast, it might not immediately be obvious why trans people in Scotland could be excluded from voting. So can you just run through why that might be?

[00:13:44.150] - Vic Valentine

Yes. So one of the problems that trans people can have is that when we all register to vote, the way

that the online system knows we are who we say we are is by checking our National Insurance number for lots of trans people, their national insurance number is actually kind of locked to mean that people at the DWP aren't able to see that they're a trans person. So although the reason the National Insurance number is locked in for a perfectly good, valid reason, actually, when it comes to the time where they then go to register to vote, the online system comes back and says to them that they don't recognise their name or them as living at that address.

[00:14:21.290] - Vic Valentine

In theory, this might not need to pose too much of a problem, but as I'm sure you can imagine, lots of people registered to vote very close to the deadline. So they're unaware of the fact that their ability to register and their National Insurance number isn't going to work for them. So they might then miss the deadline to register because of that. But also in order to correct the problem, most trans people then need to get in touch with their kind of local electoral registry board and essentially out themselves to the local board to explain to them what has happened because most places will assume if they can't find your National Insurance number, it's because you're trying to register fraudulently, whereas you have to be able to explain that actually, it's just because your National Insurance number is locked because you're a trans person. So you sort of end up in a bit of a topsy-turvy situation where to protect your privacy at the DWP, you then lose your privacy when you register to vote. So yeah, that can be one of the main issues.

[00:15:14.390] - Alys Mumford

Thank you. That was like, a super clear description of just - I think something a lot of folk wouldn't have thought about because obviously we take it as a given that we have the right to vote in this country, in Scotland. We'll be chatting in this podcast to Scottish Women's Aid about their successful campaign to anonymise voter registration to enable women that are suffering from controlling partners or needing to protect their identities. Are there any changes that could happen that might improve the situation that you've just described in Scotland? We've got the franchise bill coming up, which will be looking at, extending the franchise, changing the way we do things. Are there solutions to those problems?

[00:15:52.010] - Vic Valentine

I think it's not something that we have kind of looked at in depth yet, but we know that issues around kind of proving identity are often difficult for trans people, because there'll be certain stages of their life where not all their identity documents are totally in line with how they're living. There will be times where the photos on those documents don't exactly look like how they currently look. And again, we've got all these sort of problems, as I described before, with interlocking systems, where in order to maintain privacy, systems can't communicate with each other. So I think that there are undoubtedly solutions, but they probably require us to get creative, and they probably require us to not assume that the average voter doesn't have any type of marginalised identity or difficulty going on for them.

[00:16:35.330] - Alys Mumford

So one of the reasons we're recording this podcast is that the centenary of the right of some women to vote has been seen as this big cause for celebration. There's been lots of posturing about how great that was for equality. But we know there's still huge barriers to women getting involved in politics and getting elected. And we know that those barriers are intensified for trans women and trans people. We're only just beginning to see openly trans politicians getting elected, and it's taken a really long time. So why is it important that trans rights are thought about at every stage of the democratic process? So from voting through to election.

[00:17:12.410] - Vic Valentine

Yeah, I mean, I think it's never fair to put the onus on marginalised people to ensure that they're electing politicians who will do good and decent things. But equally, I think that if we look at the pattern and the groups of people who tend to be more affected by unfair franchising rules and ways to register to vote. That tends to line up with those people who were treated unfairly by kind of policymakers and actually by making sure not only that the people at the top of the pile represent the people at the bottom of the pile in a political sense, but actually making sure all those people at the bottom have any way at all to take part in any of that process is super, super vital to making it fairer

for everyone.

[00:17:53.760]

[Jingle]

[00:17:58.590] - Alys Mumford

That's it from me for this episode, make sure you catch the final episode of this miniseries in two weeks time where we'll be hearing about how Scotland could extend the right to vote to people in prison and about some of the successful campaigns we've seen to extend the right to vote in Scotland. Thanks for listening!

[00:18:16.450] - Amanda Stanley

On the Engender was hosted by Alys Mumford and was produced by Amanda Stanley on behalf of Engender. The jingle featured throughout was written and performed by Bossy Love. You can follow Engender on Twitter @EngenderScot and join in the conversation by using the hashtag #OnTheEngender.