

## WELFARE REFORM COMMITTEE

### WOMEN AND WELFARE INQUIRY

#### WRITTEN SUBMISSION RECEIVED FROM ZERO TOLERANCE

##### **Letter in support of Engender response to the Women and Welfare consultation**

Zero Tolerance has worked for over 20 years to prevent violence against women (VAW) by changing attitudes. We do this through education on healthy relationships, challenging media reporting of violence, supporting early years workers to challenge stereotypes, and much more. We know that this kind of attitudinal work can have a real impact in reducing people's acceptance of violence against women. We are, however, very much aware that violence against women will continue as long as gender inequality persists. Resources directed at violence against women prevention are most effective in a society that is moving towards equality.

Violence against women directly affects at least one in four women in Scotland, and indirectly reduces the opportunities and quality of life of all women. It is a cause and consequence of gender inequality and cuts across all areas of life. Prevention of violence against women is not an area of work that can be siloed into one policy area; to have any impact equality and violence prevention strategies *must* link up with all areas of government policy.

Welfare 'reform' as it is happening currently in the UK is essentially the imposition of significant cuts in social security and an ideological austerity agenda. £26 billion worth of cuts have been made to benefits, tax credits, pay and pensions since 2010. **85%** of this has been taken from women's incomes.

This kind of reform impacts particularly negatively on women experiencing violence, making it difficult if not impossible to escape an abusive relationship and increasing the severity of abuse by further disempowering them. For example, creating a single household payment of Universal Credit increases the risk of women experiencing financial control; or women who are experiencing that form of domestic abuse suffering further. By reducing gender equality, welfare reform as currently planned increases the risks to all women of experiencing violence. We also know that poverty is one of the main risk factors for women's exploitation in the sex industry (which the Scottish Government defines as violence against women).

The Scottish Government has historically been a progressive force for ending violence against women and the recently launched Strategy on Violence against Women and Girls, Equally Safe, makes VAW prevention a priority. While we welcome this commitment, we are extremely concerned about the ways that welfare reform is undermining this progress and fully support the recommendations of Engender's 'Women and Welfare: A Widening Gap' report and their response to the Women and Welfare Inquiry consultation. In particular we call on the Scottish Government to recognise that women are bearing the brunt of welfare reform, directly due to existing inequalities, and to put a gendered analysis at the centre of welfare reform and all related policies.

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