

Statement to the Joint Ministerial Working Group on Welfare: Women, further devolution and social security, February 2015

Since 2010, 85% of cuts to benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions have been taken from women's incomes. Together with the Autumn Statement 2014 this amounts to £22 billion from a total £26 billion.¹

Our organisations work with women and women's organisations devastated by the impacts of welfare reform and the wider austerity agenda. Women are twice as dependent on social security as men because of gender inequality.² Women have fewer financial assets and less access to occupational pensions than men and the gender pay gap in Scotland stands at 17.5% (34.5% for part-time work).³ Women's unpaid care work props up the economy, and motherhood and caring see women's career progression and earning potential undermined. Women lack financial autonomy, including often as a result of domestic abuse.

From this perspective, we have serious concerns about the current process of further devolution of welfare to Scotland. The breakneck speed of negotiations is precluding the possibility of democratic civic participation and the chance to create a better system that meets the needs women in Scotland. Given the complexity of welfare provision in particular, this cannot be achieved in the timetable set down by your governments.

In failing to meaningfully consult the people most affected by this constitutional reform and organisations that represent them, your governments are putting women and children at risk of harm. If you fail to implement the Smith Commission Agreement at the very least, and do not seek to adequately reflect the views of people living and working in Scotland in the draft Bill, you risk undermining the possibility of 'an enduring settlement'.

We are calling for equality, social justice and democratic participation to be at the heart of the devolution process going forward and to be made explicit within new powers over welfare for Scotland. We regret that design and delivery of social security is set to be carved up in piecemeal fashion, in order to serve political interests and not the people whom it serves.

To ensure that this complex division of responsibility does not inflict harm on women, it is imperative that thorough equality impact assessment and gender budget analysis shape the draft Bill and the practical decisions that stem from it. **This means immediate analysis of how the legislation and spending decisions will affect women and men differently, as well as the impact on gender equality, followed by action to redress any discrimination.** A post-hoc impact assessment would be wholly inadequate.

¹ Fawcett Society (2015) [Where's the Benefit? An Independent Inquiry into Women and Jobseeker's Allowance](#)

² Engender (2014) [Gender and 'Welfare Reform': A joint position paper](#)

³ ONS (2014) [Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings Table 3.6A](#)

Scope for progressive change is limited by the lack of coherence between reserved and devolved powers, particularly with regard to Universal Credit and the sanctions and conditionality regime.

Nonetheless there are real opportunities for the Scottish Government to improve the welfare system for women, to involve those directly affected in shaping how new powers are used, and to ensure that the gender discrimination at the heart of the UK system is not replicated in Scotland.⁴

Employment support

The power over employment support offers potential to mitigate the gendered patterns of skills acquisition that lead to occupational segregation and see women clustered in low-paid, insecure jobs. At present, employment programmes ignore these factors when pairing jobseekers with mandatory work activity, serving to further entrench them and to perpetuate the gender pay gap.⁵ Furthermore, the Smith Commission Agreement did not stipulate a limited form of support for those facing long-term unemployment that must last for a year. **We call for these caveats that have appeared in the draft clauses to be removed.**

Housing

The power to vary the housing cost elements and administration of Universal Credit (UC) offers potential to better support women experiencing domestic abuse. Access to financial support and safe housing are crucial for these women and their safety is undermined by the monthly household payment under UC.⁶ However, we are concerned about the clause mandating approval from the Secretary of State for any such changes and that access to resources and physical safety for women in danger could be delayed due to complex constitutional processes (as has been experienced in Wales and Northern Ireland).⁷ **We are calling for greater clarity on this point.**

Disability and caring

The power over benefits for disabled people and carers holds potential to better support disabled women, who are amongst the very hardest hit by welfare reform, and female carers, who make up 74% of those in receipt of Carers' Allowance.⁸ However, this potential is undermined by the roll-out of UC and Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in Scotland. The introduction of PIP entails a projected 20% reduction in spending, which will mean linked loss of entitlements for carers. **We join with the 57 civil society organisations who have called for a halt to implementation of UC and PIP until related benefits have been devolved.**⁹

⁴ Engender (2014) [Welfare Reform Committee debate on Welfare Reform and the Smith Commission](#)

⁵ Engender (2014) [Gender and 'welfare reform': A joint position paper](#)

⁶ Scottish Women's Aid (2014) [Briefing paper on welfare reform and refuge accommodation](#)

⁷ Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, [Oral evidence, 2 Feb 2015 \(Questions 260, 261\)](#)

⁸ DWP (2013) [Quarterly Statistical Summary](#) Carers UK (2014) [Caring and Family Finances Inquiry](#)

⁹ <http://www.sfha.co.uk/sfha/news/civic-scotland-open-letter-to-ids-calls-for-suspension-of-roll-out-of-universal-credit>

New benefits

Finally, the powers to create new benefits in areas of devolved responsibilities and to introduce discretionary payments hold great potential to mitigate the discrimination faced by women within the social security system. Disabled, black and minority ethnic, refugee and older women, lone mothers and carers are all at risk of multiple discrimination and are particularly vulnerable to harm.¹⁰ Meanwhile, links between women's poverty and child poverty are widely recognised.¹¹ The ability to increase women's disposable income in a targeted way would be manifestly beneficial to those most disadvantaged by economic 'shocks' and the austerity agenda. The restrictions placed on these powers within the draft clauses, however, fundamentally undermine their potential to prevent women from reaching the point of extreme need and eligibility for short-term support that is now proposed. **This does not reflect the Smith Commission Agreement and we call for these conditions to be removed.**

Conclusion

Over 1000 people responded to Engender's consultation on their submission to the Smith Commission.¹² 827 of them strongly agreed with full devolution of social security on account of the perceived potential to improve women's lives. We urge you to ensure that this potential is not denied to Scottish civil society from the outset.

The Scottish and UK Governments are both currently failing to meet their broad range of commitments to progress gender equality. Women's and children's poverty are rising, women's participation in public life is falling and vital services to protect women and their children from violence are closing. This is a clear opportunity to support women as they face these challenges.

Close the Gap

Engender

Electoral Reform Society Scotland

Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland

Inclusion Scotland

NUS Scotland Women's Campaign

One Parent Families Scotland

Poverty Alliance

Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations

Scottish Refugee Council

Scottish Women's Aid

Scottish Women's Budget Group

Rape Crisis Scotland

Voluntary Action Scotland

Women's Support Project

YouthLink Scotland

YWCA Scotland

Zero Tolerance

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¹⁰ Engender (2014) [Gender and 'welfare reform': a joint position paper](#)

¹¹ Women's Budget Group (2005) [Making the links: women's and children's poverty](#)

¹² Engender (2014) [Engender Submission to the Smith Commission on devolution](#)

