Post-Legislative Scrutiny of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017

Scottish Women's Aid (SWA) is the lead organisation in Scotland working to end domestic abuse and plays a vital role in campaigning for effective responses to domestic abuse.

SWA is the umbrella organisation for the majority of local Women's Aid organisations across Scotland; each providing practical and emotional support to women, children and young people who experience domestic abuse. The services offered by our members include crisis intervention, advocacy, counselling, outreach, follow-on support and temporary refuge accommodation.

We also run Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline taking over 1000 calls, WhatsApp messages, and texts (24h/365) every month.

Overview

We are pleased to see post-legislative scrutiny of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. We share the Scottish Government's views that tackling child poverty in Scotland is a key policy priority which requires substantive and bold policy, legislative and practical responses to achieve. At present, we are concerned with the continued high child poverty rate as well as the lack of a gendered understanding of the nexus between children's poverty, women's poverty and violence against women.

1. The Act introduced a statutory framework for reducing child poverty. What difference has that framework made to the way the Scottish Government has approached reducing child poverty?

We welcome the Scottish Government taking on child poverty as a mission. The first child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022 recognised the gendered nature of poverty, by highlighting that there is “conclusive evidence that poverty and gender are inextricably linked” (Close the Gap, 2024; Scottish Government, 2018).

However, the most recent child poverty delivery plan is not gender competent. We know that women make up 90% of lone parents or single-parent households in Scotland, and that lone parents disproportionately experience poverty (One Parent Families Scotland, 2024). We also know that women are twice as dependent on social security than men (Close the Gap).

The failure to fully recognise this has resulted in some ineffective interventions, and has contributed to policy incoherence across government work. For instance, there is no evidence within the government’s National Strategy for Economic Transformation of prioritising issues such as unpaid care, or investing in childcare in order to improve single mothers’ access to the paid labour market. We welcomed the language in the 2024-25 Programme for Government on the inextricability of women’s and children’s poverty. However, if government does not become gender competent in its analysis of the drivers of and solutions to child poverty, its missions will not succeed.

This is demonstrated by the Scottish Government’s own poverty statistics, which confirm that further action is urgently required in order to meet the 2030 targets. The most recent statistics show that on average over the period of 2020-23, 24% of all children in Scotland - 240,000 - were living in relative poverty after housing costs (Scottish Government Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2020-23 statistics). An interim target of 18% will be reported on when this year's figures are published in March 2025. However, the Poverty and Inequality Commission has stated that ‘it is unlikely the interim targets will be met’ and that ‘without immediate and significant action, the Scottish Government will also not meet its 2030 target’. As the Commission has outlined, if the First Minister aims to meet his priority policy objective, ‘the Scottish Government needs to be much bolder’. This will not be possible without a close focus on supporting women out of poverty.

The abolishment of the two-child policy within the UK welfare system is long overdue. As well as forcing women and children into poverty, the policy restricts women’s basic reproductive rights. The Scottish government’s own analysis has found that ending the two-child limit would be the single most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty (Child Poverty Action Group). While the policy continues, the Scottish government must be prepared to take action to mitigate it.

A key step towards this would be topping up the Scottish Child Payment. The most recent available government statistics on poverty do not yet reflect the full impact of the payment, but analysis from Child Poverty Action Group shows that the payment alone lifts between 40 000 and 60 000 children out of poverty. Increasing the payment to at least £40 per week would help to promote gender equality, as well as supporting children at the highest risk of poverty.

It is also vital to address the pressures created by the cost of living crisis, as well as the disproportionate effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on women. Our Cost of Leaving campaign highlighted the huge safety impacts of soaring energy and food costs, combined with an inadequate social security system, on women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Any conversation around child poverty must acknowledge that women's and children's poverty enables perpetrators of domestic abuse.

2. What does the implementation of the Act tell us about the effectiveness or otherwise of statutory targets as a way of driving policy?

Statutory targets are necessary, but not sufficient, to drive policy.

We are currently seeing a gap between words and action when it comes to the implementation of the Child Poverty Act. If the Scottish Government had provided more clarity on the drivers of children's poverty, this would have in turn created more clarity about the necessary actions for public bodies and agencies as part of the statutory duty. For instance, taking action to close the pay gap and investing in the availability and infrastructure of childcare are vital elements to a successful mission to eradicate child poverty.

More broadly, we are supportive of parliamentary scrutiny of implementation. The more parliament is invited to scrutinise implementation, the more effective policy is likely to be.

3. Do you have any other comments?

As outlined in our responses above the government's analysis of how to reduce child poverty is deeply gender incompetent. We therefore want to outline key issues relating to children and women's poverty and how these are intrinsically linked to wider gender inequality in Scotland.

Children's poverty is women's poverty

- Children's poverty is intrinsically linked to women's poverty and will not be eradicated until women's economic equality and security are achieved.
- Women continue to have disproportionate caring responsibilities for children and young people, disabled, sick and older people. This care work remains unrecognised and unpaid, reducing disposable income and acting as a key

contributor to children's poverty (*see* previous briefings from Close the Gap, Engender, Scottish Women's Budget Group and Scottish Women's Aid).

- Women make up 90% of lone parents or single-parent households in Scotland. It is well-documented that lone parents disproportionately experience poverty (One Parent Families Scotland, 2024).
    - Poverty Alliance (2023) highlights that young single mothers are particularly at risk of experiencing poverty, with more than half (55%) living in poverty in Scotland.
- SWA and our partnership organisations have routinely highlighted that a lack of affordable childcare directly contributes to women's and therefore children's poverty.
    - Providing accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare remains a critical anti-poverty measure and needs serious commitment from Scottish Government to evoke change in women and children's lives across Scotland.
- Due to their insecure participation in the labour market and unpaid caring responsibilities, women are twice as dependent on social security than men (Close the Gap). This includes benefits to help provide for their children. We are therefore disappointed that Scottish Government has not used their social security powers to increase the child payment to help alleviate financial hardship and poverty.
- Similarly, women who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) are disproportionately affected by poverty and their ability to provide for their children. We therefore recommend that Scottish Government consider an extension of the Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods to families with NRPF, similar to the UK Government's current consultation to extend their 'Healthy Start' grant.

Women's economic inequality in Scotland

- Women's continued economic inequality in our society directly affects their ability to provide for their children. Therefore, children's physical and mental health, wellbeing, educational outcomes, and future prospects are adversely affected by women's poverty.
- Women are the majority of low-paid workers in Scotland, comprising 60% of workers earning below the living wage (Close the Gap, 2023). This restricts women's professional and therefore economic progression and contributes further to the gender pay gap. As highlighted consistently, the gender pay gap is a key contributor to women's poverty (Close the Gap 2023, 2024; Scottish Women's Budget Group, 2023). This not only limits their earning potential, but

also reduces their ability to save and build financial security for themselves and their children. The Scottish Government must prioritise closing the gender pay gap across *all* policy areas, including the promotion of fair wages, supporting women in accessing higher-paying employment and providing incentives for employers to offer flexible and fair working arrangements.

- Poverty rates among racially minoritised and disabled women are disproportionately higher than average across Scotland (Scottish Women's Budget Group, 2023). Disabled women and racially minoritised women face intersecting and compounding inequalities which create further barriers to equal labour market participation (Close the Gap, 2024).
- Despite the undervaluation of women's work being a key driver of women's poverty, and therefore child poverty, there is no policy focus on addressing economic injustice (Close the Gap, 2024). The Government's National Strategy (NSET) is gender incompetent and fails to recognise the unpaid care economy, occupational segregation and the economy-wide undervaluation of women's work.
- The lack of emphasis on women's labour market equality has worsened since the first gender pay gap action plan was subsumed into the fair work action plan.
- Existing Scottish Government initiatives to address child poverty, including the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act, need to consider and address systemic gender inequalities that are cause and consequence of women's and therefore children's poverty. This includes but is not limited to, addressing the gender pay gap, ensuring access to affordable childcare, and supporting women in low-paid and precarious employment.

Child maintenance and affordable childcare

- The amount of money, as a national figure, owed by non-paying parents is significant. A forthcoming report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Scotland indicates that collection of child maintenance could substantially reduce child poverty. The issue of children's poverty is not a single-policy issue, therefore, to help bolster the effectiveness of the Act other policy areas (both devolved and reserved), such as child maintenance, need to be considered and acted upon.
- Inconsistent child maintenance payments are commonly utilised as a form of economic abuse against the caring parent. This exacerbates financial insecurity and hardship for children. It must be understood that child poverty can be the result of deliberate (in)action by an abusive parent.
- High and unsustainable childcare costs force many women to choose between employment and caregiving. Terminating employment or reducing working hours

to provide childcare instead deepens women's poverty. The Scottish government needs to:
  - Invest in affordable, accessible and flexible childcare options, especially for low-income families.
  - Facilitate systemic economic change which enable and encourage women to enter or stay in the workforce.

Domestic abuse and economic dependence

- The interconnection between experiencing domestic abuse and poverty has long been acknowledged. Domestic abuse, including economic abuse, is a significant contributor to women's poverty.
  - Economic abuse is a key form of domestic abuse which exploits, sabotages and restricts women and children's economic and financial resources (money, income, housing, transport, employment, education). This creates financial dependence on the abusive partner and leads to serious economic instability for women and children.
  - Economic abuse often plummets women and children into poverty and prevents them from leaving their abusive partner.
- The lack of recognition of economic abuse and its consequences exacerbates women and children's experiences of financial hardship and traps them in a cycle of poverty with no real solutions currently available. The Scottish Government should consider:
  - Raising awareness of economic abuse and its impact on women and children's poverty.
  - Ensuring that policies and legislation (including the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act) aimed at reducing poverty include protections and resources for victim-survivors of domestic abuse and their children.

Contact Details

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