

WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

WOMEN AND WELFARE INQUIRY

WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM THE POVERTY ALLIANCE

1. What is the impact of welfare reform on women?

The Poverty Alliance welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Women and Welfare Inquiry. The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, formally established in 1992. We are an independent organisation with almost 200 members, with members drawn from the voluntary and public sectors, trade unions, researchers, faith groups and individuals with direct experience of poverty. Our aim is to work with others to enable communities and individuals to tackle poverty. We have a number of key policy areas that provide the focus for our activities; these are addressing low incomes, supporting services to address poverty, enhancing the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in policy development processes, and addressing attitudes to poverty. These concerns are reflected in this response.

Welfare reform has had multiple impacts on women¹. The Scottish Government highlighted that impacts on women have been linked to their caring responsibilities². The gendered nature of poverty means that changes to the welfare system need to be carefully considered in terms of the experience of women and the impact it will have on their lives. Women's experience of poverty can vary across the life course, for example as a result of paid employment, older age and due to changing household circumstances such as lone parenthood. Consideration must be paid to intersectional relationships of gender for example the between gender and age, gender and ethnicity etc. as well as the interaction with caring roles and access to the labour market.

Welfare reform has impacted on women in Scotland in different ways dependent on the benefits they receive. The Poverty Alliance has concerns about the speed and depth of welfare reform and the ability to support women across Scotland affected by these changes. These changes will impact on women both financially and on their wider quality of life. Evidence has shown that within families women are more likely to be managing the household budget and to go without such as skipping meals³.

¹Scottish Government Communities ASD (2013) 'The Gendered Impact of Welfare Reform' Equality and Tackling Poverty Analysis

²Scottish Government Communities ASD (2013) 'The Gendered Impact of Welfare Reform' Equality and Tackling Poverty Analysis

³ Bennet, F. Daly M, (2014) 'Gender and Poverty' in *Reducing Poverty in the UK , a collection of Evidence Reviews*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation : York

Key welfare reform changes have directly affected women such as loss of the Health In Pregnancy and the Sure Start maternity grants⁴

Evidence from our Welfare Trackers project has indicated that Welfare Reform has impacted negatively on organisations in Glasgow who support people affected by welfare changes. We found that:

- 75% of organisations reported an increased workload;
- 67% reported a more challenging, complex caseload;
- 63% said it was having an impact on the delivery of core work;
- 38% reported providing emergency food assistance.⁵

This evidence suggests that for both women and men there will be less support available to deal with the pressure that welfare reform is having on their lives. The forthcoming roll-out of Universal Credit in Glasgow will only add to these pressures unless the availability of support is addressed. Having access to holistic adequate support is critical to ensuring that people are supported through these changes.

2. What is your (or your clients) experience of being on benefits or employment support?

Our Welfare Trackers project in Glasgow has ran both city wide networking sessions and local awareness sessions. A number of issues have emerged from communities across Glasgow.

Conditionality

The effect of increased conditionality for those seeking employment is well documented. Our work shows that households with a kinship caring role (mainly headed by women) are facing increased pressure to seek work despite their caring role⁶. This has contributed to increased pressure within these households and is in contrast to those within other caring roles such as those who are in foster carer roles.

Accessing employment

A core aim of the welfare changes has been to move people into employment. This however is dependent on the local labour market context and the conditions placed on claimants accessing employment have presented challenges for women in Glasgow. It has been reported that many claimants are having problems with

⁴ Scottish Government Communities Analytical Changes (2014) *Impact of UK Government Welfare Reforms on Families. Autumn Update*

⁵ McHardy F(2015) *'What's going in Glasgow Welfare trackers research'* Poverty Alliance :Glasgow

⁶Poverty Alliance (2014) Welfare Trackers community session

unrealistic expectations placed upon them through their Claimant Commitment. For example, frontline support workers have reported difficulties for people getting a Claimant Commitment that accurately reflects their needs. Examples included people fleeing embarrassed about telling coaches the barriers to working they face, overestimating the knowledge of the work coach about their conditions⁷, and lack of knowledge amongst claimants as to their rights under the Claimant Commitment.

3. How has your (or your clients) experience with the benefit system changed in recent years since the introduction of the welfare reforms?

Our work shows that women have reported a more negative experience with the benefits system since the introduction of welfare reforms. These include finding the changes confusing and problematic to navigate. A number have reported increased stress and anxiety about engaging with the system including examples of negative attitudes from frontline advisors. Loss of income has resulted in pressures to reduce household spending or other strategies such as incurring debt.

4. Are there any challenges involved in being in receipt of your (your clients) particular benefits?

For those on a low income – periods of transitions such as moving between benefits and work create uncertainty, and delays in receiving benefits with any loss of income being heavily felt. There is a clear need for a process that's clear and accessible for claimants and for a system that minimises disruption to households. In addition, support organisations need to be provided with clear support and guidance to help their clients navigate the system and access help for their needs and circumstances.

5. What would be your priorities for change when certain benefits / elements of employment support are devolved to Scotland?

The devolution of the work programme has potential to improve the lives of lone parents, 92 per cent of whom are women⁸. There will be some difficulties with this as conditionality is to remain reserved at UK Government level but devolution allows us to ensure the work programme can work alongside other devolved areas such as health and education to provide a more holistic approach. The devolution of the work programme should not mean simply replicating the old system, but instead we should move to a more flexible system with fairness and dignity at its heart. As part of this we need to move towards a system which recognises the value of unpaid work and the important role of women as carers.

The Poverty Alliance campaigned for the power to create a new benefit to be devolved to Scotland and we welcomed this following the Smith report.

⁷ Poverty Alliance (2014) Welfare Trackers citywide session

⁸ Office of National Statistics (2012) 'Lone parents with dependent children'

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/family-demography/families-and-households/2011/sum-lone-parents.html>

Unfortunately, the draft clauses which have since been published have narrowed the ability to use this power to such an extent that it is difficult to see how it could now be of any meaningful value in tackling poverty. We would like to see this changed to reflect what we believe was the original intent in the Smith report. By doing this, Scotland could re-introduce benefits such as Lone Parent Grants and Child Trust funds which would make a real difference to the lives of many women experiencing poverty.

- We also believe that we should move towards a welfare system in Scotland that is better able to deliver the principles outlined by the Scottish Campaign on Welfare Reform (SCoWR):
- Benefit rates should be set at a level where no one is left in poverty and all have sufficient income to lead a dignified life.
- Respect for human rights and dignity should be the cornerstone of a new approach to welfare.
- The benefits system should be simplified - by, for example, increasing the role of non-means tested benefits.
- The system should provide the support needed to enable everyone to participate fully in society.

By moving towards a system based on these principles, we can improve the lives of women in Scotland and make meaningful progress in tackling poverty.

6. Do you have any suggestions of practical improvements that you would like to see when certain benefits/elements of employment support are under Scottish control?

In recent years, Scotland has seen a growth in the numbers of people experiencing in work poverty. Women are more likely to be in low paid work, especially part-time work. Currently, almost two-thirds of children in poverty in Scotland are in working households and this is a result of low pay and poor labour market practices⁹. In light of certain benefits and elements of employment support coming under Scottish control we would urge that consideration be given to gender assessment impacts of labour market practices and labour market support and training. Consideration should also be given to practical measures which reduce the barriers to employment that women might such as help with transport costs (especially at the start of a job) and increasing affordable childcare and family caring responsibilities., and other key factors including more hidden factors such as language barriers.

⁹ McCormack C (2015) 'Smith Commission on Further Powers for Scotland' Poverty Alliance

In addition our Welfare Trackers project has found BME and migrant communities reporting negative experiences when seeking employment. For example, they have highlighted that there is very little support for where English is not their first so negotiating the system is problematic and confusing. For those who are refugees there are additional challenges for those accessing employment in terms of work experience within the country of exile often not been recognised by employers within Scotland¹⁰.

In addition, women with experience of addiction have also highlighted problems with employment support¹¹. For example a lack of understanding amongst employment support workers of the recovery process and the implications this can for people being moved into jobs or training that were unsuitable for their recovery. We would therefore recommend that employment support staff should have training to deal with this.

Also highlighted were issues around accessing resources such as IT within the community to search for and apply for jobs. Universal job match is the tool employed by Job Centre Plus to undertake work seeking activity and its digital focus creates problems for those with limited or no digital access. Consideration should be given to ensuring that digital resources and support be made more widely available within communities, for example via libraries and community centres. In light of all these issues we would recommend a holistic package of employment support is provided for women to assist them in accessing high quality employment that meets the needs and provides an adequate level of income. At the heart of this should be engagement with women directly to understand their needs and concerns.

Fiona McHardy
Research and Policy Officer
The Poverty Alliance
1 May 2015

¹⁰ Poverty Alliance (2015) Welfare Trackers community session

¹¹ Poverty Alliance/ Scottish Drugs Forum (2015) Welfare Trackers community session