

# PUTTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS AT THE HEART OF THE SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE CAMPAIGN, 18.1.17

Alys Munford, Engender



Apologies from Basia Mindewicz. Sally Wainwright facilitated. Alys Munford from Engender spoke. This was followed by general questions and then three breakout groups, which discussed the issues raised.

## 1. Talk given by Alys Mumford (Engender)

- As a charity, Engender was advised it couldn't take a position on independence, as theoretically women's equality is possible under any constitutional arrangement. We created space for women to discuss the possibilities for women's equality of independence and the status quo. Fair to say that most feminists and feminist organisations were excited about some of the possibilities of independence, including the space to imagine new institutions, policies, and ways for women to participate in building a new nation.
- We were disappointed by the way that gender and women were missing or underrepresented in many of the conversations about independence. "Eat Your Cereal" was probably the worst example of messaging to women, but so much of the discussion just seemed to assume that women weren't involved, or had exactly the same experience of life in Scotland as men. It shouldn't have been necessary for Women for Independence to exist, but we're glad they did. Since indyref, it's been disappointing to see the extent to which anti-feminist men's voices have dominated some pro-indy spaces.
- Across the world, women are more likely to vote for political parties that are 'progressive'. Although there didn't end up being much of a gender gap in voting in in indyref - for a while it seemed like women were much less keen on independence - in theory there may be a lot of the women's vote that just hasn't been activated by a progressive pro-indy campaign.

- Engender advocates for change in Scotland now, under the current constitutional arrangements, but there are so many possibilities to extend that work in a new state. We would want to see:
  - a constitution that enshrined women's human rights, economic and social rights, and rights for disabled people, LGBTI, black and ME people, children, and incorporated all of the international human rights treaties that independent Scotland would be a party to;
  - an economic system and economic institutions that measured our wellbeing by counting things beyond GDP, particularly the unpaid work (principally done by women) of caring, and domestic and eproductive labour;
  - Scotland's institutions and legislature represent Scotland's people, including women; using quotas to kickstart equality and shift cultures.
- The independence project is one that is about hope rather than fear. It's vital that we use the powers that we have to make change now, to enable people to continue to imagine the possibilities that independence might create. It's vital that the people of Scotland are involved now in shaping our use of the new powers that have come through the Scotland Act. Rhetoric around dignity and fairness must be matched by action to redistribute power, resources, and safety from men to women; from those that have too much to those that don't.

Specific issues which are vital for women in Scotland in the coming years:

### **Abortion**

This is a real test for Scotland and a chance for bold policy to talk about what sort of a nation Scotland wants to be. Abortion is currently criminalised in the UK, and the devolution of abortion law means that the Scottish Government has the power to decriminalise abortion and remove paternalistic measures like the 2 doctor rule.

Currently provision in Scotland is poor – women seeking an abortion after 18 weeks are routinely forced to travel to England for the procedure.

This is an international issue (Ohio 'heartbeat law', Poland's draconian laws etc) and Scotland can be at the forefront of showing solidarity.

### **Social Security**

86% of the 'savings' made from social security cuts will come from women's incomes. Some powers over social security have been devolved and, again, it is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to diverge from the path set out by Westminster and use the powers they have to advance women's equality now. A key issue for women's equality is in individual payments of Universal Credit – continuing to offer only household payments undermines equality and women's financial autonomy.

### **Women's representation**

While we have lots of high profile women politicians – leader of SNP, Labour, Conservatives and the co-convenor of the Greens – this masks that we have serious overrepresentation of men in politics and public life. 35% MSPs and only 24% local councillors are women. If Scotland had power over equalities law, we could introduce legal parliamentary quotas.

While these are some key issues which will dominate discussions about women's equality over the coming 5 years, every political issue in Scotland is gendered, from taxation to defence. We must make sure all discussions including women's voices, not just those around 'women's issues'. Campaign groups must work towards equality with the powers Scotland currently has, as well as preparing for any potential constitutional changes in future.

The Engender website (<https://www.engender.org.uk>) also provides access to latest publications.

1. General points
  - More emphasis needs to be made on the powers Holyrood already has.
  - More campaigns focussed on Holyrood to ensure these powers are used.
  - Educational campaign to argue against financial short-termism used to make so many cuts and point out their greater long-term financial consequences.
  - RIC should be emphasising that Another Scotland Is Possible now, as part of its campaigning.
2. Austerity and cuts have a disproportionate effect on women.
  - Need for detailed information on who is affected.
  - Give more teeth to equalities measures, including an evaluation of Scottish government's gender edit.
  - End 1% limit on public sector pay awards.
3. Destigmatise social security.
  - Default payments of Universal Credit should be to individuals.
  - Weekly payments are often better than monthly payments.
  - Universal Citizens Income as replacement for means tested benefits, also paid directly to parents who stay at home to rear children.
  - More progressive taxation.
4. Nursery provision remains very expensive.
  - Move towards free nursery provision.
5. Later start for formal education.
  - End testing obsession in schools.
  - Pursue a gendered education strategy.
  - Improves sex education - not all teachers are qualified, should be part of their training.
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  - Involve Tie for Inclusive Education (TIE) to be involved.
  - College cuts have a disproportionate effect on women.
6. Update the abortion right.
  - Provide free contraception.
7. Challenging intimidation and violence against women (and LBGT individuals) with better representation in public space.
  - Ring fence funding for women's refuges.

Prostitution - disagreement on the best model to pursue, although Nordic model was raised. This criminalises paying for sex.

8. Reform support for survivors of childhood sexual abuse (better consultation with survivors' and other support organisations).
9. Need for people focussed rather than just work focussed public transport.
10. Land reform could benefit women too.

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## **HOW FAR HAVE WE GOT?**

The longer term aims were compared to the demands first raised by the Womens Liberation Movement and the Working Womens Charter.

### **A. THE SEVEN DEMANDS OF THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT UK (1971-8)**

(National Women's Liberation Conference, 1971)

- 1 – Equal pay now
- 2 – Equal education and job opportunities
- 3 – Free contraception and abortion on demand
- 4 – Free 24hr nurseries

(National Women's Liberation Conference, 1975)

- 5 – Financial and legal independence
- 6 – An end to all discrimination against lesbians and a woman's right to define her own sexuality

(the last - so far - ...National Women's Liberation Conference, 1978)

- 7 – Freedom from intimidation by threat or use of violence or sexual coercion, regardless of marital status and an end to all laws, assumptions and institutions which perpetuate male dominance and men's aggression towards women.

### **B. WORKING WOMENS CHARTER (1974)**

1. The rate for the job, regardless of sex, at rated negotiated by trade unions, with a national minimum wage below which no wage should fall.

2. Equal opportunity of entry into occupations and in promotion, regardless of sex or marital status.
3. Equal education and training for all occupations and compulsory day-release for all 16-18 year olds in employment.
4. Working conditions to be without deterioration of previous conditions, the same for men as for women.
5. The removal of all legal and bureaucratic impediments to equality, e.g. with regard to tenancies, mortgages, pension schemes, taxation, passports, control over children, social security payments, hire purchase agreements .
6. Improved provision of local authority day nurseries, free of charge with extended hours to suit working mothers. Provision of nursery classes within day nurseries. More nursery schools.
7. 18 weeks maternity leave with full net pay before and after birth of a live child. 7 weeks after birth of the child is stillborn. No dismissal during pregnancy or maternity leave. No loss of security or promotion rights.
8. Family planning clinics providing free contraception to be extended to cover every locality. Free abortion to be readily available.
9. Family allowances to be increased to £2.50 per child, including the first child.
10. To campaign amongst women to take an active part in the trade unions and in political life so they exercise influence commensurate with their numbers and to campaign amongst men trade unionists that they may work to achieve this aim.