

BUILDING A FEMINIST NATION

SCOTLAND IN THE ERA OF POLYCRISIS



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EDITED BY KIM BARKER, HELEN O'SHEA AND TALAT YAQOOB

Building a feminist nation:
Scotland in the era of polycrisis

Building a feminist nation: Scotland in the era of polycrisis

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*For Catherine McGregor and Emma Liddle.
Two best friends who left us far too soon.*

*And for Emma Mawdsley.
You were, and are, so loved.*

From each of you, this project first found its light.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Late into the UK general election night, on 4 July 2024, and long after good judgement had logged off, I opened a new folder and christened it Project Rage. No outline, no methodology, not even a stray Post-it. All I had was this high-voltage impulse triggered by six, mainly self-inflicted, weeks of political despair. I suspected Talat and Kim were equally unwell, so naturally I invited them to join forces – they immediately said yes.

Since that moment, the cost-of-living crisis has kept pressing on Scottish households, the heaviest blows reserved, as always, for women. Across all major poverty indicators – income, employment precarity, wealth, and debt – it is women in Scotland who face deeper and more persistent economic disadvantages than men. Women have faced escalating, immediate risks across every major geo-political fault line too. The assaults on Sudan, Gaza and Ukraine have intensified, driving mass displacement and exposing women and girls to rising violence, hunger and the collapse of essential services. We have seen an emboldened MAGA movement, accelerating rollbacks on migrants' rights, racial justice and women's rights, whilst across Europe, resurgent far-right movements threatened long-standing gender-equality protections.

Scotland, being no exception to the prevailing political winds, recorded a rise in anti-migrant and racist activity. Meanwhile, rapid advances in AI have intensified harm and expanded the risks women face across both real and online worlds. And through it all, the

historian in me kept tapping my shoulder. History has taught me many humbling things, including that we seem to specialise in stumbling into crises and then insisting we're shocked. But the long view also gives me comfort. The archives are full of imperfect people doing their best with incomplete information, leaving behind traces of resilience, improvisation, and the occasional accidental breakthrough.

History also shows us that progress is rarely linear, seldom a grand crescendo, even if our national stories are often still stubbornly received as such. And it has also taught me that much of what transforms a society begins with the coming together of small, almost imperceptible acts – tiny refusals, quiet solidarities and modest interventions – that accumulate into tangible cultural shifts. It is history too that gives me proof that despair is premature, that agency is real, and that even in times of fracture there is always the possibility of renewal. In this era of polycrisis history reminds us that turmoil is not an ending but a hinge. Somehow, between a melodramatically titled folder, global unease, domestic strain, and the archive's quiet insistence that humanity has weathered darker moments with even less to hold onto, this project took shape.

To Jo, Laura, Alison, Kim and Linda, thank you for letting me chew over most of the book's themes out loud during our book group evenings, which were allegedly devoted to fiction. To Vidya and Emily, thank you for hauling me through every emotional pothole since. To my sister Fiona, you're living proof that resistance doesn't just survive, it evolves. And to two more formidable women, my co-editors Talat and Kim; your courage steadied mine whenever it faltered, and you proved, again and again, that kindness isn't what just holds a project together, it's what holds us all together.

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Sara Sheridan, thank you for being so supportive from the outset and for such a forthright foreword.

To every chapter contributor, this book simply wouldn't exist without you. It is here because you gave your already-overstretched time to something bigger than us. And with it, you brought honesty, expertise, conviction and trust at a time when they matter most.

Thank you to all those who have come before us, those who work alongside us, and those who will come after, and who were and are determined to create a fairer Scotland. I am especially thankful for the influences of the many fabulous women who have been taken too soon, whose commitment to equality and social justice helped to trigger many of the ideas, arguments, discussions and influences that have shaped my approach to this work and the issues it highlights. This book is for them too. We come from generations who fought for every inch of progress we've made. A greater integration of these histories into the public realm might help us better situate where we have collectively landed. Whilst silence may feel safer, it offers us little defence. So, it's our turn, collectively, to try; to take the risk or lose the chance to create a future Scotland on our own terms. To do this, we need community, connection and creativity – as those before us did – that not only imagines change but also makes it. The following is our small contribution, where we chose to place some of our attention.

Helen O'Shea
March 2026

QUOTES

*Is it just . . . tae destroy all of fucking humanity?
A privileged kind ay – sport?
Just a wee game, ay?*

From the poem 'Homicidal Motivations' in the collection *A Swan's
Neck on the Butcher's Block* by Jenni Fagan

*We shut it down! No immigrants, no immigrants.
No sniveling-recycling-global-warming nutters.
Little man, little woman, the world is a dangerous place.
Now, pour me a pint, dear. Get out of my fracking face.
From the poem 'Extinction' by Jackie Kay*

*Ken yer words hae smeddum
Ahint the way ye look
So, tak aw the keich life wheechs yer way
An fill a bloody book.
From the poem 'Reflections' in the collection
Poyums by Len Pennie*

*Be my sisters,
Hold my hand.
Hear my whispers,
All across this land.*

Together we stand.
From the song 'sisters' by Pippa Blundell

Between you and me, I think there's something going on.
From the song 'Gitika' by Bee Asha

PREFACE

Scotland is at a critical social and political juncture. The choices made by those with influence now will determine whether all women and girls live safe and progressive lives, or whether the nation will follow the path being pursued by too many countries worldwide towards a rollback of hard-won change for women and marginalised communities.

Opportunities have already been missed, creating the multiple crises that we are now facing. Short-termism, political posturing, austerity, centralised decision-making and a lack of public access and accountability have got us here.

Scotland needs to get the fundamentals right with feminist, anti-racist, anti-poverty and anti-oppressive practices at the centre of our systems, policy and legislative design and implementation. Building these strong foundations is what prevents the influences that seek to divide Scotland from being successful with their hostile agenda. There is too much at stake for women and girls for those with power to carry on as usual.

Scotland needs courage, it needs ambition, and it needs the evidence-led recommendations made throughout this publication.

The experts and campaigners in this book have been brought together because we feel passionately about delivering for women in Scotland, particularly those who experience compounding inequalities and those who are most often ignored. This is not a publication to be left to gather dust on a shelf. This book comes with a loud

siren calling for change and will be followed by demands and the accountability of those in decision-making and influencing positions.

A feminist and fair nation can be a reality and Scotland *can* lead the way. The time is now to show the world how this can happen.

Kim Barker, Helen O'Shea and Talat Yaqoob
March 2026

FOREWORD

The contents of this book create a vision that will alter the fabric of our lives. I must warn you – once you have read it, you will see the inequalities more clearly, either in your own life or in the lives around you. There is trauma in looking with clarity at the situation of women, be that situation local, national or global. The erasure in our day-to-day lives is staggering. As writer Rebecca Solnit writes in her book *Men Explain Things To Me*:

‘Some women get erased a little at a time, some all at once. Some reappear. Every woman who appears wrestles with the forces that would have her disappear. She struggles with the forces that would tell her story for her, or write her out of the story, the genealogy, the rights of man, the rule of law.’

The injustices uncovered in this book may be triggering, but pulling data about women’s lives into the light that we, in our goldfish bowls, see every day but rarely notice, even when they impact our own lives, is vital. It’s a painful thing to witness systemic harm. But once you’ve seen it, you can’t unsee it. Solnit writes:

‘Every woman knows what I’m talking about. It’s the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by

indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence.'

Writers and creatives have addressed this issue in different ways. As Naomi Alderman writes in her science fiction novel, *The Power*, which won the Baileys Prize in 2017, 'We're only pretending everything is normal because we don't know what else to do.' This book was one of many projects in the 2010s which used fictional means to explore contemporary gender norms by imagining worlds where these norms were reversed. French filmmaker Éléonore Pourriat's romantic comedy *I Am Not an Easy Man* creates a matriarchal society in which men are submissive. These projects have been hugely instrumental in simply pointing out the ridiculous inequality of society by showing the reverse. It's a creative force for change.

Scotland is a country that is ripe for transformation. From community councils to local councils to devolved national government to Westminster to the global stage, there are activists, politicians and civil servants who are committed to change. This book, I hope, will cast that difficult light brightly enough to inspire them in non-fiction, data-driven evidence. I am always wary of talking about diversity in isolation. Women's history is the story of women's lives, but includes the actions of men, on many occasions (for better or worse), it is the actions of men that create what we think of as 'women's history'. In schools, after talking about female achievement, little boys sometimes ask, 'What has this got to do with me?' I always answer, 'These women are part of where you come from. They're your grannies too. Women's history isn't only for women. Men's history isn't only for men.' Thus, when we change our country for women, we change our country for everyone. The good news is that we have a long and successful record of change. In fact, outside the mud and the blood of history (the many wars we've fought and financed), most of the story we tell ourselves about where we come from, is about change. Stasis isn't notable.

When I was first contacted by the team that sought to bring together this book, I immediately thought of Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner. In 2018, Robinson

famously called for a feminist solution to climate change. Her approach was, of course, in itself feminist. The movement she envisaged would grow organically, she said, 'in an unstructured way, which is all the better, because we are not prescribing what a feminist solution should look like, we are listening – we want women to tell us what they want.' The vision contained in these pages, however, is not organic or unstructured. It's carefully organised, thought through and evidenced. And that's important too. It's a handbook for making life better for individuals and to make Scotland a better country to live in. It's a tool. I notice, however, that the change that is being fostered around women's issues in Scotland also has an organic element. Someone will take a stand. Someone will dedicate time and effort to making a change. In reading this book, you may have taken a first step. It feels overwhelming, but there is so much good to come from systemic change. And the start of that is to dream that it can be different. To envision an alternative situation. A better world. And from there, to take a step into action. Each such step is a radical act, from simply changing the terminology you use when referring to women's bodies, to writing a letter to an official, to demonstrating on the streets, to casting your vote in a particular way, to standing up for an idea at a meeting, to doing whatever you do differently. Every person who realises how much better the world can be is a hero, or, perhaps I should say, a shero. There are already many such people amongst us. We need every one of them. We need more.

As the text says, we are currently in an era of polycrisis, and that means change can go both ways. This too is normal. History isn't a straight line on a graph, heading ever upwards towards better outcomes. It's a line that traces hills and troughs, and the troughs invariably target marginalised groups, of which women are the largest. Globally, this is happening around us as well as here, in Scotland, on our doorstep. Well-funded extremist organisations dedicated to repressive policies are lobbying our politicians and demonstrating on our streets. We are poised at a point when the graph of our history can soar either up or down. We each carry many burdens, and I include in that 'we' privileged women, like myself, though I see many of my sisters bent double with a greater weight. We share our

most important privilege, however: we have the means to transform both individually and collectively, and with that kind of change, the world can turn. I hope this book inspires you to take action that is in reach, whatever that might mean for you – for we must do what we can, and we must do it together.

Sara Sheridan
Glasgow, January 2026

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Zarina Ahmad is a climate justice advocate specialising in race equality and environmental policy. She has worked with the Council for Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations (CEMVO Scotland) as Climate Change and Environment Officer, supporting minority ethnic communities to engage with climate action and policy. Her work focuses on increasing the participation of underrepresented groups in environmental movements and policymaking. She has contributed to Scottish Parliament inquiries and helped expand access to climate funding for minority ethnic organisations. Zarina is also a researcher and educator working at the intersection of climate justice, social justice and community-led change.

Ang, Jen

Jen Ang is Founding Director of Lawmanity, a project that aims to tackle inequalities in the law by working with people-led movements to secure positive change. Jen is an experienced human rights lawyer qualified to practise in Scotland, England and Wales, and New York State. She is a legal expert on asylum, human rights and children's rights, and on the rights of survivors of torture. She is also a Professor in Practice at the GO Justice Centre, School of Law, University of Glasgow, and believes in making legal education open and accessible to all.

Barker, Kim

Kim Barker is Professor of Law at the University of York. She is an internationally recognised expert on technology-facilitated violence against women (TFVAWG) and her work has informed parliamentary debates, international reports, policymaking and legal developments in the UK, Europe, and internationally. She has advised a range of organisations, including the Council of Europe, governments, tech companies and NGOs internationally, on issues relating to TFVAWG, online violence, and platform regulation. Her research has been funded by RAI, ESRC, EPSRC and UKRI. Kim is an award-winning academic (*Zero Tolerance* 2020, AI Impact Awards 2026).

Brindley, Sandy

Sandy Brindley has worked in the rape crisis movement in Scotland for 30 years, starting as a volunteer and now acting as Chief Executive. Her work has been influential in driving progress for survivors of rape, sexual assault and abuse in Scotland, including legislative change and improved responses. She sits on multiple strategic forums and taskforces, including those of the Scottish Government, working to ensure survivors' voices are heard.

Chambers, Thea

Thea Chambers is Director of Mind the Gap, an inclusive design consultancy, and has taught architectural design at ESALA since 2003. She was Design Director for Chambers McMillan Architects, including work on the award-winning Ramp House. Her research explores inclusive design and how children and young people engage creatively with space. Her work is informed by lived experience and focuses on developing inclusive design processes.

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Dr Diane Delaney is a researcher and practitioner with over 25 years' experience across health, social work and education in Scotland. She completed her PhD at the University of Strathclyde on parents' and carers' roles in children's health and development. She co-founded the Give Them Time Campaign, which achieved legislative change in 2023 on deferred school starts. Her work adopts feminist perspectives and promotes equity, inclusion and collaborative, evidence-informed approaches.

Elaraby, Fatma

Fatma Elaraby is an Administrative Officer at Maryhill Integration Network, where she is responsible for day-to-day administration and welcoming people to the organisation. She joined the staff team in 2023. Fatma is also a human rights activist, advocating for the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, particularly the right to work. She is a member of Glasgow West Amnesty Group and volunteers with MIN Voices Group and JustRight Scotland. She also serves as a trustee of Asylum Matters, contributing to work supporting people seeking asylum across the UK.

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Carole Erskine is Head of Policy and Campaigns for Pregnant Then Screwed (Scotland). She leads work addressing the 'motherhood penalty' in employment and pay. Before this, she spent over 15 years as a TV reporter and broadcast journalist in Scotland and London, and later worked in research, events and communications, including with the John Smith Centre at the University of Glasgow.

Grieve, Lucy

Lucy Grieve is an award-winning reproductive rights campaigner. In 2020, she co-founded Back Off Scotland, which successfully campaigned for safe access zones around abortion clinics, implemented in 2024. She now focuses on improving access to abortion care and broader law reform. She works as Policy and Engagement Manager at the British Pregnancy Advisory Service and has been recognised in BBC Scotland's The Women Who Changed Modern Scotland and the Young Women's Movement's '30 under 30'.

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Toni Groundwater is the Director of Policy and Influencing for Families Outside and has over 18 years' experience in the charity sector. Her work spans criminal justice, health and inequalities affecting women. She has worked in leadership roles at See Me Scotland and chaired a Scottish Government lived experience panel. She is committed to justice reform and supporting families affected by imprisonment.

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Dr Kizanne James-McCarthy is a physician, development professional and reproductive health advocate with over 20 years'

experience across Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the UK. She has led SRHR campaigns and community development programmes and is a World Contraception Day Ambassador and '120 Under 40' Global Family Planning Champion. She has completed postgraduate studies across multiple institutions and has been published widely, including as a TEDx UK speaker.

Joseph, Sigi

Dr Sigi Joseph is a GP partner in Edinburgh with over 20 years' experience in Scottish general practice. Alongside her clinical work, she has worked with NHS Education for Scotland for over 17 years, developing and delivering educational programmes and training more than 1,000 future GPs. She is Clinical Lead for Leadership for Integration at RCGP Scotland and has contributed to national work-force and leadership initiatives. Dr Joseph was Primary Care Lead for the Scottish Government's Women's Health Plan and serves on the UK Government's Menopause Taskforce. She co-founded The Doctor Explains, promoting accessible, evidence-based health education.

Koleoso, Muminah

Muminah Koleoso is a Yoruba Nigerian British Muslim writer, journalist and content creator. A graduate of the University of Edinburgh, she uses storytelling to amplify the voices of Black and Muslim women. She has written for publications including *Black Ballad* and *The Scotsman*, and performs poetry across the UK. She is founder and host of the Sister Station podcast and has received multiple awards, including the Young Scot Award for Culture & Entertainment.

Lightbody, Ruth

Dr Ruth Lightbody is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Glasgow

Caledonian University and a research leader at the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU). Her research focuses on deliberative democracy and community engagement to address social inequalities. She has highlighted women's contributions to policymaking and has led projects funded by the British Academy, the Scottish Government and the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Miss M

Miss M campaigned successfully to abolish Scotland's 'not proven' verdict. Following her own experience of sexual violence, she pursued a civil case and later launched the #EndNotProven campaign with Rape Crisis Scotland. Her advocacy led to legislation passed in 2025 to remove the verdict from Scots law, effective from 2026.

Murphy, Catherine

Catherine Murphy is the Executive Director of Engender. She has spent over 20 years as an activist and leader in the NGO sector in the UK and internationally, focusing on addressing inequalities experienced by women and marginalised communities. Her work has spanned the feminist, human rights, and HIV movements, where she has collaborated closely with groups facing deep systemic injustice, stigmatisation and socio-economic exclusion, to secure policy and legislative change.

Okolo, Isioma

Dr Isioma Okolo is a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, Harvard-trained global health researcher, writer and speaker. Her work sits at the intersection of women's health, medical careers, leadership and health equity, with a focus on addressing inequalities within healthcare systems. With over 15 years' experience across clinical care, research, education and public health, she works with

individuals, communities and organisations to improve health outcomes and support clinicians. She has worked internationally across Africa, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East, and is committed to advancing equitable, evidence-based and patient-centred care.

O'Hagan, Angela

Angela O'Hagan has been a gender equality and gender budgeting advocate for 25 years and she is a founding member of the Scottish Women's Budget Group. She has worked across research and policy, including as Depute Director of the WISE Centre for Economic Justice at Glasgow Caledonian University, and is active in international feminist networks.

O'Shea, Helen

Dr Helen O'Shea is a Senior Lecturer in History at the Open University in Scotland. Her research spans modern Irish, British and imperial history, including women's workplace struggles. She has contributed to BBC Open University productions, and her work has been funded by major research councils. She is also interested in higher education policy, particularly access and support for under-represented learners.

Sheridan, Sara

Sara Sheridan is an award-winning writer of more than 20 books of historical fiction and non-fiction. Her work explores connections between past and present, often focusing on women's history. Her novel *The Fair Botanists* (2022) was named Waterstones Scottish Book of the Year. Her 1950s mystery series has been widely recognised, and her recent work continues to explore Scottish history through women's lives.

Snell, Jenni

Jenni Snell is Chief Executive Officer of The Young Women's Movement, Scotland's national organisation for young women's leadership and rights. She took up the role in August 2022, having previously participated in the organisation's Young Women Lead programme and served on its advisory panel. Before becoming CEO, she was a Senior Development Officer at YouthLink Scotland. Jenni leads major initiatives, including the annual '30 Under 30' list celebrating young women across Scotland. She is a prominent advocate on issues such as online misogyny, the cost of living and feminist leadership.

Swan-Nelson, Katie

Katie Swan-Nelson works on climate and development policy at United Nations Trade and Development. She was appointed a Commissioner on the Scottish Government's Just Transition Commission in 2022. She has worked in academia and civil society, including with Oxfam, ActionAid and Boston University, and was previously Convenor of the Scottish Women's Budget Group.

Williams, Lynn

Lynn Williams is an unpaid carer and campaigner who works in the charity sector. She cared for her husband, Derek, until his death in 2022. She continues to support family members and remains engaged in politics and policymaking.

Wright, Steph

Steph Wright has a background spanning astrophysics, genomics, media and the third sector. She is a leader in ethical and inclusive AI and contributed to Scotland's national AI strategy. She is

co-founder and Director of Our AI Collective. She has been recognised amongst the 100 Brilliant Women in AI Ethics and Top 10 Women in Tech in Scotland and received the DatalQ Award for Data & AI for Good Champion.

Yaqoob, Talat

Talat Yaqoob FRSE is an award-winning campaigner, writer and consultant working on women's rights, anti-racism and intersectionality. She co-founded Women 50:50 and founded Pass the Mic. She has held leadership roles in equality organisations and served as co-chair of the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls. She is a frequent media commentator.

INTRODUCTION

Building a feminist nation: Scotland in the era of polycrisis

A ROLLBACK OF RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR

Across the world, rights that once seemed secure are being rolled back at an alarming pace. Hard-won gains in gender equality, bodily autonomy, democratic participation, and social justice are under renewed assault. The rise of authoritarian governments, the emboldening of anti-rights movements and ever-widening economic inequalities have combined to create a moment of profound uncertainty for women and girls everywhere.

Scotland is not insulated from these global dynamics. But it is uniquely placed – historically, politically, and culturally – to offer a different path. This book begins from a place of recognising that tension – a recognition of the dangers surrounding us, and an insistence on the possibility of something better. Its central proposition is simple but urgent: Scotland has both the opportunity and the responsibility to chart a progressive future for women and girls – a future rooted in justice, care, equity and human rights. But that future will not emerge automatically. It requires deliberate design, political courage and the mobilisation of voices that have too often been marginalised.

Over the last decade, the global political climate has shifted dramatically. Countries long considered stable democracies have

seen growing attacks on reproductive rights, restrictions on protest, cuts to social protections and the mainstreaming of misogynistic rhetoric. Movements that target women, migrants, racialised communities, LGBTQIA+ people, disabled people and other marginalised groups have gained power by positioning equality itself as a threat (we have used the word ‘women’ throughout the text, but we view issues from a gender and intersectional perspective, which are inclusive of gender non-binary, trans and gender non-conforming people). The rise of digital hate, the constant evolution of technology-facilitated harms and gendered disinformation campaigns have intensified this hostility, making public life more dangerous for those who advocate for inclusion and justice.

These developments matter in Scotland not just because of their immediate consequences, but because they reveal a broader pattern – rights are fragile when they rely on the goodwill of institutions rather than deep structural commitments. A feminist nation cannot depend on temporary political alignment or symbolic gestures. It must be built on durable foundations – legislative, economic, social, and cultural – that can withstand political change and resist backlash.

THE POLYCRISIS ERA

Scotland is currently experiencing an era of *polycrisis* – where major challenges overlap and intensify one another. Rather than emerging in isolation, issues such as the rising cost of living, pressure on public services, climate-related disruptions, widening inequalities and political uncertainty intersect in ways that make them harder – or impossible – to tackle individually.

This compounding of crises exposes the limits of existing systems and highlights long-standing gaps in policy and practice. For women in Scotland and those who face additional barriers linked to race, class, disability or immigration status in particular, the polycrisis effects are pronounced. These combined pressures shape everyday realities: access to care, participation in work and community life,

financial security, personal safety, access to justice and the enjoyment of fundamental rights.

Understanding that Scotland is experiencing an era of polycrisis helps make sense of the complexity of these experiences, and of each of the perspectives offered in this book. It also reinforces why responses must be connected, thoughtful and rooted in an awareness of how inequalities often reinforce one another.

That said, this book does not seek to replicate a sense of crisis, although it recognises the severity of the moment. We recognise that there is excellent work already published that explores issues affecting women in Scotland. Some of this work has subtly influenced the topics discussed in this book. For instance, Gregor Gall's *A New Scotland: Building an Equal, Fair and Equitable Society* (2022) explores progressive politics; Engender have published much valuable work on gender audits, and human rights monitoring; and Jenny Morrison and Cat Boyd's *Scottish Independence: A Feminist Response* (2014) offers a feminist blueprint for an equitable Scotland.

These are not standalone or isolated offerings and sit within a body of literature that calls attention to gender or feminist issues affecting women, and women in Scotland. We recognise that our volume cannot exist in a vacuum nor in isolation and is part of a wider discourse on feminist issues. However, this volume does not try to cover or summarise previous work, debates or disagreements on the issues raised in it. Instead, this volume argues that crises can sharpen our understanding of what is at stake and clarify the need for transformative action at a critical juncture. If the global picture suggests regression, Scotland has an opportunity to demonstrate how progress can still be made – which is why it should!

This edited collection brings together a diverse group of feminist thinkers, campaigners, researchers, community leaders, organisers and practitioners to explore how Scotland might reimagine itself as a genuinely feminist nation and how doing so can lead to an emergence from the polycrisis era to a different future. The chapters that follow explore key areas where feminist nation-building must take place – from devolution and economic justice to violence, care, health, migration, climate, AI (artificial intelligence) and more. The

chapters gathered in this volume bring together contemporary perspectives on urgent issues – this is a book very much influenced by lived realities, and, therefore, it offers something different to that which has gone before it. This, too, is intentional.

But this introduction is not intended to be a full roadmap of the volume. Instead, it provides the societal, contextual and political framing that binds the contributions together, outlining *why* feminist nation-building is needed *now*, why Scotland is at a crossroads and why every voice – including those not captured here – is required to move forward.

SCOTLAND AT A CROSSROADS: UNMET POTENTIAL AND EXTRAORDINARY POSSIBILITY

The Scottish Parliament, still young by international standards, was founded with a commitment to social justice, equality, and democratic renewal. Devolution offered the possibility of doing things differently: redistributing power, expanding rights and embedding fairness in political decision-making.

And in many respects, Scotland has set itself apart from the direction of travel at Westminster, particularly in rhetoric and intent.

But rhetoric and reality are not the same.

Across multiple areas – from women’s health, care infrastructure and local democracy to racial justice, migration systems, climate transition and economic reform – Scotland has fallen short of its own ambitions. Implementation gaps persist. Intersectional inequalities deepen. Minoritised women continue to bear disproportionate burdens. Progressive visions have not always translated into progressive outcomes.

As recently as December 2025, the Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC) reiterated the challenging situation for human rights in Scotland, calling out, in particular, the ‘erosion’ of rights in 10 key areas. Several of these speak directly to the contributions captured in this book. The SHRC State of the Nation Report 2025 highlights:

- that access to healthcare is unavailable
- that barriers to care persist, and that there are uneven and unequal divisions of care-related labour
- that the welfare and social support systems are inadequate
- that access to justice and effective remedies are hard to realise, and barriers continue to be placed in the way.

That is not all. The SHRC also highlights that, perhaps, most damningly of all, the attainability of economic, social and cultural rights is increasingly difficult in Scotland.

The contributions in this volume echo that. As the State of the Nation Report explicitly announces, the 'State of the Nation 2025' is published at a potentially watershed moment for human rights.' We do not disagree.

And so, this volume takes seriously the idea that Scotland has not yet used the full potential of devolution – and that doing so is essential for feminist nation-building. But potential is not simply about constitutional powers; it is also about political will, collective imagination and the ability to listen to the needs and expertise of those most affected by policy decisions.

It is also about the ability to implement change in response to those needs.

SOME VOICES ARE NOT ENOUGH: FEMINIST NATION-BUILDING REQUIRES ALL OF US

One of the animating ideas of this collection is the recognition that feminist change cannot be shaped by a small group of experts, however knowledgeable or committed they may be.

A feminist nation cannot be built solely from parliamentary debates, research papers, consultation reports or policy strategies – necessary though these tools are. It must be shaped by the lived experiences of women in all their diversity: women who are

marginalised by racism, poverty, immigration status, disability or trauma; women navigating frontline services; women resisting violence; women who care, who organise, who imagine, who carry communities, who *refuse* to accept the limitations imposed upon them.

This book includes only some of those voices. It cannot represent the full spectrum of Scottish womanhood – no volume could. But it is built on the belief that partial voices can spark collective conversations, and that feminist nation-building is a process that expands only when more people are empowered to speak, contribute and demand change.

Every contributor has been invited because they illuminate one dimension of what feminist transformation in Scotland might look like. Their insights, analyses, and imaginings open doors for others to walk through. The book aims to catalyse, not conclude, a national dialogue. The contributors to this book do not offer Scotland an easy narrative of exceptionalism. Instead, they offer a challenge: to move beyond performance and towards the building of a feminist Scotland.

BUILDING A NATION OF FEMINISTS

The idea of a ‘feminist nation’ is deliberately ambitious. It extends beyond equality strategies or policy tweaks. It involves rethinking the organising principles of society: how power is distributed, whose voices matter, what labour is valued, how decisions are made and how care, justice, and dignity are understood.

A feminist nation is one where:

- i. human rights are foundational, not optional or vulnerable to political tides
- ii. economic systems recognise and redistribute care, rather than relying on women’s unpaid labour as an invisible subsidy
- iii. health, bodily autonomy and reproductive rights are treated as essential parts of gender justice
- iv. violence against women is understood as a structural, cultural and political issue – not an inevitable social reality

- v. local and national democracy empower communities, especially women whose voices have been sidelined
- vi. climate policy is designed with social justice at its core, recognising that environmental harms and transitions are deeply gendered
- vii. migration systems and racial justice approaches are grounded in humanity, dignity and intersectional understanding
- viii. digital technologies and AI are governed with the active participation of women, ensuring that future systems do not replicate historical inequalities, nor perpetuate violence and abuse

This vision requires more than policy change; it demands cultural change – a shift in how Scotland understands itself and what it values. It requires us to challenge entrenched norms around gender, power, autonomy and belonging. It also necessitates recognising that feminism cannot be an afterthought, a siloed area, or a rhetorical flourish.

Moments of uncertainty can be moments of opportunity. Scotland is at such a moment. The political landscape is shifting, constitutional debates continue to shape national identity, and questions around economic models, climate futures, migration, tax, healthcare, education, digital transformation, transport and community resilience have rarely been more pressing. Against this context, feminist perspectives are not niche and cannot operate in isolation – they are essential.

Scotland has already taken steps that signal a willingness to lead progressive domestic abuse legislation, world-leading period poverty commitments, safe access zones for reproductive healthcare, participatory democratic experiments and commitments to climate justice. Yet these successes sit alongside persistent inequalities, unmet needs and systemic failures.

The feminist nation envisioned in this book is not about celebrating what Scotland has already done. It is about envisioning how Scotland can move from intention to transformation, making a feminist nation a tangible reality.

A COLLECTIVE WORK FOR A COLLECTIVE FUTURE

Every contribution in this book highlights one part of the wider ecosystem of feminist nation-building. Some of the chapters to follow examine structural issues, whilst others focus on lived experiences. Some contributions are driven by policy analysis; others by community organising, professional insight or personal and lived experiences. These perspectives do not always align perfectly – nor should they – that is deliberate. Feminism is not a singular viewpoint – nor should it be. Instead, these perspectives without neat edges or perfect alignment, reflect a plurality of visions held together by shared commitments to justice, equality, dignity and progressive change, even where that change is incremental.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume illustrate a Scotland that is both struggling and striving; a Scotland that has achieved much but has much still to do; a Scotland where barriers persist, but where women continue to resist, create and lead. It is demonstrative that the women of Scotland stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, and who did so much to build a foundation for us. This collection is a quasi-testament to that, but it is also a call for something more.

The task of building a feminist nation cannot be delegated to academics, activists or policymakers alone. It cannot be left to evolve in a piecemeal manner. Instead, it must be taken up by communities; by practitioners; by elected officials; by institutions; by artists and educators; by carers and campaigners; by migrants and newcomers; by young people imagining their futures; by those who have been excluded from public debate; and by those willing to *challenge* the status quo.

Scotland has not (yet) lived up to its feminist promise but has the capacity to do so – *if* it chooses to listen, invest and act.

SO... HERE IS YOUR INVITATION

We offer this book as an invitation rather than a conclusion.

It invites Scotland to reconsider what it values and who it listens

to. It invites you – the reader – to confront uncomfortable truths about inequality, injustice and harm. And equally uncomfortable perspectives.

It invites policymakers to be braver and more ambitious.

It invites communities to imagine themselves as agents of national transformation.

And it invites all of us – especially those whose voices are rarely amplified – to see feminist nation-building not as an abstract project, but as a collective endeavour grounded in everyday realities and future possibilities.

The global rollback of rights makes this work urgent. Scotland's political moment makes it possible. But only together can we make it real.

This book is a beginning for this conversation. It offers challenges to the status quo of inequality and advocates for change. Some of this is substantive; some is more incremental and logical 'next steps' that have not (yet) been pursued by policymakers, irrespective of the scale of the change.

Scotland's future depends on what we all *choose* to do next.

PART I

Power, inequality and the limits of the current system

Part I of this volume asks a fundamental question: What does *power* look like in Scotland today, and *who* does it serve?

For all the optimism that accompanied devolution, the promise of a fairer, more progressive nation has yet to be realised. The creation of the Scottish Parliament was supposed to bring decision-making closer to the people, to reshape policy with greater democratic accountability, and to offer a political culture embedded in social justice. Whilst there have been important advances, the distance between political aspiration and lived reality remains stark for many women and girls.

Part I outlines the shared theme that is present across the volume: Scotland's systems – political, economic, and judicial – are still structured in ways that *fail to protect, value or empower women*, especially those who experience the compounding injustices of sexism alongside racism, xenophobia, disability discrimination, LGBT discrimination, ageism and classism. Whether we look at the economy, experiences of violence or interactions with the justice system, patterns of inequality prevail. All of this despite 25 years of devolved governance. Part I does not suggest that devolution has failed; rather, it explores the untapped potential for transformative change.

Chapter 1, which examines devolution, exposes this clearly. It asks whether devolution has lived up to its promise to address societal and systemic inequalities, particularly those affecting women. The answer, for now, is that the political system has been hesitant to

stretch itself. Laws may be progressive on paper, but policy intentions repeatedly falter at the point of implementation. Women, living at the intersection of oppression, particularly those facing racism, xenophobia, poverty or disability discrimination, remain disproportionately failed by the institutions meant to uphold their rights. If Scotland wants to be genuinely transformative, it must be brave enough to use every lever at its disposal, treating equality not as an ideal but as an operational priority that is planned, budgeted for and delivered.

Chapter 2 changes focus and moves from government to the economy – the structural engine of inequality. The pandemic made visible what feminist economists have long argued: women's paid and unpaid labour is the invisible infrastructure propping up society. Yet despite this, Scotland has not taken the radical steps needed to reshape its economic model. Poverty continues to affect women at significantly higher rates, driven by low pay, insecure work, caring responsibilities and the cumulative effects of discrimination. Without embedding intersectional gender analysis in the heart of economic policy – in budgets, local decision-making and national planning – inequality will not simply persist; it will deepen.

Alongside economic injustice sits the pervasive, everyday reality of violence against women. Chapter 3, which looks at violence, underscores a painful truth about the way women experience violence in all its forms. Violence is not an aberration but a structural outcome of gender inequality. From domestic abuse to street harassment, economic control to digital violations (explored in Part III of this book), women in Scotland continue to navigate threats that shape their daily lives. The country has adopted strong strategic commitments through frameworks such as 'Equally Safe', but implementation gaps, resourcing pressures and cultural norms continue to undermine progress. Violence is a barometer of gender inequality, and Scotland's current levels reveal how far the nation still must go to deliver safety and dignity for all women. Nowhere is this clearer than with the barriers to justice imposed by the failures of the Scottish criminal justice system – explored through lived experience in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 explores how protective structures sometimes end up harming women instead. Women's experiences within Scotland's

justice system – particularly those who have been incarcerated – reveal how trauma, poverty, violence and inequality compound over lifetimes. Many women in custody are not there because of inherent criminality but because of unmet needs, untreated trauma, disrupted education, unstable housing and repeated failures of care. The chapter calls attention to the necessity of trauma-informed approaches, alternatives to incarceration and justice pathways that recognise the complex contexts of women's lives.

Taken together, the chapters in Part I expose the foundational dynamics that shape women's experiences in Scotland: who has power, how it is exercised, who benefits and who is harmed.

The message is clear: Scotland has the capacity to transform itself – not through symbolic commitments but through structural action. Structural action in itself does not need to be significant – but it can still be substantive, and there is strength in that. Devolution provides opportunity; feminist analysis provides direction. What remains is the political courage to bring them together.

CHAPTER 1

The unmet potential of devolution

Talat Yaqoob and Angela O'Hagan

- **Devolution has delivered progress but fallen short of its transformative promise for marginalised women and girls, whose lives remain shaped by fragmented policy-making and limited feminist ambition.**
- **Systemic inequality persists because economic, social and cultural rights – particularly for women facing poverty, racism, disability and migration barriers – are not centred, resourced or coherently implemented across government.**
- **Without deeper local empowerment, stronger accountability, and bold intersectional governance, Scotland risks repeating cycles of rhetoric over action and missing the potential of devolution to create lasting justice for women and girls.**

INTRODUCTION

In the 25 years of the Scottish Parliament and different colours of Government, we have witnessed its ability to create societal change; the smoking ban, same-sex marriage and domestic abuse policy, being just three examples where Scotland led and the rest of the

UK followed. On the creation of the parliament, Donald Dewar's opening remarks included 'a Scottish Parliament. Not an end, a means to greater ends' (Scottish Parliament, 1999). But the question must be asked: after 25 years, is the Scottish Parliament delivering the means to greater ends for marginalised women and girls?

Women who are furthest away from policymaking but feel the worst of it; women of colour, migrant women, disabled women, single-parent women, lesbian, bisexual and trans women, and those living in increasing levels of poverty, are not seeing the transformative change that was promised on the delivery of devolution.

Whilst significant work by campaigners, grassroots groups, and women's organisations has all pushed for change across policy, what devolution has not delivered is coherence in the implementation of policy at the point where it impacts women and girls' lives. Change has remained piecemeal and surface-level rather than transformational.

The current state of play in Scotland reveals the same multi-crisis of failed economic models, social isolation and climate change we see across the world, with the addition of a crisis caused by a lack of feminist and progressive ambition and accountability.

GENDER EQUALITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY AS A CENTRAL FOCUS

Let's take child poverty as an example. Over recent years, it has been labelled as the central focus within the Government. There are statutory targets, but as anti-poverty organisations have pointed out, it is unlikely Scotland will meet its own target for 2030 of less than 10 per cent of children being in relative poverty. A strategy to tackle this exists (Scottish Government, 2011), but, surprisingly, women's equality does not feature as heavily as one might expect, despite overwhelming evidence illustrating that child poverty and women's poverty are interconnected (Engender, 2023). The lack of action on this interconnectedness is part of what is preventing transformative change.

Economic and social justice for all women must be a central focus and method of governing. But this central focus requires resourcing,

skills, prioritisation, and overhauling of the Government culture. It requires a systemic change and an intersectional approach that is unapologetic about wanting to improve the lives of those living in poverty and inequality. Until and unless that happens, economic and social justice for women will remain at the periphery of policymaking in Scotland, despite countless 'mainstreaming' strategies and piecemeal programmes from government and against the consistent advocacy of feminist organisations such as the Scottish Women's Budget Group and others.

The necessary coherence and cross-government way of working is surely achievable in a nation the size of Scotland?

TESTING DEVOLUTION TO ITS LIMITS

Devolution, being a means to a greater end, is for some interpreted as part of the constitutional debate, either as devolving more powers to the Scottish Parliament or as part of an independent Scotland. Scottish politics and, as a consequence, its policymaking, have been trapped in this debate, particularly since the 2014 referendum. This has resulted in a further dilution or even loss of importance of utilising and testing to the maximum the powers we have now to improve the lives of marginalised women and girls today. Any government in Scotland must see it as their mission to tackle deep systemic inequality, and as such, see the powers that Scotland has, though limited, as a route to deliver this. Of course, significant policy areas such as employment law, immigration and some areas of tax and social security, remain reserved and act as a barrier particularly when the Government of Westminster and Holyrood do not share this vision, but the devolved powers of Scotland should be utilised to their fullest extent to secure the necessary steps to change, show-case what can be achieved and what difference further powers would make.

The cruelty of exclusion and poverty does not end at an arbitrary policy border and nor is it relieved by warm words.

An example of this is the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) immigration policy (see for example, UK Parliament, 2025). Though

created as early as 1980, successive governments have expanded the number of areas of public service delivery which cannot be accessed by those with this visa condition. Currently, this includes denial of access to social security, homelessness support and government-subsidised childcare. Women migrants are more likely to be under NRPF conditions via spousal visas (Women's Budget Group, 2020). Women living under such visa conditions are economically dependent on their partners and at significant risk of facing destitution if the relationship ends. As such, these women may be unable to leave abusive relationships as a consequence of their financial dependence in the absence of recourse to independent financial means, however limited. Whilst access to some support schemes exists, it is limited and often difficult to obtain.

In Scotland, there has been no shortage of welcome rhetoric on the discrimination and damage caused by the no recourse to public funds policy. The 'ending destitution strategy' provided some piecemeal interventions across existing areas of work to support those at risk of homelessness and on NRPF visas; however, this strategy ended in 2024 and has not currently been replaced or an alternative introduced. As an opportunity to showcase the power of devolution, mitigating the no recourse to public funds policy as far as possible, provides a clear example of how Scotland could embed a vision to tackle systemic inequality across all areas of devolved policy, but this opportunity has not been taken. Women who are coerced into remaining in abusive relationships as a consequence of hostile environment immigration policies surely deserve us at least attempting to push devolution to its very limits.

The economic, social and cultural rights of women and girls are systemically undermined in multiple ways (Scottish Human Rights Commission, 2025). From the national 'housing emergency' and poor availability and adequacy of public housing to the squeezes on household income from exorbitant childcare costs, which have not been sufficiently mitigated through childcare funding, or the persistence of the gender pay gap and the deterioration of pay and conditions in paid work. Unpaid care continues to support the economy and the functioning of public services and private business, yet remains persistently ignored in economic strategy and policy in

Scotland, despite the weight of evidence presented to government and care provider organisations highlighting the deep-rooted and complex crisis of care provision. Disabled women are amongst those most marginalised and find their incomes absorbed by the additional costs of disability and their distance from paid work and the dignity of basic income thresholds. Scottish Gypsy Traveller women are relegated to accommodation that is culturally inappropriate and of the poorest quality, resulting in local authorities being challenged on their use of funds and the character of their relationships with this community (Scottish Housing Regulator, 2024).

The rights of women and girls to economic equality have been further undermined by the slow and limited progress to bring international human rights standards into law in Scotland.

After years of promises and participation by many civil society organisations in a range of processes, in 2024, the Scottish Government stepped back from rights realisation and further delayed incorporation of economic, social and cultural rights, leaving a gaping accountability gap. Further rounds of cuts to third sector and civil society organisations will undermine the capacity for advocacy for rights, as well as creating significant instability amongst service providers and organisations providing community-based support.

Our small-scale, associative disposition and traditions of community-led change hold great potential for what has been a vibrant civil society sector for women's rights and more generally. Precarious funding, burdensome processes, and poor absorption of gendered analysis and an understanding of women's lived experience and its diversity all contribute to opportunities lost for women and girls. Unless the quality of policymaking and commitments to secure implementation are addressed, future governments will continue to under-deliver despite the individual commitment of some politicians and the analysis and advocacy from women's organisations.

DEVOLUTION AND CENTRALISATION

Whilst devolution reached Holyrood, it has not reached the 32 local authorities across Scotland, and many would argue that since

devolution, there has been a centralisation of power (IPPO, 2024). Whilst the Scottish Government makes national policy decisions and sets budgets, the delivery is largely in the hands of local authorities, all of which are in financially precarious situations. Where discussions with the public should be had on investment, local councils instead consult on where the most effective cuts can be made. As a consequence, we have seen local community centres and libraries close, we have social care delivery unable to meet the needs of the most vulnerable or pay those working within it adequately, we have limited or disappearing local access to support services, including in other areas of stated priority such as prevention of violence against women and girls and provision of frontline services. All of this has a disproportionate impact on marginalised women, who are most likely to be in need of these spaces and services. Whilst devolution boasted of decisions being taken closer to the people of Scotland, this proximity cannot be felt by women and girls as their points of community and collectivism disappear.

Autonomy and adequate resourcing of local authorities are essential to the implementation of wide-ranging policies promised by the Scottish Government, and rubber-stamped by the parliament. But that promise has been all but abandoned and even given a name of its own: 'the implementation gap'.

Rather than further centralisation, the creation of the Scottish Parliament could have and should have been a moment where devolution continued down to local communities, where marginalised women and girls were not left simply to feel the consequences of policy, but were able to design policy, demand change and be heard.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN DEVOLUTION

The Scottish Parliament is young enough to change. It does not need to follow in the footsteps of Westminster or further embed archaic methods of working by cementing its own path dependencies. Instead, now is the time to pursue reform of how decision-making is held to account and scrutinised through a human-rights and intersectional lens. From the ways in which Scottish Parliament

committees work, to how the public is consulted and engaged, Scotland can, and must, radically improve who gets to hold power to account and how they do it, as multiple academic and civil society blueprints have attested, including in this book. Policies, strategies and legislation are not being scrutinised with the rigour and intensity that is desperately needed, and they are rarely scrutinised to determine whether they are fit for purpose for those most marginalised.

The Scottish Government is a member of the global Open Government Partnership, the purpose of which is to promote transparent, accountable, inclusive and participatory governing. The first action plan for OPG by the Scottish Government was produced in 2016 (Scottish Government, 2016), but this form of governing is yet to be realised. It requires both the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament to revolutionise how it designs, scrutinises and evaluates policy and legislation, and crucially, how they do so with gender equality and intersectionality at its core.

CONCLUSION

Devolution came with ambition and hope, and whilst there are multiple examples of how devolution has changed Scotland for the better, we still have far to go to meet the ambitions and hopes of marginalised women and girls. The most significant unmet potential of devolution is the continued invisibility of the women and girls who remain the furthest from power, opportunity and wealth. We cannot afford for this to continue. We are living in a time of multiple crises, which compound and worsen outcomes for women and girls. The response to this cannot continue to be piecemeal delivery that is heavier on rhetoric than it is action. Instead, we must see a focus on tackling the foundational and systemic inequalities that cause the consequences of poverty and harm experienced by women and girls. Policymaking and politics remain caught in a cycle of reacting to consequences rather than responding to the causes of these harms. Tackling systemic problems in how our economy, democracy and infrastructure work – or currently fail to – for women and girls must be the impetus with which Scotland moves forward.

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CHAPTER 2

Poverty and the economy

Catherine Murphy

- **Successive crises have exposed the centrality of women's paid and unpaid labour to Scotland's economic and social infrastructure, yet this work remains systematically undervalued and underpaid.**
- **Austerity, regressive welfare reform and structurally biased economic models have entrenched deep economic injustice, hitting single mothers, marginalised women and disabled women hardest.**
- **Scotland cannot achieve genuine renewal without abandoning tokenistic equality measures and embedding an intersectional, gendered economic strategy that recognises care, tackles structural bias and redistributes power and resources.**

INTRODUCTION

The most critical advancements in women's equality have followed crises that exposed the scale of women's contribution to society's social and economic wellbeing. This was evident in the post-war period, where women's roles in factories and reconstruction efforts bolstered the case for women's suffrage and contributed to the

expansion of women's labour market and trade union participation and advanced women's rights.

For the current generation, the Covid-19 pandemic provided an analogous moment of clarity on women's paid and unpaid work and their role in upholding vital social and economic infrastructure. During the pandemic, women accounted for 79 per cent of frontline workers, many from Black or minority ethnic communities, across sectors including health, social care, education and retail (Close the Gap, 2021). The scale and importance of women's unpaid caring and household labour also became acutely apparent as the demands of home-schooling and domestic work and the vulnerability of older and disabled family members increased. In the face of extreme pressure, women, particularly minoritised women, played an outsized role in sustaining the state's functions and providing for communities.

The deep irony is that outside of these periods of emergency, much of this paid and unpaid work is still widely considered low-status, low-value 'women's work'. For many women working in these essential sectors, employment is characterised by low pay, lack of flexibility and poor terms and conditions. Despite historical advances, we are still far from ensuring that all women's paid and unpaid work is sufficiently valued or compensated.

As the immediate threat to public health subsided in late 2020, those working in equality and social justice began to ask whether the post-pandemic period could generate a similar transformative moment comparable to the post-war era. In Scotland, a Social Renewal Advisory Board outlined ambitious recommendations to fix our ailing social and economic systems, posing the question: 'If not now, when?' (Scottish Government, 2021). For women living and working at the margins, action couldn't come quickly enough.

ECONOMIC REGRESSION AND THE FINANCIAL DECIMATION OF WOMEN

The Covid-19 pandemic arrived at the end of a decade shaped by devastating regression in the economic security of many women in the UK. A crisis that began with the financial crash of 2008, caused

partly by excessive risk-taking in the male-dominated banking sector, one described at the time by the chairman of the Financial Services Authority as bloated and largely 'socially useless' (Inman, 2009), segued into a government austerity agenda of ruthlessly deep cuts to public services and the social safety net.

As most primary carers, part-time workers, and secondary earners, women are more likely to be employed in the public sector, to use public services, and depend on social security. The impact of austerity on women was severe. An estimated 59 per cent of the net 'savings' from social security payments and public services between 2010 and 2020 came from women's incomes (Women's Budget Group, 2019).

Policies, including the benefit cap and the two-child limit, have heaped pressure on women and their families. By 2027, the most economically marginalised women in the UK are projected to have endured a 21 per cent reduction in living standards since 2010, with single mothers, Black and Asian, and disabled women most severely impacted (Women's Budget Group, 2024). Speaking in 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur for Extreme Poverty described Universal Credit as a system in which 'If you got a group of misogynists together in a room and said: "how can we make a system that works for men but not women?" they wouldn't have come up with too many other ideas than what's in place' (Ward, 2018).

DEEP-ROOTED ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

The successive crises of the last 16 years have thrown the deep economic injustice that women, particularly marginalised and minoritised women, face into stark relief, and this has become more pronounced as cost-of-living pressures have spiralled. The Scottish Government has attempted to mitigate some of these harms, tackling alarming child poverty rates through measures such as the Scottish Child Payment. In 2020–23, just under a quarter of children in Scotland were living in relative poverty, rising to a staggering 48 per cent amongst children from ethnic minority communities. More than two-thirds of children in poverty live in working households, and 60 per cent of workers earning below the Real Living Wage are

women (Scottish Parliament, 2020). Women, especially Black and minority ethnic women, are overrepresented in lower-paid sectors and precarious employment. Despite this, the role that women's economic situation plays in underpinning child poverty is still poorly recognised in policy design. This is aggravated further by significant data gaps that obscure the full picture of how women, and minoritised women in particular, act as 'shock absorbers' of poverty.

UNDERLYING INEQUALITIES AS A POLICY FOCUS

The Scottish Government has introduced several initiatives to improve understanding of how underlying inequalities need to be considered in policy design. The National Advisory Council on Women and Girls has worked to unpack gaps in government thinking, improve policy and track outcomes. Such projects have provided welcome new levers for securing some accountability. However, they remain marginal within the overarching framework of how government shapes policy and makes spending decisions. The National Performance Framework, the primary mechanism shaping national policy, contains no specific outcome on gender equality, and most of its indicators lack gender or other equality markers. Women account for 51 per cent of the population, and their experiences should be taken into account in all government decision-making. Relying on relatively small-scale initiatives to secure the necessary level of transformation is unrealistic at best and tokenistic at worst.

Perhaps the starkest omission in the government's response to deepening inequality and poverty is in economic policy. Despite its vast potential to improve women's situation and address poverty, we have yet to see an intersectional, gendered approach to economic development in Scotland. The current National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) relies almost entirely on an economic model and definition of growth that obscures women's contribution to the economy and upholds biased systems that disproportionately benefit men.

Women's unpaid care and domestic work prop up the economy in Scotland, contributing £10.8 billion annually. However, it is not

recognised within Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the measure the government considers to be the ultimate indicator of growth.

The economic model employed by the Scottish Government demonstrates deep bias in how it prioritises investment in areas of the economy led by women and men. Investment in physical infrastructure – roads, bridges, prisons – is considered capital spending: investment that brings economic *returns*. Yet spending on social care infrastructure is considered only as a cost to the state. This skews investment towards male-dominated spheres, meaning that women are actively disadvantaged by current economic policy. It also frames many women as passive recipients of growth – rather than as engines of the economy.

Increasingly, evidence is demonstrating that investment in health, child and social care can deliver more GDP growth through job creation and broader impacts than investment in physical infrastructure (Close the Gap, 2020). Women are four times more likely to leave employment because of multiple caring responsibilities. Reducing the burden of unpaid work through investment in care opens up opportunities for women, increasing tax returns and reducing pressure on social security.

The care economy is also almost entirely missing from the national economic strategy, despite the formal care sector contributing around £3.9 billion annually to Scotland's economic output, accounting for 3.2 per cent of the economy overall and in the context of an ageing population.

CONCLUSION

Tracking so closely to such biased and flawed economic orthodoxies is becoming rapidly unsustainable. Political leaders urgently need to evaluate how our economy works for women, specifically marginalised and minoritised women and how current strategies are undermining the fabric of our communities and country. The time for tokenistic gestures on women's economic equality is long gone. In an age of increasing extremism, policy approaches that give the external impression of prioritising women but represent little to no

material change can no longer be tolerated. It is time for the next generation of leaders in Scotland to look to the examples set in the post-war period, when innovation and political daring brought about change that few had previously thought possible.

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CHAPTER 3

It's time to create a criminal justice system capable of giving justice to women in Scotland

Miss M and Sandy Brindley

- **Scotland's approach to prosecuting rape has long reflected wider gendered power imbalances, with the *not proven* verdict compounding barriers to justice and leaving many survivors without closure or protection.**
- **The criminal justice system's treatment of rape survivors disproportionately harms women and marginalised communities, from entrenched myths about credibility to inconsistent approaches that fail to meet the needs of victims.**
- **In recent years, survivors of sexual crime in Scotland have spoken out to reclaim their agency and power, sharing their experiences in the hope of creating a fairer and more trauma-informed justice process for those who come after them.**

INTRODUCTION

Rape is a crime which disproportionately affects women (Scottish Government, 2023a).¹ Rape has the lowest conviction rate of any crime type in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021), and survivors who go through the process regularly describe the sense of violation and injustice they are left with (Brindley, 2024; Brooks-Hay & Burman, 2019; HMIPS, 2017). Like many countries, Scotland has struggled with the response of its criminal justice system to survivors of sexual crime. Failures to provide an effective legal deterrent and access to justice have a significant impact on women.

Scotland was unique in having two acquittal verdicts: not proven and not guilty. There was no definition of not proven or any guidance given to juries as to when it should have been used. The not proven verdict was used disproportionately in rape cases, accounting for 61 per cent of acquittals in rape cases compared to 22 per cent for all crimes and offences (Scottish Government, 2023b). At the heart of the campaign to abolish the not proven verdict were the voices of survivors who have been directly affected by it. They campaigned for change, met with politicians and gave evidence to parliament.² In 2025, a major reform bill – the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act was passed by the Scottish Parliament. This Act will fundamentally alter how Scotland responds to sexual crime. Amongst other provisions, it abolishes Scotland's controversial third verdict – not proven.³

1 The definition of rape in Scotland was broadened to include male victims in the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009. In 2022–2023 2,236 rapes and attempted rapes were reported to the police, which had taken place after the introduction of the 2009 Act; of these, 94 per cent had female victims.

2 For a record of evidence given by survivors to the Criminal Justice Committee as part of the consideration of the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, see: <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/criminal-justice-committee/informal-evidence-session-6-december-2023-transcript.pdf> and <https://www.parliament.scot/api/sitecore/CustomMedia/OfficialReport?meetingId=15662>

3 The not proven verdict was abolished on the 1st January 2026.

THE END NOT PROVEN CAMPAIGN

In 2018, Miss M and Rape Crisis Scotland (RCS) launched the End Not Proven campaign (Rape Crisis Scotland, n.d.). Miss M is a rape survivor who, after receiving a not proven verdict in the criminal courts in Scotland, went on to successfully sue her rapist. Supported by the Scottish Women's Rights Centre, this was the first case of this nature for almost 100 years.

'I am Miss M. I am the woman who was raped by Stephen Coxen in 2013 and who has finally received justice after a long, complicated and difficult journey through the criminal and civil justice system. But it is not justice that motivated me to start this campaign to end the not proven verdict in Scotland, it was injustice.

Scotland is the only European nation to have a third verdict in criminal cases, "not proven". The certainty we apply to guilty and not guilty does not apply to not proven. Clouded with ambiguity, some think not proven means that the sheriff or jury believe the accused is guilty, but don't have enough evidence, and others aren't so sure. It goes without saying that this uncertainty exists amongst juries as the general population, the very people who must make a decision and uphold the law. Nevertheless, the legal implications of not proven are the same as not guilty and the accused is acquitted and innocent in the eyes of the law. In amongst the uncertainty what we know for sure is that not proven is most commonly used in cases of rape and sexual violence.

I fear – as someone who received a not proven verdict and spent three long years fighting the Scottish legal system subsequently – is that the not proven verdict means that those who are raped are unfairly left without justice and those who rape face no consequence, no sanction for their actions. What message does this send to society?

Reporting rape is never going to be easy, but I shouldn't have had to fight against the justice system in my pursuit for fairness. It didn't have to be this difficult.'

Miss M's experience resonates with that of other survivors, who have also spoken about the negative impact of receiving a not proven verdict (Munro, 2020). The End Not Proven campaign invited people with experience of this verdict to make contact through a dedicated email address to share their experiences. Survivors wrote to the campaign to speak of the devastating impact on their lives of receiving the not proven verdict. The quotes below from three of the many survivors who contacted the campaign give an insight into how it felt to receive this verdict.

'Not proven is soul destroying it leaves victims feeling let down not believed. It's a horrible feeling. . . I have sunk into depression, I've lost all my fight, I'm left broken by system that's meant to protect. I believe having a not proven verdict muddies the water, leaves the victim without answers in an already not supported court process.'

'I feel like the jury took the "easy way out" as they only deliberated for a couple hours. I am all for the not proven verdict to be dropped because I believe if that wasn't an option it would have been a guilty verdict.'

'After three years of fighting the trauma of this attack and a four day trial my cases, verdict was "not proven." It felt horrific, I have never been more let down by anything in my life. After all that pain to be told nothing will be done about it just made me regret reporting it in the first place. This is why more women don't come forward.'

The campaign was also contacted by people who had sat on juries in rape trials, who wanted to share their concerns about how this verdict had been used in the trial they sat on.

'A majority of one went with a verdict of not proven. The rest of us said guilty. No one on the jury thought he was not guilty. Not one person. The case was devastating and a swift lesson in how little survivors are believed. How easily men are excused. Again,

not one juror thought he was innocent. It was clear that it was more important to protect the perpetrator. The jury used not proven to this end. I can only imagine how awful this would have been for the survivors in the case' (Rape Crisis Scotland, n.d.).

There is considerable evidence that juries can be reluctant to convict in rape cases. Some jury members can bring false assumptions about the nature of rape and likely responses to rape, which can influence their response to evidence offered in cases (Leverick, 2020). The End Not Proven campaign made the point that, in this context, the not proven verdict gave juries who did not want to convict an 'easy out', and in doing so actively contributed to the denial of justice experienced by so many women in Scotland.

Solidarity was at the heart of the End Not Proven campaign. Notable was the support of Fidjit, the tattoo artist, who drew bespoke artwork for the campaign⁴ and raised significant funds for RCS through 'flash days', often tattooing until past 1 am to ensure everyone who had been queueing for hours was seen.

The End Not Proven campaign built on, and paid tribute to, the campaigning work by Joe and Kate Duffy, who in 1992 started a campaign to abolish the not proven verdict after the acquittal, by a not proven verdict, of Frances Auld, the man prosecuted for murdering their daughter, Amanda (McCall and Hind, 2025). Over 30 years later, the Scottish Parliament finally voted (although not unanimously) to abolish a verdict that so many people had campaigned for so long to abolish.

4 Miss M attributes the artwork Fidjit created for her as helping her remain anonymous by giving a visual image to use in coverage of her civil case, then later in the End Not Proven campaign. It was also used as a backdrop to the Scottish Government's introduction of the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025.

NEXT STEPS FOR SURVIVORS IN SCOTLAND: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

What will removing the not proven verdict mean for survivors in Scotland? The jury is out.

It is undoubtedly the right decision, and something many survivors have been calling for. The cost of its abolition is, however, high. To 'compensate' for removing the not proven verdict, the Scottish Government introduced a provision into the Act which increases the majority needed for a conviction, from eight out of 15 to 10 out of 15. Rape Crisis Scotland has issued grave warnings about the impact this might have of making it even harder to secure convictions in these cases (Rape Crisis Scotland, 2023).

Although the passing of the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform Act marks a significant milestone in reforming criminal law and procedure with respect to sexual crime, it is clear that much remains to be done. Recent research with 20 sexual offence complainers demonstrated that the level of re-traumatisation caused by complainers' engagement with the criminal justice system is intrinsically linked to their ability to meaningfully participate in the process (Brindley, 2024).

Miss M is in a unique position, having served as a witness in the criminal system without legal representation and as a party in the civil system with direct legal representation. For Miss M, the experience of having agency and control in the civil process was transformative. Consideration needs to be given as to how to improve complainers' agency and sense of control within the criminal justice process. Access to legal advice and representation could play a key part in achieving this. In Scotland, there is currently a right to legal representation where attempts are made to obtain a complainers' sensitive records, such as medical records,⁵ and the new Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform Act introduces a right to legal representation when applications are made to introduce a complainers' sexual history or character. It

5 A right to non-means-tested, state-funded legal aid in these circumstances was introduced in Scotland in WF, Petitioner (2016) CSOH 27.

is clear, however, from the evidence given to the Criminal Justice Committee by survivors that there is a desire for this to go further.⁶

For Miss M, for other survivors, and for campaigners for justice for survivors, the fight is not yet over. For Scotland, change does not always equate to progress and there is still more to be done to ensure justice for survivors.

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CHAPTER 4

Women InJustice

Toni Groundwater

- **Only 5 per cent of children remain in the family home when a mother goes to prison. Ninety-five per cent of the women in Scottish prisons reported a history of abuse. Ninety-six per cent of women supporting someone in prison, who were also caring for children, were already living in absolute poverty before the costs associated with prison.**
- **Prison is not as effective and costs the Scottish taxpayer nearly 10 times more than community measures.**
- **Imprisonment is a driver of poverty and inequality and can exacerbate existing inequalities for families who are already marginalised, especially women and children.**

INTRODUCTION

Despite a growing body of evidence highlighting that the use of imprisonment (especially short-term sentences) is ineffective and perpetuates cycles of reoffending and marginalisation, Scotland continues to imprison people at one of the highest rates in Western Europe (ICPR, 2025).

The average daily prison population in 2024–25 was 8,216, the highest recorded average on record (Scottish Government, 2024–2025). This upward trend highlights a worrying pattern, with the average daily prison population increasing by more than 10 per cent since 2022–23 (Scottish Government, 2022–2023).

Whilst the reasons for high prison numbers are complex, the evidence around the harms of overcrowding our prisons is clear, not only for people in prison but also for victims, staff, families and the wider community, making it increasingly challenging to deliver safe and effective justice, with a focus on rehabilitation. HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland warned that without a reduction in the use of imprisonment or significant investment in capacity, the current situation is unsustainable (HMIPS, 2025).

Imprisonment is not only a justice issue, but also a social determinant of health and a driver of poverty and inequality. The impacts of imprisonment can be felt deeply beyond the prison walls, especially by women and children (Nugent, 2022).

The Scottish Government's Prison Needs Assessment (Scottish Government, 2022) highlighted that people in prison are more likely to be experiencing poverty, mental health issues, substance misuse issues and childhood trauma compared with those in the community.

Arguably, prison is overused as a response to problems it cannot solve, perpetuating cycles of offending and inequalities. The Scottish Government (2025b) noted that delivering punitive measures without rehabilitative support may increase the likelihood of re-offending. It also noted, '...the most effective responses to offending typically keep people in their communities and address their underlying criminogenic needs.' Short-term prison sentences disrupt housing, employment and relationships, often pushing families into crisis whilst failing to address the underlying causes. Sustained action is required to shift the balance, where appropriate, from prison to community, to address the root causes and lessen the harms. Concerted efforts are urgently required to increase awareness and support for children and families affected by imprisonment, especially recognising and responding to the unique inequalities faced by women.

Failing to work together to create systemic solutions, with the evidence base as it is, Scotland risks creating and deepening trauma, poverty and inequalities for its most vulnerable.

WOMEN AND JUSTICE

Women experience significant harms across the justice system, as victims, perpetrators of crime and as those impacted by a family member's imprisonment. These harms are often distinct from those experienced by men and intersect with poverty and existing trauma.

In Scotland, women are disproportionately affected by crimes that inflict significant physical and psychological harm, especially forms of gender-based violence (ScotPHO, 2024). The overlap between women's experiences as both victims and perpetrators of crime is significant. The Commission on Women Offenders (2012) found that women in the justice system often have complex needs like experiencing domestic abuse, mental health problems and addiction, most of which are not addressed during imprisonment. Since then, reports and research continue to highlight the history of trauma in women in the justice system and the need for a gendered approach.

For instance, a study of women in Scottish prisons (McMillan et al, 2021) found that 95 per cent of the women reported a history of abuse and that 78 per cent had a significant head injury, with most of these injuries resulting from domestic abuse. Violent criminal behaviour was three times more likely in women with a history of significant head injury, and those women spent three times longer in prison.

The Women's Justice Leadership Panel (Scottish Government, 2023) echoed much of the Commission's report from 2012, calling for urgent action to reform Scotland's justice system through a gendered and intersectional lens. It also underlined that many women in the justice system have children who are impacted, living in poverty, and often have histories of sexual, physical and emotional abuse leading to offending behaviour.

Women who encounter the justice system are also more likely to be the sole carer for a child, only 5 per cent of whom remain in the family home when a mother goes to prison (Home Office, 2007), further highlighting the cycle of trauma and the importance of considering the wider impacts on children and their rights, if a mother is sent to prison.

Scotland has come a long way in recent years in its approach to women who offend. The number of women receiving a custodial sentence has decreased significantly in the past 10 years (Scottish Government, 2013–2014). However, in the past two years, the average number of women in prison has increased by 22 per cent, which indicates a worrying upward trend (Scottish Government, 2024–2025).

Women are also still greatly overrepresented in the remand population, with 70 per cent of women on remand not going on to receive a custodial sentence (Howard League, 2021). This raises the question of whether imprisonment could have been avoided entirely by adopting community measures earlier.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN ON THE OUTSIDE

Women and children are often overlooked in conversations relating to justice, despite facing significant impacts such as financial and emotional burdens, as well as coping with the stigma of imprisonment.

The Lord Farmer Review hailed family ties as the ‘golden thread’ in prisoner rehabilitation and the prevention of future harms (Farmer, 2017). This responsibility often falls to women to maintain these connections, with little recognition or support.

Despite only making up 4 per cent of the average daily prison population (Scottish Government, 2024–2025), imprisonment arguably affects more women than men, as they are often the ones left to face the impacts of imprisonment and care for children (Loucks, 2026).

Families Outside, a charity in Scotland that supports families affected by imprisonment, reported that most (78 per cent) of the people they support are women, typically with sons and partners in prison (Families Outside, 2024–2025). *No Easy Journey* (Families

Outside, 2024) explored the costs and barriers to visiting prisons in Scotland for families. The report found that people are placed in prisons too far away from their families, the scheme designed to support the costs of visits is failing those who need it and local travel services do not fairly and effectively service prisons (Families Outside, 2024–2025).

No Easy Journey and *Paying the Price* (Nugent, 2022) both highlight an urgent need for cross-policy responses to the issues facing families. *Paying the Price* (Nugent, 2022) unequivocally demonstrated how imprisonment creates, sustains and deepens poverty for children and families. It highlighted that the costs of supporting a family member in prison fall disproportionately on women, negatively impacting their health and wellbeing. Two-thirds of women were caring for children, and 96 per cent were living in absolute poverty, before the costs associated with prison. Many were spending more than half their monthly income on travel costs to visit and supporting the person in prison with clothing and money to make calls.

An estimated 20–27,000 children each year experience the imprisonment of a parent in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2025a). This number is likely to be far higher, as no systematic process is in place to identify children and families affected by imprisonment. The lack of accurate data means many go unrecognised and unsupported.

Imprisonment of a household member is one of the 10 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), known to have long-term impacts on a person's health and wellbeing, and exposure to this particular ACE is associated with a fivefold increase in exposure to other adverse experiences (Turney, 2018).

‘My dad read my bedtime story every night and then just one night he never came home, I didn’t know what had happened.’

‘When my dad went to prison no one asked how I felt, or what I wanted.’ (Families Outside, 2025a).

Imprisonment fractures families, and some describe it as a ‘living bereavement’ that has ruined their lives, and they will never get over it. Unsupported and often alone, many women are left to deal with

practical implications like emptying their family member's house, repaying outstanding debts and dealing with other business affairs (Families Outside, 2025b):

'I had to fathom how to stop his business he'd set up, deal with all of his affairs. How the hell do you get a car sold when you need the V5 signed, I can't just take the V5 into prison.'

Some families experience hostility that is often intended for the person in prison:

'My house was on the front page of the *Daily Record*. I had two cars firebombed, the house caught fire.'

The current policy context within which children and young people sit is largely positive and supportive, especially following the landmark move to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law. Unfortunately, this is often not reflected in their lived experiences. Decisions are made regularly without consideration of how this will impact a child. The very act of imprisonment can significantly breach a child's rights, so it is vital that agencies involved in the adult justice system and beyond work together to prevent further harm (Brookes, 2018).

The Scottish Government recognised that children affected by imprisonment are at greater risk of poverty (Scottish Government, 2024). There is an urgent need to turn awareness and positive legislation into action.

CONCLUSION

The overlapping challenges that people impacted by the justice system face require systemic solutions, including increased visibility of families. Families, especially women and children, remain largely invisible across adult justice decisions and processes, despite facing significant financial and emotional impacts.

Beyond women as perpetrators of crime, the case for a gendered

approach to justice applies also to women on the outside, supporting someone in prison and taking care of children. Improved understanding of the level of the problem in Scotland, in creating a process that better helps estimate how many children are affected by imprisonment, would be a good start.

Imprisonment is a driver of poverty and inequality and can exacerbate existing inequalities for families who are already marginalised. Any efforts to reduce poverty and trauma in Scotland must include better recognition and support for families affected by imprisonment, and a cross-policy response.

Justice reform is urgent, and we must move beyond our over-reliance on prison and follow evidence-led community justice solutions, where appropriate, to create safer communities, address the root causes of offending and prevent perpetuating cycles of trauma and inequality. Prison is less effective and costs the Scottish taxpayer nearly 10 times more than community measures (Scottish Government, 2025c).

We must turn recommendations, research, reviews and reports into meaningful action without delay.

Numerous reports in Scotland point to significant, ongoing problems in the implementation of positive, well-intended policy ambitions. For instance, *A Little Less Conversation* (OSF, 2023) highlighted issues around having too many ministers making too many new announcements: ‘...rather than finishing and delivering what’s already there.’ *Review, Recommend, and Repeat* (SHRC, 2024) examined progress on human rights recommendations for places of detention in Scotland, highlighting a worrying cycle of failure to implement them. The report concluded that there was a significant lack of action, with 83 per cent of the recommendations assessed showing little to no meaningful progress.

Women and children disproportionately face punishments in the delivery of justice, however unintended these are. Better recognition and support are required to prevent cyclical harms.

We all must challenge ourselves to look at the delivery of justice and ask, where is the justice in the current system in Scotland and for whom?

The time for action is *now*.

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PART II

Bodies, care and the everyday feminist struggle

If Part I of this volume asks you to look outward – at institutions, systems and structures of power – Part II asks us to look differently, and inwardly, to the spaces where politics meets people, where inequality becomes intimate and where the most personal elements of life are shaped by the most public forces.

In the chapters that make up Part II, the central question is not what Scotland does, but how Scotland values, perceives and responds to the realities of women's bodies and lives. Here, feminist nation-building is not an abstract project. It is felt.

Care, our physical environments, health, sexist gender norms and bodily autonomy are not peripheral issues. They are at the core of women's everyday experiences. They shape the rhythms of daily life, the distribution of labour, the stories that get told or silenced, the opportunities women can seize and the vulnerabilities they must navigate when doing so. These issues determine whose pain is believed, whose labour is invisible, whose choices are constrained and whose bodies are seen as public property. When these dimensions are overlooked, a nation cannot meaningfully claim to advance gender equality. Yet if they could be transformed, the impact could extend beyond any single policy area.

Part II begins with Chapter 5 on care, or rather the *undervaluing* of care – the most fundamental form of social infrastructure, yet still the least recognised. The story of unpaid and underpaid caring labour in Scotland is one of endurance, sacrifice and systemic neglect. Caring roles, overwhelmingly performed by women, sustain

families, communities and the economy, yet remain undervalued materially, economically, socially and politically. Carers absorb the shocks of austerity, health system gaps, social care failures and social fragmentation. Many do so at enormous personal cost: financial precarity, career sacrifice, reduced wellbeing, social isolation and loss of autonomy. This is not a natural inevitability, rather it is a political and economic choice, deeply rooted in policy interventions and decisions. The discussion of care here challenges the assumption that Scotland is a caring nation by default, arguing instead that genuine care requires investment, recognition, shared responsibility and the redistribution of power and resources.

Chapter 6 builds on this, showing that other physical barriers are prevalent. In Chapter 6, the discussions of Scotland's built environment reflect the inequitable distribution of power and resources, namely, planning traditions shaped by male norms that marginalise women's mobility, safety and care-centred travel patterns. Poor lighting, inaccessible streets, unreliable evening transport and disappearing public toilets restrict women's full participation in civic life. These barriers fall hardest on wheelchair users, pram-pushing carers and ethnic minority women, whose intersecting experiences – from broken step-free routes to racialised harassment – expose structural inequalities embedded in everyday spaces. A feminist Scotland demands design that centres dignity, agency and lived experience. Motions in Glasgow and Edinburgh to adopt feminist urbanism signal progress, but real change requires embedding co-production and intersectional evidence into planning and transport systems that still treat women as statistical afterthoughts.

These issues matter because a feminist approach recognises that when those most excluded – disabled women, carers, minority women – can move freely and safely, Scotland becomes more equal, democratic and humane for everyone. Deliberative design choices *can* be more inclusive – Chapter 6 illustrates why they should be.

Following on from explorations of the undervaluing of care and the challenges posed by the built environment, in Chapter 7 the conversation turns to the cultural forces that shape how women and girls see themselves. Gender stereotyping, objectification and well-being may appear less tangible than economic policy or care, yet

they are no less consequential. They influence confidence, aspirations, mental health and the boundaries of possibility. They shape how young women navigate school, work, relationships, technology and public space. They underpin the policing of bodies and the judgement of choices, but also how complaints about how women's bodies are viewed and handled when they are made. Exploring these societal and cultural pressures exposes how stereotypes are reproduced through media, social norms and the booming so-called 'wellness' industry. Importantly, this chapter examines how these narratives confine women whilst claiming to empower them. Challenging these forces is essential because a feminist nation is not only built on policy, but on who women are *allowed* to be.

Health, too, demands a reckoning – and it receives one in Chapter 8. For years, women's health has been sidelined within discussions about the future of Scotland's health and social care system. Pain is dismissed, symptoms are normalised, and conditions specific to women are under-researched or poorly understood. The Women's Health Plan marked a crucial step forward, but the chapter exploring healthcare argues that progress must go further. Addressing medical misogyny and misogynoir means shifting clinical cultures, resourcing services properly, listening to women's experiences and embedding gendered understanding into every layer of health policy. It requires seeing women's health not as a niche issue, but as a core component of population wellbeing. It also requires listening to women – nobody knows her body better than the woman talking about it.

Finally, Part II turns to reproductive rights in Chapter 9 – an area where regression casts a long shadow, all whilst perpetrating real harm. Reproductive justice encompasses more than abortion; it includes contraception, fertility care, miscarriage support and freedom from coercion. It is the capacity to make decisions about one's own body without fear, stigma or structural barriers. It is foundational to gender equality. Scotland has taken important steps to improve things, including the introduction of safe access zones, but reproductive autonomy remains contested, controversial and fosters hostility. Gaps persist in access, support and political prioritisation. Bodily autonomy illustrates how quickly rights can erode without vigilance and activism, and why young women's grassroots organising

has been vital in securing progress. All whilst acknowledging that more remains to be done.

Part II, as a whole, reveals a crucial truth: the feminist future Scotland needs cannot be built without transforming how the nation understands and supports women's bodies, environments, labour, choices and wellbeing. Policies matter, but so do norms, narratives and the emotional and physical landscapes in which women live. Part II reminds us *all* that gender inequality is not only written in laws or institutions – it is ingrained in daily life, in who cares and who is cared for, in who is believed, in who is visible and heard and in whose autonomy is respected.

Part II discussions invite you – the readers – to recognise the sites of feminist struggle that often go unnoticed, yet shape everything. It asks what Scotland might look like if care were valued, if physical environments were designed accessibly, if women's health were prioritised, if stereotypes lost their grip and if bodily autonomy were treated as a non-negotiable right. Above all, it challenges us to imagine a nation where women's lives are not constrained by expectation or neglect, but are supported, respected and free.

CHAPTER 5

Invisible labour, visible consequences: Scotland's care economy in crisis

Carole Erskine, Helen O'Shea and Lynn Williams

- **Scotland's economy depends on unpaid carers – predominantly women – whose invisible labour props up collapsing childcare, social care and health systems at immense personal, financial and emotional cost.**
- **The spiralling childcare crisis, gendered poverty, deteriorating health of carers and stalled policy reforms reveal a systemic refusal to value care as essential economic infrastructure.**
- **Without bold structural change – including investment, rights-based support and political leadership that centres lived experience – Scotland will deepen inequality and jeopardise its future resilience.**

INTRODUCTION

Imagine living in a country where the most essential work – the care that sustains life – is treated as an afterthought. In Scotland today, this isn't hypothetical. It's reality. Behind closed doors, women are

holding society together, often at enormous personal cost. The costs to the public purse, to our economy, are not hidden – they're there, in plain sight, in increased sickness, in people being unable to work and in poorer mental health. Unless politicians acknowledge these policy intersections, we will never progress in creating an environment that better values unpaid care and supports those who provide it.

Consider the facts:

- Around 694,000 unpaid carers in Scotland, including 27,000 young carers; 63 per cent are women (Scottish Government, 2023).
- Nearly 25 per cent of women aged 45–64 provide unpaid care, and 16 per cent of carers provide 50+ hours weekly.
- Unpaid care is worth £15.9 billion annually (Carers UK, 2024).
- Twenty-eight per cent of unpaid carers live in poverty, with 8 per cent in deep poverty; carers are 56 per cent more likely to experience poverty than non-carers (Carers UK, 2024).
- Childcare costs: full-time nursery for a two-year-old averages £235–85 per week; part-time (25 hrs) costs £124.75 weekly (daynurseries.co.uk).
- Pregnant Then Screwed findings: 83.7 per cent of mothers say childcare costs equal or exceed income; 71 per cent of mothers and 50 per cent of fathers say working doesn't make financial sense; 41 per cent of parents rely on debt or savings to pay childcare; four in 10 women cite childcare costs as a reason for terminating a pregnancy (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2024).
- Gender pension gap: Women retire with 35 per cent less pension wealth than men; average retirement income for women is £12k versus £17k for men (Strauss, 2024).

- Social care charges: Despite a 2021 pledge to abolish non-residential care charges, progress is slow; disabled people face inconsistent and rising fees, deepening poverty (Cowan and Williams, 2025).

These figures tell a story of systemic undervaluation – a story that intersects with gender, class and race. It is a story of women who are expected to absorb the failures of public policy, often at the expense of their health, income, and future security. And it is a story that is becoming more urgent as Scotland faces a polycrisis: economic instability, demographic shifts, climate emergencies and the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and austerity. This chapter explores why care remains undervalued, how women bear the brunt of this injustice and what needs to change to create a fairer, more sustainable Scotland.

THE VALUE OF CARE VERSUS THE INVISIBLE COSTS

Care – whether for children, older people or those with disabilities – is the invisible infrastructure of society. Without it, economies collapse, communities fracture and lives unravel. Yet historically, care has been treated as a private responsibility rather than a public good.

In Scotland, unpaid care is worth over £15 billion annually, according to Carers Scotland (Carers UK, 2024). This figure dwarfs many sectors of the economy, yet carers receive minimal recognition or support. Carer's Allowance, for those who qualify, is just over £80 per week – a sum that barely covers basic living costs. Childcare tells a similar story. Scotland has some of the highest childcare costs in Europe, with full-time nursery fees averaging £270 per week (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2024). For many families, returning to work after having a child is financially impossible. Pregnant Then Screwed's 2024 survey found that 83.7 per cent of parents said childcare costs were the same or more than their income.

The undervaluation of care is not accidental. It is rooted in structural gender inequality (Scottish Women's Budget Group, 2024).

Women are more likely to work part-time, earn less and take career breaks for caregiving. They are also more likely to be single parents – 95 per cent of lone parents in Scotland are women. These patterns are reinforced by policy choices that fail to treat care as an economic investment.

The consequences ripple across generations. Women who leave work to care for loved ones face long-term financial insecurity, including a gender pension gap so severe that a girl would need to start saving for retirement at age three to match a man's pension pot (Women's Budget Group, 2017).

THE GENDERED IMPACT

The burden of care falls disproportionately on women and is heavily intertwined with poverty, given that the poverty rate for carers is 50 per cent higher than for non-carers (Carers UK, 2024). Minority ethnic carers face additional barriers, including cultural stigma and a lack of culturally appropriate services. As one campaigner told the Coalition of Carers in Scotland: 'The system is broken and increasingly relies on the labour of unpaid carers. People told us they hadn't had a break for years, that they are exhausted, that their mental and physical health had been severely affected' (Coalition of Carers in Scotland, 2021).

CHILDCARE: SCOTLAND'S BREAKING POINT

Pregnant Then Screwed's 2024 State of the Nation report paints a devastating picture: childcare costs are so high that four in 10 women in Scotland who terminated a pregnancy said the cost of childcare was the primary reason (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2024). This is not just a statistic – it is a moral and economic crisis. The same survey found that 83.7 per cent of mothers say childcare costs equal or exceed their income, meaning many parents are effectively paying to work. A staggering 71 per cent of mothers and 50 per cent of fathers say it doesn't make financial sense to remain in employment.

The financial strain forces families into impossible choices: 27.8 per cent of parents report choosing between paying for childcare and buying essentials like food and heating. Nearly 41 per cent have had to rely on debt or raid savings to cover childcare bills, and 20 per cent have dipped into pensions. In cities like Aberdeen and Glasgow, over half of parents spend more than a quarter of household income on childcare, with 15 per cent spending more than half.

This crisis disproportionately affects women, especially single mothers – 95 per cent of lone parents in Scotland are women. The motherhood penalty compounds the problem: women returning to work after maternity leave face an average 32 per cent pay cut, and two in five never regain their previous status. Emotional tolls include exhaustion, identity loss and mental health struggles. Pregnant Then Screwed's advocacy highlights systemic failures: inadequate maternity pay, inflexible work arrangements and underfunded childcare infrastructure. Their petition to the Scottish Parliament calls for an independent review of childcare costs and availability, underscoring the urgent need for reform.

An example of the lived experience, provided by Pregnant Then Screwed, such as the following (names have been changed), helps humanise the picture behind the statistics. At 35, Louise was earning £34,000 a year in a mid-management role when she became pregnant. After maternity leave, she asked to return part-time. Her employer agreed – on the condition that she accept a junior role with a significant pay cut. Humiliated, Louise watched her salary shrink to early-career levels. With no family support, Louise paid for nursery care, but her wages barely covered the fees. The financial strain fractured her relationship, leaving her a single mother. Eventually, she gave up work and applied for benefits – a devastating blow after nearly two decades of employment.

Louise's experience is not unique. Childcare costs in Scotland are amongst the highest in Europe. A full-time nursery place for a two-year-old costs £270 per week (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2024). For many families, this means paying to work. Pregnant Then Screwed reports that 71 per cent of mothers and 50 per cent of fathers say it doesn't make financial sense to stay in employment.

The motherhood penalty is real. Women who take career breaks

face an average pay cut of 32 per cent when they return. Two in five women who leave managerial roles never regain their previous status. The emotional toll is immense: identity loss, exhaustion and isolation.

For single parents – 95 per cent of whom are women – the situation is even more precarious. Limited childcare options, inflexible work patterns and inadequate social security create a cycle of poverty that is hard to escape (Scottish Women’s Budget Group, 2024). Carers of children with highly complex disabilities and intensive healthcare needs are often unable to access their right to nursery placements across Scotland (Children’s Health Scotland, 2023).

Childcare is not a luxury but an essential infrastructure that supports our economy and gender equality. This is why Pregnant Then Screwed has recently worked with the New Economics Foundation to model what a better system, called Scotland’s Childcare Guarantee, could look like. A system with a universal, guaranteed core of funded hours for all children from 9 months old, and a cap of 5 per cent on what families pay above that, linked to what they actually earn. At today’s levels of childcare use, this cap would be broadly fiscally neutral – with potential net savings of around £31 million per year for the Scottish government (Pregnant Then Screwed & New Economics Foundation, 2025).

CARE FOR THE SICK, ELDERLY AND DISABLED: COMPLEX CARE WITHOUT SUPPORT

At the other end of life, women are again the default caregivers. Unpaid carers provide complex, often medical-grade care for disabled or elderly relatives. Many do so without respite, sacrificing their own health and income.

Scotland’s ageing population means rising demand for elder care, yet unpaid carers – predominantly women – shoulder this responsibility without adequate support. Carers UK’s State of Caring report reveals that nearly half of working-age carers lose £12,000 annually due to reduced hours or job loss. Over 54 per cent report deteriorating

physical health, and 28 per cent rate their mental health as bad or very bad, with 36 per cent experiencing suicidal thoughts. Providing care for sick relatives increasingly involves complex, medical-grade tasks – administering medication, managing feeding tubes, monitoring symptoms and coordinating hospital discharges – responsibilities once reserved for trained professionals. In Scotland and across the UK, unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, are expected to shoulder these duties without adequate training, respite or financial support. This shift reflects systemic gaps in health and social care provision, where overstretched services rely on family members to bridge the ‘expectation–capacity gap’ left by austerity and workforce shortages.

Carers UK’s State of Caring report highlights that 52 per cent of unpaid carers have seen their caring hours rise in the past year, with many providing over 50 hours weekly. Such intensification collides with economic strain: 49 per cent have cut back on essentials like food and heating, and one-third have resorted to debt to sustain their caring role. For women, the impact is particularly severe. Gender norms and structural inequalities mean women are more likely to assume caregiving responsibilities, often at the expense of employment. In Scotland, 59 per cent of unpaid carers are women, and one in three has left work entirely to care, whilst others reduce hours or accept lower-paid roles, eroding lifetime earnings and pension contributions. This contributes to a gender pension gap where women retire with 35 per cent less pension wealth than men (Carers UK, 2025).

The health consequences are stark. Caring for the sick is physically demanding – lifting, assisting with mobility and performing clinical tasks without professional guidance. Two in five carers report worsening physical health, and 20 per cent have sustained injuries linked to their role. Mental health outcomes are even more alarming: 74 per cent feel stressed or anxious, and nearly half experience depression, with some reporting panic attacks and chronic sleep deprivation. In Scotland, 81 per cent of female carers feel stressed or anxious, and 47 per cent report depression, figures that rise sharply amongst those struggling financially. Isolation compounds these challenges; carers often sacrifice social connections and leisure time, leaving

them vulnerable to loneliness and burnout. A 2025 review warns that unpaid carers are ‘in a mental and physical health crisis,’ with 36 per cent rating their mental health as bad or very bad, a figure that jumps to 59 per cent amongst carers in poverty (Carers UK, 2025).

Economic vulnerability and health deterioration are intertwined. Unpaid carers are 56 per cent more likely to experience poverty than non-carers, and 8 per cent live in deep poverty, forcing impossible trade-offs between essentials and care-related costs. Women, who typically begin caring earlier and for longer periods, face compounded disadvantages: reduced earnings, stalled careers and diminished financial resilience. For single mothers and minority ethnic women, the burden is even heavier, exacerbated by cultural expectations and limited access to culturally appropriate services. Geographic disparities add another layer – rural carers struggle with poor transport links and scarce respite provision, intensifying isolation and financial strain.

Policy frameworks, such as the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, acknowledge carers’ rights to assessment and support, yet implementation lags behind need. Promised reforms – abolition of non-residential care charges, improved respite access and flexible health appointments – remain slow, leaving carers to navigate fragmented systems. Reports from Carers UK and the Nuffield Trust underscore a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and reality: funding for carer breaks has fallen by 42 per cent since 2015, and local authority spending on carer services has dropped by 11 per cent, even as demand surges. Disabled people and their carers face a uniquely harsh reality. Glasgow Disability Alliance highlights the injustice of social care charging, which forces low-income families to pay for essential services. Despite a 2021 pledge to abolish non-residential care charges, progress has stalled, leaving thousands in financial hardship. Disabled households already face a ‘disability price tag’ – an extra £1,095 per month to achieve the same living standard as non-disabled households. Current charging policies compound this inequality, often requiring carers to use disability benefits intended for additional costs to pay for care. Legal challenges, such as *BB v Glasgow City Council* (2024), underscore systemic failures and the urgent need for reform. Carers often turn

down urgent medical treatment because they cannot access replacement care. They endure dehumanising assessments to prove eligibility for benefits like Adult Disability Payment (Glasgow Disability Alliance, 2024). And they live with constant anxiety about losing support due to budget cuts.

The latest Carers UK report reveals the stark costs of caring: the financial costs, the human costs, the wider opportunity costs, and the long-term costs (Carers UK, 2025). But this is not just a personal crisis. It is a public one. Scotland's health and social care system depends on unpaid carers to function. Hospital-to-home models assume family members will provide care. Without them, the system would collapse, and without urgent investment in training, respite and financial support, unpaid carers will continue to absorb the failures of public provision at immense personal cost. Their invisible labour sustains Scotland's health system – valued at £15.9 billion annually – yet remains chronically undervalued and unsupported. Addressing this crisis requires a gender-sensitive approach that recognises care as essential infrastructure, not a private burden, and delivers tangible rights, resources and respite for those who provide it.

Minority ethnic carers face additional cultural and systemic barriers, whilst many carers turn down urgent medical treatment because they cannot secure replacement care. The poverty rate amongst carers is 50 per cent higher than for non-carers, and 24 per cent provide over 50 hours of care weekly. This unpaid labour, valued at £15.9 billion annually, is the backbone of Scotland's health system – yet remains invisible and undervalued.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

The undervaluation of care is not inevitable. It is the result of choices – and it can be reversed. Here's what Scotland must do:

- Invest in affordable, high-quality childcare: treat childcare as economic infrastructure, not a private luxury. Expand funded hours and ensure provision during school holidays (Scottish Women's Budget Group, 2024).

- Reform Carer's Allowance and social security: raise payments to reflect the true cost of care. Simplify eligibility and reduce bureaucratic hurdles (Carers UK, 2024).
- Provide accessible housing and respite care: enable carers to live with dignity and maintain their own health (Coalition of Carers in Scotland, 2021).
- Promote workplace flexibility and return-to-work support: campaigns like the Open University's Mumentum show how education can help mothers re-enter the workforce.
- Embed gender-sensitive budgeting and impact assessments: every policy should consider its effect on carers and women (Scottish Women's Budget Group, 2024).
- Recognise social care as infrastructure (in addition to child-care): until care is seen as an investment in Scotland's future, progress will stall.

CONCLUSION

Scotland needs a dedicated Cabinet Minister for Social Care – someone with lived experience who can champion reform. This role, despite the overlaps, should be separated from the current combined Cabinet Ministerial portfolio of Health *and* Social Care so that it receives the focus it deserves. This minister should have authority to shape policy across health, education, housing and employment and be supported by Lived Experience Advisers. Genuine co-production must be at the heart of this approach. Carers should be in the rooms where decisions are made – not as token voices but as equal partners. We must learn from the failures of Covid-19, when life-changing decisions were made without consulting those most affected. In doing so, lessons must also be learned from the National Care Service debacle, in which the vision of a groundbreaking new care service merely led to the establishment of a non-statutory advisory board.

The 2026 Scottish Election marks a critical moment. Care must be central, and manifesto pledges need to be kept. Without bold action, Scotland risks deepening inequality and undermining its own economic resilience. Unpaid care has held society together. We exploit it at our peril. It's time to value care – not with warm words, but with structural change.

Scotland stands at a crossroads. The polycrisis – economic shocks, demographic shifts and climate stress – magnifies the urgency of valuing care. Without bold action, unpaid carers will continue to bear an unsustainable burden, deepening gender inequality and threatening social cohesion. A dedicated Cabinet Minister for Care is an essential step toward a fairer future. Invisible labour must become visible, and its value recognised in policy and practice.

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CHAPTER 6

Women, social spaces and the built environment in Scotland

Thea Chambers

- **Public space design in Scotland often fails to meet women's safety and accessibility needs by neglecting to adequately address lighting, step-free routes, affordability, winter conditions and evening transport (Scottish Government, 2024). Women string together multi-purpose journeys centred on care. Implementation of local living approaches that could considerably help, such as the 20-minute neighbourhood, remains too slow.**
- **High levels of harassment severely constrain women's use of public transport and public space. One UN Women study cited by Transport Scotland found that 71 per cent of women of all ages and 86 per cent of young women aged 18–24 experienced some form of sexual harassment in public spaces (Transport Scotland, 2023).**
- **Women feel markedly less safe after dark; staffing, lighting and reliable services are critical yet sorely lacking (Transport Scotland, 2023). Wheelchair and pram users need unobstructed, well-lit paths. Ethnic minority women face the added fear – and reality – of**

racialised harassment, which is compounded by the all-too-often absence of these provisions.

INTRODUCTION

Across Scotland's streets, buses, libraries, parks and civic halls, women's participation in social, economic and cultural life is shaped by the built environment – and by whose needs it prioritises. Scotland's planning and built environment sectors are still dominated by men, and urban design has historically centred on the needs of a male breadwinner commuting pattern. This results in insufficient lighting and inaccessible streets and public buildings, which directly restricts women's mobility and safety. Additionally, the decline of public toilets disproportionately affects disabled women and carers (the majority of whom are women), limiting their ability to access public spaces (Engender, n.d.).

Three groups in particular – ethnic minority women, women who use wheelchairs and women using prams (especially during maternity leave) – encounter layered barriers that constrain mobility, time, safety and voice. Addressing these barriers is essential to creating a liveable, care-centred Scotland (Scottish Government, 2024).

However, there are opportunities to do just this. In 2022, Glasgow City Council passed a motion to adopt a feminist approach to its city planning and design practices, a motion overlapping with a wider, renewed interest in feminist urbanism. Subsequently, a similar motion was passed by Edinburgh City Council in early 2023. Although Glasgow is now ostracised as 'the UK's First Feminist City', and whilst it could serve as an inspiring template for other Scottish cities, this claim will remain hollow – and constitute a sorely missed opportunity – unless its policies and practices on the ground *authentically* address inclusivity and co-creation at every stage. Whilst a lack of intersectional evidence limits the effectiveness of policy, this need not be the case.

As someone with lived experience of the daily challenges faced by my daughter Greta, a wheelchair user, who uses an eye gaze-controlled computer to communicate and be creative, these changes can't come quickly enough.

WOMEN WHO USE WHEELCHAIRS: STEP-FREE REALITIES, TIME AND ACCESS

Greta once made a film about cycling, her point of view and her way of seeing the world. The location she chose was the Scottish Parliament. With filmmaker Cathy Soreny, she set up her cargo bike to film what she cycled past from many viewpoints. She wanted others to see how she experiences public space, and this was both symbolically and physically a good choice. The Scottish Parliament was designed by Enric Miralles to offer a publicly accessible space where people and democracy could meet. It's hard landscaping wraps around and through and almost onto the top of the building, in a way that allows for many viewpoints too. This public external space works just as well for wheelchair users (as well as bikes and prams) as it does for walkers. This is not always the case.

For wheelchair users, such as my daughter, Scotland's social spaces are often segmented by small but decisive breaks in a 'door-to-door' journey: an uncut kerb, a broken lift, a steep ramp or inaccessible toilets (Transport Scotland, 2021). And for a long time it was the only building with a Changing Place in Edinburgh (Changing Places provide a bed with a hoist, which means that anyone can go to the toilet with dignity) so if we were doing a longer day trip, or taking part in a demo, or a school learning trip, the Scottish Parliament was where we had to come to. There was something quite important about having to go into the Parliament for an inclusive toilet, through the metal detectors and security checks; it felt quite exceptional. Now there is a Changing Place at the Johnny Walker Whisky Experience – maybe a more celebratory location! But the wider lack of suitable facilities means that disabled people make fewer train trips and continue to face specific difficulties at interchanges, limiting access to work, education, care and cultural participation (Transport Scotland, 2021).

As a family with a disabled child, we learned to think on our feet, to come up with access solutions on the ground. We weren't going to let anything stop us from being included. But this process is exhausting, on an everyday lived-experience level. And we, and families like ours, shouldn't have to do this. Sometimes we would

get to other European cities, where the built environment felt much more accessibly designed (sometimes because of the needs of bikes and cyclists, but if it works for wheels, we were happy). I often wondered if there was something in the design processes of these societies that created more inclusive spaces. As a family of architects, we visited a lot of buildings, and my heart broke every time I stayed stuck with Greta, in her wheelchair, at the bottom of a beautiful stair, designed to be enjoyed by the building user as part of the experience of moving through spaces, watching her sister dash fluidly about the spaces just as the architect had intended. The lift experience rarely matched it (except in some places where inclusive design is at the top of considerations, like the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, with its multi-coloured lift experience).

These daily experiences of barriers and physical exclusion led us to design the Ramp House, our wheelchair accessible family home. This would be one space where the everyday was led by Greta, where she had agency. It has since become so much more than this, her creative collaborative working space, and at times a gallery art house to invite people in to experience her and her sister's art. So whilst the Ramp House, which started as a wheelchair accessible family home, has now become so much more, we can see how the beginnings of inclusive design can challenge preconceptions and change viewpoints. Through exposure to different ways of living, with Greta at the centre, with agency, all those who spent time with her in this inclusive space came to see her and her possibilities differently. Her friends, when she was a child, adapted their games of hide-and-seek to include Greta, who was unable to move around independently, and by shifting the focus, gave Greta power in the game. Her therapists, who saw potential for inclusive ways of being in the space to enable Greta to feel 'able' in her own space. In the everyday life of us as a family, Greta learnt to see herself as an equal, involved, seen and heard. The articulated open plan design, with many connections, vertical and horizontal, visual and aural, meant that Greta was involved in every conversation and everyday family activity.

Nonetheless, externally, street design remains a major barrier. Best-practice guidance emphasises continuous surfaces, appropriately graded dropped kerbs, and avoidance of crossfalls (Wheels for

Wellbeing, 2023). Despite Scotland's pavement-parking ban, weak enforcement means many wheelchair users still face blocked pavements (Herald Scotland, 2025). On public transport, 'mind the gap' issues – low platforms, limited lifts – continue to restrict independent rail travel (Scottish Association for Public Transport, 2024). And whilst buses and coaches are legally required to provide ramps and wheelchair bays, the reliability of assistance and equipment is too often variable. (UK Government, 2023). Again, we know what works. Fully step-free routes between homes and destinations, strong enforcement of pavement-parking rules, investment in station accessibility and treating accessible toilets as essential infrastructure are all essential to ensure Scotland is a truly inclusive society (Harrison, 2025; Transport Scotland, 2021b).

We also need to better acknowledge that disability is a feminist issue, for as long as most of the caring work is still done by women, especially when the mental load is included. Women, from the time of maternity leave onwards, tend to be the ones pushing prams, which, with a disabled child, then becomes a heavier wheelchair. Anywhere with steps becomes a barrier, both psychologically and physically.

WOMEN WITH PRAMS: THE EVERYDAY POLITICS OF KERBS, BUS BAYS AND TOILETS

Pram users, who continue to be disproportionately women, share many spatial needs with wheelchair users – continuous pavements, dropped kerbs, step-free entrances – but face distinct bus-policy frictions. A single 'accessible space' on buses is routinely contested between wheelchairs and prams. Wheelchair users have legal priority, but insufficient space and limited service frequency routinely leave carers waiting or forced to fold buggies whilst managing infants (Lothian Buses, 2024). Campaigners argue that reductions in pram space on vehicles, without compensatory service increases, disproportionately affect low-income carers, the majority of whom are women (Change.org, 2024).

On streets, missing or inadequately designed dropped kerbs and narrow, cluttered pavements force pram users onto roadways.

Edinburgh access advocates estimate thousands of missing or inadequate kerbs (Living Streets Edinburgh, 2024). Walkability audits emphasise footway width, surface quality, junction design and natural surveillance (Living Streets, 2023).

Toilets and baby-change facilities extend the feasible radius for carers travelling with infants. Equality guidance underscores that toilet provision must support pregnancy and maternity, whilst ensuring privacy and safety (UK Government, 2022). Yet public toilets are continuing to shut down at an alarming rate. But this doesn't need to be the case. Bus procurement designed for 'care trips' (more shared space, clear priority rules, higher frequency), kerb retrofits, decluttered pavements and a national approach to accessible toilets and baby-change facilities are all both possible and long overdue (Lothian Buses, 2024; Living Streets, 2023). We can do better.

ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN: RACISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE (UN)SAFE CITY

Recent Scottish Government analysis highlights persistent inequalities experienced by ethnic minority women across services, labour markets and public life, and stresses gaps in available intersectional data (Scottish Government, 2024). Evidence from the Evidence for Equality National Survey shows that one in four ethnic minority people in Scotland have experienced a racist insult, one in 10 report unfair treatment by police, and more than a third express worry about racist harassment (Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity, 2021).

Safety data from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey suggests that only around two-thirds of minority ethnic and white women feel safe walking alone locally after dark, with small sample sizes potentially masking real differences (Scottish Government, 2024a). Even if headline figures look similar across ethnicities, the review cautions that small sample sizes can understate real differences – an important reminder that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Rape Crisis Scotland highlights additional barriers for women of colour seeking support after sexual violence, including racism and distrust of institutions (Rape Crisis Scotland, 2023).

It will hardly come as a surprise that ethnic minority women report harassment on public transport and in town centres, with concerns elevated at night and around alcohol-related venues (Transport Scotland, 2023). Yet cultural under-representation in naming, statues and programming reinforces a sense of exclusion from civic life (Scottish Affairs, 2024). One of the most frustrating things is that we know what helps. Co-produced safety measures (lighting, staff presence, reporting), anti-racism initiatives in cultural sectors and intersectional monitoring to ensure policies such as 20-minute neighbourhoods work for diverse patterns of movement (Transport Scotland, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024b).

PLANNING AND TRANSPORT SYSTEMS

More broadly, planning and transport systems systematically disadvantage women through gender-blind policy. Engender highlights that despite the highly gendered use of transport, intersectional gender analysis is routinely absent from Scotland's transport planning and management. Women are less likely to own a car, more likely to undertake unpaid care-related travel and more reliant on public transport. These omissions in planning perpetuate inequalities in access, safety, and mobility across Scotland's built environment (Engender, n.d.). In 2023, a survey conducted by RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers) of women working at ScotRail found that more than half had witnessed sexual harassment of women and girls on the railway within the past year, and that less than a quarter of women staff feel safe at work. Crucially, 98 per cent said that further extension of Driver-Only Operation would worsen safety for women and girls, emphasising systemic concerns about staffing and safety provision in rail environments (RMT, 2023).

TOWARD EQUAL CONTRIBUTION: PRIORITIES

- Enforce existing street laws: pavement-parking bans, kerb upgrades, decluttering (Herald Scotland, 2025; Living Streets Edinburgh, 2024).
- Make door-to-door journeys real: invest in station lifts, level boarding, staff training (Transport Scotland, 2021b; Scottish Association for Public Transport, 2024).
- Design buses for care: more flexible shared spaces and frequency (Lothian Buses, 2024).
- Invest in evening and winter urbanism: lighting, staffed hubs, warm third spaces (Transport Scotland, 2023).
- Treat toilets as essential infrastructure: a Scotland-wide approach to clean, well-signed, accessible toilets and baby-change – across centres, parks and interchanges – directly enlarges women’s achievable geographies (UK Government, 2022).
- Co-produce with those affected: ethnic minority women, disabled people’s organisations, carers (Scottish Government, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Social space in Scotland is shaped by seemingly ordinary details – kerbs, benches, lighting, toilets and transport reliability. Designing for those who push wheels – wheelchairs or prams – and for those who face racism or nighttime insecurity creates places that work for everyone. The civic dividends are collective: time, access and fuller participation.

Greta’s choosing to cycle around and film the Scottish Parliament building remains symbolically powerful in a purely physical sense, with everyone moving through spaces in the same way rather than being blocked by barriers at every turn. But this also crucially

connects to a much deeper psychological connection, how a lived experience of inclusion can create a society where everyone is valued equally and celebrated for their differences.

If we can't move freely, enter and circulate around buildings easily, and do so in the same way as everyone else, then we are being given the message that we are 'other' and not equal, not invited to share that space, not included in the decisions made in that place. In a small democratic country like Scotland, it is especially important that the citizens feel equal, that their voices will be heard, and that consultation has a purpose and will be used.

Moreover, addressing these barriers is not a matter of 'special pleading', but of designing a liveable, care-centred Scotland in which daily journeys are viable and dignified, not only for Greta, but for every one of us.

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CHAPTER 7

Dismantling gender norms and stereotypes

Jenni Snell and Muminah Koleoso

- **Young women feel increasingly worried about the rise of far-right movements and the rollback of women's rights worldwide.**
- **One in four young women surveyed in the 2024–25 Status of Young Women in Scotland report feel that they have not had the same educational or employment opportunities as boys or young men.**
- **Seventy-four per cent of young women report that their body image affects participation in sport. AI algorithms delivered more toxic eating disorder content (+4,343 per cent) to users with eating disorders.**

INTRODUCTION

Generations of gender stereotyping and societal expectations have caged the potential of women and girls, shaping their opportunities and treatment for too long. These harmful ideals create economic divides, limit aspirations and normalise violence against women and

girls. Whilst Scotland has taken some strides towards gender equality, entrenched gender roles shaped by centuries of societal, religious and political norms – coupled with new emerging threats – pose real harm to women today.

There has been a significant rise in toxic online spaces such as the manosphere, alongside extreme misogyny from male public figures. With this, we face the real prospect of years of progress on gender equality being reversed. The increasing levels of misogyny experienced by women and girls – and the extremism being groomed into young men and boys – are becoming both a digital and real-life crisis that Scotland must address more proactively.

Women and girls are facing a crisis fuelled by the resurgence of rigid gender stereotypes. They are frequently targeted for defying traditional roles, whilst boys are being drawn into hyper-masculine echo chambers that glorify dominance, aggression and control. Social media platforms have become breeding grounds for influencers who promote harmful ideologies, normalising the objectification of women and encouraging young men to reject empathy and emotional vulnerability. These dynamics are not isolated; they reinforce a culture where gender-based violence, inequality and radicalisation are increasingly normalised.

Without action, the future for women and girls in Scotland looks bleak. Breaking free from these constraints requires putting gender equality at the heart of policy and practice. A gender mainstreaming approach removes barriers and equips women with the tools, representation and spaces to rewrite their stories. We need commitment to bold, cross-sectoral action that challenges these norms head-on through courageous leadership, progressive policy and a collective refusal to accept the status quo. The response must focus on prevention, otherwise we risk reactive tactics coming too late to protect women and girls.

EDUCATION

Stereotypes take root early: the toys children are given, the clothes they're encouraged to wear and the media they consume all expose

girls to limiting – and at times debilitating – gender norms. Gendered expectations are reinforced in school settings, with girls regularly feeling harassed or silenced for speaking out, whilst boys who don't conform to 'alpha male' expectations face ridicule or exclusion from peers.

A report by Zero Tolerance found that 64 per cent of secondary teachers reported hearing sexist language weekly, and over a third of primary teachers witness gender stereotyping regularly (Zero Tolerance, 2023). Girls are often steered away from subjects deemed traditionally 'masculine', such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and exposed to hurtful comments about the way they look, speak and express themselves.

One in four young women surveyed in the 2024–25 Status of Young Women in Scotland (The Young Women's Movement, 2025b) report feeling they have not had the same educational or employment opportunities as boys or young men their age. Many reflected on the social and cultural expectations that still exist for girls and women, and how prevalent gender stereotypes are within educational and workplace settings across Scotland. These stereotypes don't just limit aspirations, they actively shape a society where young women feel undervalued, unsafe and unheard. Girls are forced to navigate systems that reinforce inequality, restrict self-expression and undermine their potential from an early age.

The normalisation of gender stereotypes and inequality in schools has long existed, but a new surge of extreme ideology is taking hold and exacerbating the issues facing young women. As young boys increasingly engage with online content from the manosphere – often without critical guidance – harmful narratives are beginning to seep into classroom dynamics, reinforcing misogyny and deepening gender divides. The Scottish Government's Behaviour in Scottish Schools report (Scottish Government, 2023) highlights the rise of misogynistic language, with boys as young as 10 making sexist comments that reinforce problematic gender stereotypes. This dehumanisation and objectification of women and girls often escalates into patterns of violence against them.

Tackling the rise of misogyny in schools requires work with all genders. Prevention-based gender equality programmes must be

prioritised and delivered by expert partners, and their design must involve the important perspectives of diverse young people. Encouragement and investment for girls to explore STEM and boys to pursue the arts would broaden self-expression and help dismantle gender norms before they take root.

BEAUTY STANDARDS AND BODY IMAGE

From a young age, women face immense pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards, often rooted in the male gaze. The media, social norms and digital trends, alongside pressures faced at school, all contribute to this issue. We are also witnessing an increased policing of how women look and fit into outdated and harmful perceptions of 'womanhood', with women in the LGBT+ community disproportionately affected. Rather than rejecting rigid definitions of what women should look like, women's worth is increasingly being determined by a narrow interpretation of femininity – one that prioritises appearance, passivity and conformity. We are witnessing a rise in online harassment targeting women who challenge beauty standards, speak out politically or present in ways that defy conventional gender norms.

Alarming statistics indicate how these issues affect self-perception and mental health: according to Girlguiding's Girls' Attitudes Survey, six in 10 girls aged 11 to 21 feel consumed by negative thoughts about their appearance, and many feel pressure to alter their looks both online and in real life (Girlguiding, 2024).

Body image concerns also deter young women from engaging in sport, with 74 per cent reporting that their body image affects participation (The Young Women's Movement, 2018). Some young women feel pressured to exercise for weight loss, viewing it as a chore rather than an enjoyable activity. For others, activities like weightlifting or rugby are avoided for fear of becoming 'too muscular'. This reflects broader fatphobia and narrow beauty ideals, which disproportionately harm women and girls. It also perpetuates gender stereotypes by reinforcing the notion that women's value is primarily based on their appearance rather than their abilities or interests.

Whilst we are seeing more role models challenging gender norms in sport, greater efforts are needed to reach girls before these ideas take root.

Negative body image affects women throughout life, diminishing joy in food, eroding confidence in their bodies and sometimes resulting in serious, life-altering consequences. Young women are more likely than young men to suffer from eating disorders, whilst eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychological disorder (Beat Eating Disorders, 2024). The recent surge in popularity of appetite-suppressing weight-loss drugs is arguably worsening the situation, offering an easy way to comply with toxic body image pressures, too often with minimal medical advice. Failure to address harmful beauty standards and stereotypes puts women's lives at risk.

Women from racialised and religious minorities face compounded discrimination, shaped by enduring colonial history and reinforced through contemporary media and public discourse. Black women are frequently perceived as angry or aggressive, with the 'strong Black woman' stereotype denying them vulnerability and obscuring the systemic barriers they face. Muslim women, meanwhile, are often stereotyped as oppressed, experiencing gendered Islamophobia that disregards their agency and autonomy. Fat-shaming, colourism and hypersexualisation disproportionately affect Black women and other women of colour, with advertising and media often idealising lighter skin tones and marginalising darker-skinned women. Public figures and influencers who challenge these norms frequently face criticism and abuse, particularly regarding their body shapes and appearance.

These narrow, racialised and gendered expectations undermine women's self-worth, safety and opportunities. They force women to navigate a society that increasingly punishes non-conformity with online harassment or public scrutiny. Tackling these issues requires a systemic shift: promoting inclusive and diverse representations of beauty, embedding preventative education in schools and strengthening regulation of harmful online content.

AI AND ONLINE HARMS

The digital age further amplifies stereotypes and gender norms through social media algorithms and AI. Platforms often promote narrow, Western ideals, perpetuating racism, colourism and fatphobia. Global online trends like #TradWives pressure women to conform to hyper-feminine or archetypal girl images, which are reinforced by algorithms that reward certain aesthetics. The misinformation in these accounts sets a false reality for women to aspire to.

The 2025 Young Women Lead cohort completed research and produced a Guide to AI for young women, girls and policymakers (The Young Women's Movement, 2025a). They found that AI tools enable appearance alteration, placing unrealistic beauty standards at young women's fingertips and distorting their self-perception. AI generators perpetuate bias and stereotypes through algorithms that platforms use to recommend content, often prioritising images and videos that conform to Western conventional beauty standards. The Young Women Lead research also noted a disturbing increase in eating disorder content targeting young women experiencing eating problems. Work that has been done over the past decade to counter the negative 90s body image in magazines and TV is at risk of being undone through social media and AI.

Online misogyny, fuelled by incel culture and deepfake technologies, also poses a grave threat. The Young Women's Movement's *Status of Young Women in Scotland 2024–25* survey found that 28 per cent feel 'unsafe' online. Additionally, data from Ofcom shows that 50 per cent of children aged 8–15 had seen at least one deepfake image online in a 6-month period (Ofcom, 2024). Although deepfakes fall under Scotland's revenge porn law, greater awareness of how to report them is required. Stricter repercussions are also needed for both the creation and sharing of non-consensual intimate images.

Women who defy traditional gender norms of femininity are subjected to relentless online abuse, often from anonymous users in spaces where moderation is lacking. This environment punishes authenticity and reinforces conformity. Creating safer digital spaces requires comprehensive digital literacy programmes, stricter

regulation of online harassment and accountability from tech platforms to dismantle harmful algorithms.

NEXT STEPS

We have only scratched the surface of dismantling gender norms and stereotypes. With new threats on the rise, the safety and futures of women and girls demand deeper, urgent action. Young women describe feeling increasingly worried about the rise of far-right movements and the rollback of women's rights worldwide. Many are deeply concerned about how this could affect their human rights and future in Scotland (The Young Women's Movement, 2025b). Harmful AI trends, the manosphere and incel culture are rapidly accelerating. We're only beginning to see how these are reawakening and solidifying harmful gender norms and stereotypes. A proactive response is urgently needed to avoid the looming crisis facing women and girls.

The overlapping crises women face require systemic solutions that place gender equality at the heart of policy and practice. These must be backed by a real commitment to change attitudes and behaviours towards women. Robust research reflecting and led by the diverse experiences of women is required to inform policy and system change. Healthy, inclusive beauty standards and diverse representations of women in the media and leadership roles are essential. An inclusive curriculum reform from early years through to secondary education is needed to embed gender equality and dismantle outdated stereotypes. Alongside this, targeted prevention work with boys and young men is essential to tackling misogyny and incel culture. Meanwhile, increased support is needed for women-led organisations that provide safe, supportive spaces for women and girls and opportunities for them to lead change. With the growth of AI and social media, steps to combat online abuse and improve digital literacy must also be prioritised through better education and strengthened regulation and legislation. These interventions are not enough in isolation.

CONCLUSION

To avert the deepening crisis facing women and girls, we must move beyond tokenistic, tick-box policies and commit to bold, structural change that challenges the root causes of gender inequality. A cross-sectoral approach to dismantling harmful gender norms will help Scotland build a future where everyone – women, girls, men and boys – can thrive free from societal pressure. Women and girls demand action that doesn't simply acknowledge persisting inequalities. We need bold policies, leadership and courageous actions that stand up for gender equality and tackle the gender stereotypes harming our futures.

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CHAPTER 8

Healthcare: fit for purpose for us all

Sigi Joseph, Kizanne James-McCarthy, Gwenetta Curry and Isioma Okolo

- **Endometriosis affects one in 10 women in the UK, yet it takes an average of 8.5 years to diagnose.**
- **Black women are four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than their white counterparts (MBRRACE-UK, 2021).**
- **Women make up 79 per cent of the NHS Scotland workforce, 61 per cent of unpaid carers and 83 per cent of the social care sector.**

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare is in crisis in Scotland. It is bursting at the seams: austerity measures, cost of living crisis, ageing population, staff burnout (SPICe, 2023), widening health inequalities (Scottish Government, 2023) and long waiting times (Public Health Scotland, 2024b) are just a few reasons that in Scotland, timely access to care and service is deteriorating.

As a nation, we have seen rises in drug and alcohol abuse (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, 2024), working-age poverty

(Scottish Government, 2024), homelessness (Shelter Scotland, 2024), and poor housing conditions affecting our population.

All of this has a disproportionate impact on women, especially those who experience multiple inequalities such as disability discrimination, poverty and classism, racism and more. To make positive change in Scotland's healthcare system, we must seek change that improves the lives of all women and girls, equally. This is especially true when you consider who is providing the different types of care we need in Scotland. Over three-quarters of the overall NHS Scotland workforce are women, 61 per cent of unpaid carers, and 83 per cent of our social care workforce are women.

IMPROVING HEALTHCARE AND DELIVERING FOR WOMEN

In 2021, Scotland produced the Women's Health Plan (Scottish Government, 2021), aiming to address some of these inequities. This included a necessary focus on women's reproductive and menstrual health. Endometriosis affects one in 10 women in the UK, yet it takes an average of 8.5 years to diagnose. Sixteen million sick days are taken annually due to symptoms linked to periods, with five days per woman on average (BUPA 2023). Disparity due to racism and disability discrimination means that Black women, women of colour (WRH, 2023) and women with learning disabilities (NICE, 2024) are likely to be diagnosed even later.

On menopause, public discourse has increased and contributed to tackling stigma, and more healthcare professionals than ever are aware of symptoms and treatments. However, around 400,000 women in Scotland are of menopausal age; therefore, our healthcare services need to be able to provide well-rounded, empathetic and timely support to all of them when they need it. That requires more investment, local access and education of practitioners.

However, responding to women's healthcare is not only about reproductive health. Ten women die from heart attacks and heart disease every day, yet women are more likely to receive the wrong diagnosis and be offered half as many heart treatments (Chest,

Heart & Stroke Scotland, 2024). To respond to this, we need to understand and educate on the differences in how symptoms appear in women, and how factors linked to pregnancy and menopause can play a role.

On mental health, despite the Scottish Government target of 90 per cent of referrals being seen within 18 weeks for psychological therapies, this is currently only at 80.4 per cent (Public Health Scotland, 2024b). Whilst improvements have been made, the gendered aspect of mental health support is still not given the necessary importance. Depression and anxiety in women are significantly increased amongst those with caring roles, including unpaid carers (Carers UK, 2021), as well as lone parents. Women are also 10 times more likely to experience anorexia, and recent data from the Women's Health Plan (2021) also shows that overall, girls in Scotland report worse physical and mental health.

The final report of the women's health plan by the Scottish Government reinforces that, beyond the specific plan, long-term interventions are needed to make a significant change in how health-care for *all* women is delivered. There is no quick fix or single intervention that can be considered a viable solution to what is a historic and institutionalised problem.

CASE STUDY: THE REALITY FOR BLACK WOMEN'S MATERNAL HEALTH IN SCOTLAND

Structural racism is becoming a widely recognised public health challenge in the UK. The latest Marmot 2024 report found that people who were repeatedly exposed to structural racism experienced worse physical and mental health as a direct consequence (IoHE, 2024). Previous studies and reports indicate that Black women experience racism and sexism when engaging with maternity services (John, Curry and Cunningham-Burley, 2021). These intersecting negative experiences of sexism and racism cause Black women to hesitate to seek medical attention until it is absolutely necessary.

Maternity services are one key area of vulnerability for Black women, as the latest Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through

Audits and Confidential Enquiries across the UK reports state that Black women are four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related complications than their white counterparts (MBRRACE-UK, 2021). In Scotland, the picture is no different.

Many people are quick to proclaim that these disparities must be due to biological differences. There are no significant physical differences in a Black woman's body that would account for such differences. Crucially, this deadly trend is only seen in white majority countries. This brings us to a hard truth: it is not about biology – it is about bias. A major cause for these poorer birthing outcomes between Black and white women is structural racism.

These disparities have been acknowledged by the Scottish Government's publication of an action plan to Tackle Racialised Health Inequalities in maternity care (Scottish Government, 2025). Whilst acknowledgement is a first step, action is needed; Black women's voices must be central to achieving change, and this must be met with urgency and investment.

This action plan was informed by a crucial report and project 'Nothing About Us Without Us' (KWISA, 2024) – a community participatory initiative and partnership between KWISA Women of African Heritage and NHS Lothian Maternity Voices Partnership. Through this project, women shared their positive and negative experiences of maternity services in the Lothians. Women expressed that their pain was dismissed, skin conditions on darker skin tones were misdiagnosed, delays in their care and experiences of a lack of good quality communication. The report produced from this work provided 15 recommendations to ensure specific, necessary care for women of African and Caribbean heritage (WACH).

These include:

- i. Address community gaps in knowledge identified by the NAUWU community engagement sessions by delivering specific antenatal classes tailored to the needs of WACH.
- ii. Request that Public Health Scotland commission and co-produce pregnancy literacy resources with WACH, provided in formats that are accessible to people with diverse language and literacy abilities.

- iii. Prioritise the creation of Community Hubs in antenatal locality areas of the Lothians with the highest density of WACH in the Lothians.
- iv. Provide co-created regular training about implicit biases, cultural safety, anti-racism and detection of specific conditions in WACH. This training should be mandatory, embedded and evaluated within existing training to ensure sustainability and accountability.
- v. Build trust with communities of WACH by demonstrating a commitment to tackling disparities at the highest level of Health Board leadership to ensure minoritised ethnicity issues are being valued and not tokenised.
- vi. Improve the monitoring and evaluation of outcomes for WACH by embedding ethnicity disparity reviews into NHS Lothian data collection, clinical governance, assurance frameworks and improvement processes.

THE PRIMARY CARE WORKFORCE

The shifting landscape of primary care affects all of us in Scotland. Despite a dedicated clinical workforce, a shift to firefighting approaches to care feels palpable. The reasons are multifactorial (BMA, 2023); a shrinking GP workforce (NES, 2023), practice closures, huge gynaecology waiting times and wider pressures lead to the adoption of access systems such as triage or on-the-day-only booking.

Access to primary care and huge system pressures make timely, effective care increasingly difficult, with monthly patient contacts in Scotland rising; there were 8.2 million contacts in January 2025, an increase of 4.1 per cent compared to January 2024 (Public Health Scotland 2025).

Our nation's health in terms of rising obesity rate, substance misuse and chronic conditions, lack of access to necessary social care, an ageing population and environmental factors such as poor air quality, all impact healthcare. We need sustainable, well-funded healthcare and social care services to meet this rising demand.

CONCLUSION

Improving women's healthcare is fundamental to all aspects of our society. Striving for excellence is essential; we need to listen to the voices of those with lived experience and shape services accordingly. Tackling issues around stigma, mistrust, and intersecting inequalities head-on.

To make strides, there must be a focus on investing not only in services but also in research into women's health. Scotland-specific data and research focused on women in chronically underfunded areas must be given equal prioritisation to enable change. This must include due diligence on the consequences of how racism, sexism, disability discrimination and poverty, in particular, impact all women's access to, and the design of, healthcare.

Whilst we have made many improvements in Scotland over recent years, a crisis has been looming over health and social care for just as long, and often, women workers and patients feel the brunt of it. We have tools at our disposal; the innovation of healthcare technology, lived experience panels to help us shape the way, education for practitioners, investment in preventative health, and investment in holistic, multi-disciplinary primary healthcare, ensuring services such as family nurse partnerships, link workers and mental health and wellbeing officers for primary care are retained.

All women across Scotland deserve health and social care they can rely on, and that is fit for purpose, and it is the duty of all those with power to make it so.

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CHAPTER 9

Women's reproductive justice and support

Lucy Grieve

- **One woman every five days has to travel to England to access abortion care beyond 20 weeks and up to the legal gestational limit of 24 weeks because no health board in Scotland provides this care.**
- **The outdated Abortion Act still does not give a woman the legal right to end their own pregnancy. It must be reformed in line with how abortion is provided in the twenty-first century, recognising abortion as a vital form of healthcare.**
- **70 per cent of women in Scotland of reproductive age live in a Health Board with hospitals or clinics which have been targeted by anti-choice groups in the past 10 years.**

INTRODUCTION

Women's reproductive rights continue to be overlooked.

Abortion has been legal under specific criteria in the UK since 1968 but was performed in Scotland long before that (Davis, 2005). Despite polls showing record high support amongst the public of a

woman's right to choose (Oppenheim, 2023), and the fact that one in three women will have an abortion in their lifetime (Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, 2023), it was not until 2024 that Members of the Scottish Parliament had ever had to take a position on an abortion-related issue in the Chamber.

ABORTION RIGHTS AND WOMEN'S SAFETY

Before Scottish MP David Steel successfully passed the Abortion Act in Westminster in 1967, doctors, under the common law of Scotland, were able to provide abortion care as long as they were '*acting in good faith*' (Brown, 2022). Although many did offer abortion care not under fear of prosecution – with places like Glasgow having no availability – medical figures like Dr Dugald Baird led an in-demand abortion practice in Aberdeen (Davis and Davidson, 2006).

When the Abortion Act was implemented in 1968, and access to care became more common, fear of prosecution remained amongst some doctors (Engender, 2024). A lack of clarity about what could be considered criminal conduct was an issue from the beginning and remains an issue in Scotland today.

This fear has become heightened in recent years following a stark increase in the number of prosecutions of vulnerable women in England for 'illegal' abortion (Davis, 2023). This, combined with outdated requirements that must be met when seeking an abortion – such as having to have the approval of two doctors – undoubtedly contributes to the barriers and stigma women face when accessing care today.

In Scotland, not wanting to have a child is not a legal reason to have an abortion. That is simply not good enough and is why there are calls for the decriminalisation and modernisation of our archaic abortion laws: to fully recognise abortion as a vital element of women's healthcare (Engender, 2023).

CASE STUDY: SAFE ACCESS ZONES

Although evidence suggests that anti-abortion activity outside abortion clinics had been ongoing since the 1990s (BPAS, 2023), it wasn't until 2020 – seeing them protesting in large groups during lockdown – that we, two local young women, Alice and Lucy, realised the scale of the issue. It was clear that nothing would stop them, but we felt compelled to act anyway to prevent further harm to service users.

During this time, Alice opened up about her own experience with protestors in 2019 whilst accessing abortion care, detailing the lasting impact that their presence had on her. Determined that no one else should have to endure such an ordeal, we both became passionate about ensuring that everyone in Scotland could make choices about their own bodies, free from harassment or intimidation. It was from this principle that Back Off Scotland was founded.

Soon after launching our Instagram and Facebook pages, we were inundated with stories from scores of women across the country that echoed Alice's own experience. We heard from vulnerable women and girls – such as sexual assault victims, minors and those with foetal anomaly diagnoses – who had to endure harassment at the hands of these protestors at the gates of clinics. These circumstances made the situation feel particularly insidious.

It became increasingly clear during 2021 that the scale of anti-abortion activity outside medical facilities in Scotland necessitated government intervention. Shockingly, it was during this time that Scotland's first Women's Health Minister told us in a meeting that she 'doesn't have a magic wand' (Pease, 2021) to rectify the situation and that sometimes women 'just have to run the gauntlet' (Mackay, 2024).

Eventually, the mounting pressure led the government to relent and in June 2024, Gillian Mackay MSP's Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Bill passed 118 votes to one (Scottish Parliament, 2025b), putting a stop to anti-abortion harassment outside clinics once and for all.

THE CREEP OF THE WELL-FUNDED, FAR-RIGHT IN ABORTION

Safe access zones are now the law of the land in Scotland, but it has not stopped the well-funded, international anti-abortion lobby from doing all they can to undermine the legislation (Wilson, 2022).

This far-right influence reached new heights in February 2025 when US Vice-President JD Vance – a man who has previously advocated for a national abortion ban (Kaczynski and Steck, 2024) – used his platform to incorrectly state that the Scottish Government had sent out letters to citizens within newly established safe access zones ‘warning them that private prayer within their own home may amount to breaking the law’ and that citizens were to report anyone they suspected guilty of a ‘thoughtcrime’ (Geddes, 2025) to the police.

Whilst his comments have been widely discredited as misinformation, it did not stop a barrage of President Trump’s supporters targeting our campaign with a torrent of vile abuse and threats. This is a potential crisis, enabled by the continued unregulated and unchecked sharing of disinformation online, which has already been evidenced to cause harm to women and girls. It serves no one to allow this disinformation to spread its lies and create hate towards women accessing basic rights over their own bodies.

JD Vance’s comments on Scotland’s safe access zone legislation were factually incorrect, yet he faces no accountability for spreading misinformation. This is not just about one senior politician’s misleading comments; it’s about the wider trend of right-wing figures using social media to manipulate discourse, embolden harassment and drown out the voices of those fighting to make access to abortion a legal right for all women. We must not let them win.

ACCESS TO LATER ABORTION

During our safe access zone campaign, several Scottish women started contacting us to describe their experiences of being targeted by protestors when they were accessing abortion services in England.

We soon learned that these women were only accessing care in

England because no health board in Scotland provides abortion care up to the legal limit of 24 weeks. This means that any woman wanting an abortion from 20 weeks must travel to an independent clinic in England for care (BPAS, 2023). It is estimated that thousands of Scottish women have had to make this journey over the years (Bowen, 2024).

In 2014, government-commissioned research into Scottish women's experiences of travelling to England for care was published. The findings were bleak, and improving solutions to access these abortions were described by the researchers as a *necessity*. Women reported to researchers that they were forced to ask their parents for money without disclosing why, were unable to travel because of their child's sickness, and had to find ways to take time off work whilst they weren't eligible for sick pay (Purcell et al, 2014). The intersections of sexism, poverty and wider inequalities in accessing vital healthcare were clear.

For those living in remote or under-resourced areas, the inability to access timely abortion care compounds the stress and hardship they face. These women may struggle to care for children they already have, face financial barriers to travelling for treatment or lack the social and emotional support systems needed to navigate such a challenging journey.

Forced continuation of an unwanted pregnancy can often leave these women feeling trapped, further isolating them from the support they need and denying them the autonomy to make choices about their own bodies and futures.

Having to travel to England is not the only issue. A recent *Herald* investigation found that there is only one doctor in the whole of Scotland trained to provide surgical abortion up to the legal limit (Brown, 2024).

In later medical abortions (12–20 weeks' gestation in Scotland), women have to go through an induced labour and often have to pass the fetus in a maternity ward surrounded by new mothers. Whilst this is the right procedure for some women, many women feel more at ease with the predictability and quick nature of a surgical abortion procedure, and it is only right that Scottish women are afforded that choice.

OUT OF STEP WITH GUIDELINES

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines state that abortion care providers should offer care up to 24 weeks' gestation locally, as well as offer a choice between a medical or surgical procedure (NICE, 2023).

Embedding best-practice healthcare guidelines, such as those from NICE, within law would ensure that a standardised approach to abortion care is taken, no matter where in Scotland you live.

A MODERN LAW FOR A MODERN SCOTLAND

In June 2025, MPs voted overwhelmingly to remove women from the criminal law relating to abortion in England and Wales – a landmark moment for reproductive rights, and the most significant change to UK abortion law since the Abortion Act was passed in 1967.

By voting to remove the threat of prosecution for abortion-related offences, MPs took an important step towards recognising abortion as essential healthcare and ensuring that no woman would ever again be subject to years-long investigations, be charged or risk prison for making a decision about her own body.

Yet that risk had existed for more than 160 years. Underpinned by the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 – a law passed by an all-male parliament before women had the right to vote – having an 'illegal' abortion outside of tightly controlled circumstances was a crime that carried with it a maximum life sentence. Despite decades of progress in both abortion provision and public opinion, the threat of prosecution remained.

The vote in Westminster is welcome progress, but as abortion law is devolved in Scotland, this means that Scotland now stands as the only nation in the UK that has not moved to remove abortion from the criminal law. That must change.

In 2023, when Humza Yousaf was standing to become leader of the SNP, Back Off Scotland wrote to him asking him to make three key pledges: to implement buffer zones, to stop the practice of sending women to England for abortion care by ensuring services

can be accessed within Scotland and to decriminalise abortion. He pledged to deliver all three, but only the first has been achieved.

When Humza Yousaf committed to decriminalising abortion, we seized the moment. Together with 18 pro-choice partners, we wrote to him calling for a full review of abortion law in Scotland, with a view to modernising it in the coming years.

The government responded, established an Expert Group, and a review with recommendations for a new abortion law framework in Scotland has since been published.

Abortion law reform has never been more pressing or urgent. With public backing, political will and expert consensus behind abortion law reform, the momentum is undeniable. The time for Scotland to reform our outdated abortion law is now.

CONCLUSION

Whilst we've come a long way since we started our campaign to end harassment outside abortion clinics in 2020 – every abortion care facility in Scotland now has a safe access zone (Scottish Parliament, 2025b) and the Scottish Government have undertaken an abortion law review (Scottish Government, 2024) – there is still a significant amount of work to be done to ensure that all Scottish women are able to access free, safe and legal abortions locally.

In a world lurching to the right politically, we must recognise that Scotland is not immune to this, and we must do everything we can to extend and protect our abortion rights.

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PART III

Made in Scotland – local, global, planetary, digital futures

Where the earlier parts of this book have asked us to examine what Scotland is and how women experience it, Part III asks a different question: what might Scotland become?

Part III explores the forces that will shape Scotland's feminist future – in communities, in climate action, in migration policy and in emerging technologies and their (mis)uses. Each chapter here explores a very different area, but together they remind us that the future is not abstract; it is built through choices made daily, locally and globally. It also captures a snapshot of the differing pressures and challenges on the horizon. But it does not shy away from them.

Feminist nation-building cannot be confined to parliaments or policy strategies, as Chapter 10 discusses. It is forged in neighbourhoods, in community campaigns, in local authority decisions and in the everyday work of women who organise, challenge and reimagine what participation looks like. This chapter, on delivering locally, highlights that if feminist progress does not reach local streets, schools, services and communities, it will not reach the women who are most in need. Scotland's narrative of inclusion is often exposed when confronted with the very real barriers women face in participating in local democracy or securing access to services. It serves to remind us that democratic participation must be matched with accessibility, and that national aspiration means little without local delivery that works.

From local places, Part III moves in a different direction to consider planetary ones – perhaps more removed but impacting on us all.

Climate change is transforming every part of life in Scotland, yet the gendered impacts of environmental policy remain overlooked. Chapter 11 – which makes the case for a feminist just transition – argues that climate solutions cannot be separated from care, justice or economic inequality. Such a transition that focuses only on infrastructure or new industries risks replicating old patterns of exclusion, leaving women – especially those in low-income households, migrant communities or caring roles – bearing disproportionate burdens. A *just* transition must therefore be feminist by design to ensure that Scotland’s net-zero future can be achieved. We must ask: who benefits, who pays, who is heard? Climate action must be viewed as an environmental imperative, but also a social transformation that values the work of care, redistributes resources, and ensures no community is left behind. To do otherwise risks the *just* ambition.

The discussion in Chapter 12 pivots again, this time to the movement of people across borders, into and through Scotland. Migration and race issues are neither new nor peripheral, and have long-affected Scotland, but in this volume and in the era of polycrisis are central tests of any feminist nation. A country that values women’s rights must also value those women who arrive seeking safety, opportunity or belonging. Yet Scotland’s migration landscape remains constrained by UK-level policy, shaped by hostile practices and increasingly influenced by far-right actors, and marked by gaps between inclusive rhetoric and lived experience. Women navigating the asylum and immigration systems face profound vulnerabilities: lack of access to public funds, barriers to escaping violence, precarious legal status and limited pathways to support, employment, housing and healthcare. The discussion in Chapter 12 dismantles the notion that Scotland is automatically more humane or equitable, outlining that compassion requires a Scottish approach grounded in dignity, rights and feminist action.

Finally, and ultimately, Part III asks us to look into the ‘techno-future’, one that is still being imagined but increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence whilst being challenged by techno-violence. Chapter 13 brings our attention to women, AI, and the technological domains that will define the next century and our experiences of it. Without women’s participation, the systems being built risk embedding

old inequalities in new infrastructures. Bias in datasets, exclusion from design processes and the concentration of technical decision-making amongst homogenous groups threaten to reproduce the very hierarchies this volume seeks to dismantle. A feminist future requires not just representation, but influence – women and women’s voices need to be at the heart of shaping the ethics, governance and purposes of AI and other emerging technologies.

The discussion in Chapter 14 continues the discussion of Scotland’s digital landscape but takes a different direction. Rather than a neutral space for innovation, Chapter 14 examines digital spaces as contested terrain in which equality, safety, and participation are unevenly distributed. The promise of digital transformation – connection, access and democratic engagement – is clear, yet for many women and girls it remains compromised by exclusion, harassment and technology-facilitated violence. As this chapter argues, technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (TFVAWG) is not peripheral but structural, shaping who can participate and who is driven from digital and public life. In this sense, digital safety is foundational to any vision of an inclusive, feminist Scotland. Whilst Scotland has articulated a feminist policy orientation, gaps persist between ambition and implementation. UK-level constraints, fragmented responses and an overreliance on criminalisation limit progress, even as harms evolve rapidly. Chapter 14 calls for a more coherent, integrated approach – one that embeds feminist principles across governance, design and education, and centres prevention, support and accountability in shaping Scotland’s digital future, so that it is *equal* and safe.

Across local delivery, climate justice, migration and digital futures, the chapters in Part III share a common message: Scotland’s feminist future is not predetermined. It will be shaped by the decisions we make now – in communities, in policy and in the systems we build for generations to come.

Part III invites you to reflect on everything you’ve read in this volume, but then, to imagine a nation that is open to develop, change and innovate for equality.

Are we brave enough to make that vision real for the women who will inherit the future?

CHAPTER 10

Overcoming the democratic deficit: delivering locally for Scottish women

Ruth Lightbody and Diane Delaney

- **Scotland's democratic deficit is deepening, with women – especially those facing intersecting inequalities – excluded from meaningful influence, representation and accountability in local politics.**
- **Despite national enthusiasm for democratic innovation, local governance remains inconsistent, inaccessible and often hostile to women, whose lived experiences reveal systemic barriers, misogyny and a lack of gender-sensitive policymaking.**
- **The Give Them Time campaign exposes both the failures and possibilities of local democracy: women's tenacity can drive change, but only if political leaders strengthen local democracy, embed inclusive participation and dismantle exclusionary cultures.**

INTRODUCTION

Scotland presents a confident outlook as an inclusive society and egalitarian politics (Sullivan et al, 2022; Lightbody 2023). The

enthusiastic, and sometimes innovative, adoption of deliberative and participatory processes has shone a spotlight on Scotland amongst academics and practitioners (Parkinson et al, 2022; Participedia). Practically speaking, Scotland falls short of its ambition and, importantly, of its potential. This is especially evident at the local level for women, where there is a pressing need to address intersectional politics. This chapter explores the crisis in local politics, including the democratic deficit experienced by women in terms of voice, representation and influence, using a case study to illustrate some of the central issues. The chapter concludes with our key ask of politicians and political leaders to strengthen local democracy and overcome this crisis.

THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Scottish and UK politics are currently in crisis due to a democratic deficit. The public has witnessed democratic backsliding and has called into question the integrity of their leaders and the level of transparency and accountability in the current political system. For this reason, public trust in government is at an all-time low (Gibbs and Mutebi, 2025), with over three-quarters of people in Scotland feeling they have no influence over decisions that impact the UK, and two-fifths of Scots have lost trust in the Scottish Government (Paylor, 2024).

Low levels of female representation in politics is an ongoing issue. Progress has been made with an increase of female Members of the Scottish Parliament, currently at 46 per cent, compared with 35 per cent in the 2016 election, but representation remains stagnant in local politics as only 35 per cent of local councillors are women.

Participation in politics is evolving, offering more flexibility for women to become involved, including the use of democratic and digital innovations. However, the application of democratic innovations is largely ad hoc at the local level, including participatory budgeting (O'Hagan et al, 2020), citizens' juries (Roberts and Escobar, 2015), participation requests (Bennett et al, 2022) and public dialogues (Twigger-Ross et al, 2022). Examples nationally

include the citizens' and climate assemblies (Elstub et al, 2022; Andrews et al, 2022) and Peoples' Panels in the Scottish Parliament (Lightbody et al, 2024).

These examples demonstrate a willingness to adopt innovative and inclusive processes, and a readiness to improve existing practice. However, how and when participation happens, who is willing and able to get involved and what impact it has, is less clear. Whilst the devolved government and parliament have shown a willingness to adopt these processes (IPDD, 2022; Burn-Murdoch, 2024; SCDC, 2024) in order to overcome the democratic deficit and crisis in confidence, local governance must be improved by adopting and embedding citizen-focused practices and the application of subsidiarity. Furthermore, women must be better supported to enter local politics.

THE GENDERED IMPACT OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Barriers that prevent women from entering and engaging with politics are multifaceted (Yaqoob, 2024). Navigating local politics can be a convoluted and often frustrating process (Anderson and Delaney, 2020). Barriers include access to resources (time, skills, information), ability (know-how, navigating bureaucracy, transport, caring responsibilities), confidence (impacted by language barriers, lack of experience) and an appropriate platform (Lightbody and Escobar, 2021).

Yet, women are often most affected by local decisions and funding cuts. Women are more likely to live in poverty, head single-parent families and be disabled. Women tend to live longer and are more likely to experience housing instability (Poverty Alliance, 2024; Shelter Scotland, 2024). A 2024 report on economic, social and cultural rights by the Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC, 2024) highlighted the lack of services for women in rural areas, such as gynaecological services, breastfeeding support and childcare provision. The impact of policy is often gendered and is more likely to disproportionately impact women. Examples include reductions in local services, public transport (particularly late-night services),

street lighting, urban design and planning, early learning and childcare (ELC), schools, leisure services, community centres, and so forth.

Currently, local politics is inadequately serving women. Opportunities to be heard and shape politics are insufficient. The case study of the Give Them Time (GTT) campaign illustrates the obstacles women face in navigating to create platforms and means of participating themselves. The GTT campaign, founded by a group of parents from across Scotland, is a case study in grassroots democracy in action. This campaign journey not only highlights the important role of women in advocacy but also the obstacles they face in politics.

CASE STUDY: DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Launched in 2018, the GTT campaign had a simple goal: to secure fair funding for all eligible 4-year-olds deferring school start (Anderson and Delaney, 2020). Parents, predominantly women, led the campaign. Despite the law providing legal rights to defer, the policy at the time was unfair, permitting local authorities to use their discretion in deciding which families could access funding to pay for mid-August to December-born children, another year of ELC. Families who were denied funding and could not afford to pay privately for ELC were forced to send their child to school.

By 2023, the campaign achieved its goals, and the law was amended, adding another layer of equity to Scottish education policy. Achieving this goal was momentous; however, the journey was an unpredictable learning curve, reflecting the challenges facing women in grassroots democracy and the persistence required to amplify their voices, as we show below.

The purpose of local governance is the ability to make decisions that directly benefit local people. This felt like a myth for the campaign. Parents chapped on the doors of 32 local authorities, and despite persisting, campaigners were often met with indifference or dismissal. Campaigners barely got in the door of most local authorities, and the pushback left parents feeling silenced and powerless. Gendered criticisms and comments were made frequently, women were labelled 'emotional', 'anxious' and 'overprotective'. Some were accused of

having mental health issues, and others were threatened with being reported to social work. Outspoken campaigners were warned to 'watch themselves' and 'be respectful', as if their legitimate concerns and real-life experiences did not matter. The campaign revealed the inequity in public service provision (funded deferrals), but it also exposed the lack of accountability in local government, highlighting systemic and undemocratic flaws in Scotland's structures.

Success arrived when the campaign directed its attention away from local authorities. Securing support from an MSP provided a gateway into government, and access to senior politicians, policy and decision makers. It was within this space that the voices of female campaigners were heard. With cross-party support, a motion in parliament in October 2019 (Scottish Parliament, 2019; Scottish Government, 2020) finally secured the law change. Importantly, the women's desire for social justice and equity, underpinned by tenacity and a willingness to learn and navigate the political playing field, drove forward the Campaign (McEnaney, 2024). Ordinary people, and especially women, should have the power to influence policy nationally and locally, and not be silenced or subjected to misogyny.

This case study is about more than one policy dispute, it reveals a wider democratic crisis for women, where voices and representation in local politics remain insufficient.

THE DEMOCRATIC CRISIS FOR WOMEN

The democratic deficit experienced by women in local politics is very real, acutely felt by those from marginalised and minority backgrounds, who are often excluded from decision-making in local policy processes. Although councils promote commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion, practice often contradicts this. The Give Them Time campaign offers a clear example: women advocating for their children's wellbeing faced barriers to being taken seriously, understood or heard by local authorities, revealing flaws in democratic engagement and representation. Political rhetoric often fails to translate to coherent, gender-sensitive policies. Addressing this crisis requires dismantling misogynistic governance cultures,

increasing diverse representation of women and embedding gender sensitive participation mechanisms. In addition, robust and effective accountability structures must be in place to enable women to challenge and influence decisions to match policy with lived realities.

Positive change must be made.

CONCLUSION

Our key ask to political parties and leaders is to strengthen and invest in local democracy. Engage more meaningfully and tangibly with communities, demonstrate democracy in action and visibly show how you represent the people you serve. Embed more effective recruitment processes and support women to stand for election at the local level by making politics more family-friendly and inclusive. Ensure that policy design and decision-making are gender-sensitive by working with local women. To achieve this, local governance needs to be more accessible and accountable to its local community. Political leaders should be required to reach out to community members, engage with communities in their spaces and provide more opportunities for local people to understand and engage with democratic processes more effectively.

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CHAPTER 11

Fighting climate change and the patriarchy together

Katie Swan-Nelson and Zarina Ahmad

- **Women are 14 times more likely to die in natural disasters than men (Okai, 2022). Four out of five people displaced by climate change impacts are women (United Nations, n.d.). Three per cent – the proportion of women working in the offshore industry in Scotland (Michie, 2020), but 32 per cent – the proportion of women working in the renewable energy industry globally (IRENA, 2025).**
- **Eighty-eight thousand pounds – average annual salary of an offshore worker in Scotland (Taylor, Horton and Ambrose, 2024) but £21,840 – full-time salary of a care worker in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2023).**
- **Investment in the care sector has the potential to create 2.7 times as many jobs as the same or similar investment in construction, as well as producing 30 per cent less greenhouse gas emissions (De Henau and Himmelweit, 2020).**

INTRODUCTION

Global warming's impacts are already catastrophic and irreversible, wiping out ecosystems, communities and ways of life. Whilst many in Scotland imagine these impacts to be far off, whether in time or geographically, they are already unfolding here and now in our waters, lands and communities.

WHAT DO WOMEN HAVE TO DO WITH IT?

Women, especially those that are marginalised and racialised, disproportionately bear the burden of environmental degradation and climate change. It tends to be women who manage household budgets as climate change-related inflation wreaks havoc on food and energy prices. It is largely women who provide the care services needed to respond to the negative health impacts of pollution and toxic chemicals. When extreme weather hits, it is women who are more likely to lose their lives. Yet in these crisis moments, women have also demonstrated incredible resilience to pick up the pieces, develop solutions and rebuild.

Across the world, women have been at the forefront of climate action and community resilience. In Scotland, young women have played a visible role in the school climate strikes, organising and mobilising through youth-led movements such as the Fridays for Future protests, which have pushed climate change firmly onto the political agenda. Indigenous women globally have also led struggles to protect land, water and ecosystems, often at great personal risk, securing legal recognition and environmental protections for their territories. In England, campaigners such as Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah have transformed personal tragedy into powerful environmental advocacy, successfully campaigning for legal recognition of air pollution as a cause of death and strengthening the fight for clean air in cities like London. These examples highlight how women are not only disproportionately affected by environmental crises but are also key leaders in shaping solutions and driving systemic change.

Ecofeminism investigates the intersections of environmental

issues and gender oppression, emphasising the link between patriarchy and the exploitation of both women and nature. Like nature, women are treated as an inexhaustible source of 'free' inputs by our economic system. Tackling climate change thus requires disrupting this exploitation and properly valuing the lifegiving role of our ecosystems and the world's women.

AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST LENS ON TRANSITION PLANS

At the global level, tackling climate change requires heavy lifting from countries like Scotland that bear the greatest responsibility for historic and current high emissions, implying a radical transformation in every dimension of how we live and organise our economy. Scotland has sought to position itself as a leader in delivering a *just transition*, including through the establishment of the Just Transition Commission, which advises the government on how the move to a net-zero economy, adapted to the changes of a warming climate, can be delivered fairly for workers and communities. However, recent reports have highlighted gaps between Scotland's ambitions and delivery, noting missed opportunities to embed stronger anti-poverty measures and address persistent inequalities. From a feminist perspective, these gaps are significant: for example, women remain underrepresented in emerging green sectors whilst continuing to shoulder much of the low-paid care work that sustains households and communities. Ensuring the transition tackles poverty, values social infrastructure and expands opportunities for women is therefore central to delivering a genuinely just transition.

What do you think about when you imagine Scotland's transition to a low-carbon economy? Perhaps it's a renewable energy system, expanded public transport or better-insulated housing. Each of these elements of our transition is, in fact, deeply gendered. Will the workforce of emerging green industries be primarily male, or will women have a chance to play their role? Will new physical infrastructure be designed and built to overcome inequalities, or will it embed them? Will the costs and benefits of low-carbon adaptations

be distributed fairly, or will marginalised and racialised women, as usual, bear the biggest burden?

These questions matter because climate change itself is a product of profound, intersecting inequalities. For example, the emissions that have driven the climate crisis have largely come from industrialised economies in the Global North, yet many of the most severe impacts are experienced by communities in the Global South. Relatedly, rich individuals fuel the climate crisis through over-consumption, high-emitting lifestyles and carbon-intensive investments: global data shows the poorest half of the global population accounts for only 3 per cent of carbon emissions associated with private capital ownership, whilst the wealthiest 10 per cent account for about 77 per cent of emissions.⁷ Across different contexts, women often face the greatest vulnerabilities as a result of their marginalisation, whether through increased care responsibilities, exposure to gender-based violence, health impacts, climate-related displacement and migration, or loss of livelihoods linked to land, water and food systems. Acknowledging and responding to these different axes of inequity is essential if Scotland's transition is to be genuinely just, ensuring that climate action addresses both domestic inequalities and the global legacies of extraction, exploitation and colonialism that have shaped the crisis.

Just as the causes of climate change have their roots in patriarchal systems of oppression, the solutions that contribute towards a low-carbon future are an opportunity to eradicate inequities in all their forms. To this end, the union movement developed the concept of a 'just transition' to advocate for a fair distribution of the social and economic costs of responding to climate change, including ensuring that most-affected communities are supported to take the lead in decision-making.

HARD HATS ARE ONLY HALF OF THE STORY

Whilst physical infrastructure, such as energy, transport and housing,

⁷ <https://wid.world/news-article/climate-inequality-report-2025/>

is central to delivering a just transition in Scotland, it is a mistake to focus only on 'hard' sectors, constricting horizons for more transformative, feminist visions.

Social infrastructure – comprising all the life-sustaining work of care, health and education that underpins economic performance and sustains the entire workforce and our society – is also critically important. Workers in these jobs are shamefully undervalued, and the lowest paid of these workers tend to be women, especially those from marginalised and racialised communities. Without these caring roles, whether paid or unpaid, the whole economy would come to a standstill. Yet these sectors are chronically underinvested in and are often overlooked in just transition imaginaries.

There are two primary reasons social infrastructure is central to a just transition.

First, social infrastructure helps decarbonisation efforts. As well as decarbonising carbon-intensive employment, decarbonisation will entail enlarging low-carbon sectors like care, health and education. Bringing more people into the sector is, thus, an effective mitigation strategy. But social infrastructure, as a feminised sector, continues to be systemically undervalued in terms of its economic multiplier potential. This translates into underinvestment and minimal rights. In turn, young people are less likely to see it as a promising career path.

Second, social protection is critical to manage oncoming shocks. However carefully planned our transition to a greener future may be, we will still face negative economic shocks. This will lead to unwanted impacts on our labour force, and the social safety net must be ready to catch workers when they fall. Meaningful protection from these impacts demands a major renewal of Scotland's approach to social protection to enhance resilience and adapt to a climate-changed world.

ACTIONS FOR SCOTLAND'S NEXT GOVERNMENT

The next five years are a crucial window to deliver on climate change commitments. Successive Scottish Governments have shown ambi-

tion to advance an equitable, just transition, but many of these ideas remain rhetorical. The litmus test of this crucial period will not only be whether we successfully mitigate and adapt to climate change, but also whether a fairer society is built in the process.

First, the Scottish Government must ensure that women's voices, particularly those of marginalised and racialised women, are meaningfully embedded in the governance of Scotland's just transition. Climate and industrial policy decisions are too often shaped by institutions and sectors that do not reflect the diversity of the most-affected communities. Embedding participatory decision-making processes and strengthening representation across transition planning will be essential to ensuring policies respond to lived realities rather than reproducing existing inequalities.

Second, Scotland's transition strategy must directly address gender inequality within the labour market. Women remain significantly underrepresented in many emerging green sectors, particularly in energy, engineering and construction, whilst continuing to dominate lower-paid and undervalued care roles. Government action is therefore needed to tackle occupational segregation, expand access to training and pathways into green jobs, improve the working conditions of female-dominated sectors and ensure that new low-carbon industries provide equitable opportunities for women.

Third, Scotland must recognise social infrastructure as a central pillar of a just transition. The sectors that sustain everyday life, care, health and education, are critical to supporting communities through economic and environmental change, yet they remain systematically undervalued. A just transition requires a new deal for social infrastructure workers, including improved pay, conditions and long-term investment, recognising these sectors not only as social necessities but also as key components of a low-carbon economy.

Fourth, the Scottish Government should ensure that social protection systems are equipped to manage the disruptions that will accompany economic transformation. This includes reviewing the adequacy of existing safety nets and developing targeted support for workers affected by decarbonisation and climate impacts, as well as for unpaid carers whose labour underpins household and community resilience.

Finally, delivering a feminist just transition will require a broader shift in how Scotland values and governs shared resources. Expanding public investment in caring infrastructure and embedding a human-rights-based approach to delivery can help ensure essential services are designed around collective wellbeing rather than private profit. At the same time, democratising access to land and nature will be critical to ensuring that the benefits of environmental stewardship and climate action are shared more equitably across society.

CONCLUSION

There is no just transition without women. The success of Scotland's low-carbon transition will depend on whether policymakers understand the colossal challenge of climate change as not simply a technological or industrial shift, but a profound social transformation.⁸ Approaches that focus narrowly on decarbonising high-emitting sectors risk overlooking the structural inequalities embedded within our economic and social systems, and may ultimately reproduce the injustices that the concept of a just transition seeks to address.

A genuinely just transition must therefore centre gender equality, value the social infrastructure that sustains communities, and ensure that the voices of women, particularly those from marginalised and racialised groups, are embedded in decision-making. A just transition will only succeed if it transforms not only how we power our economy, but how we value people, care and the communities that sustain us.

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CHAPTER 12

Race, migration and the hostile environment

Jen Ang and Fatma Elaraby

- **Race and migration status are important factors that affect equality of access to safety, protection, health and education for all women and girls in Scotland. At present, between 16 and 18 per cent of the UK population was born abroad (Migration Observatory, 2024), and that figure is rising more rapidly in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK (Picken, 2025).**
- **Migrant women and girls with ‘no recourse to public funds’ visa restrictions are more vulnerable to abuse and less likely to access support services or seek justice.**
- **The Home Office has no evidence to show that hostile environment policies actually work, according to the National Audit Office (Bulman, 2020a).**

INTRODUCTION

In 2026, race and migration are both flashpoint subjects. Everyone, it seems, has an opinion. And those opinions – there are ‘too many

migrants' or immigration laws are 'cruel and harsh' – can feel increasingly divisive and difficult to reconcile.

And yet, race and migration are issues that we must – as politically minded and socially aware people – confidently face up to. A majority of the Scottish public will now have loved ones or close friends who are, in some way, impacted by the 'hostile environment' and for whom the nexus of racism and immigration law creates precarity and risk of real harm. The hostile environment is a range of UK Home Office policies with the aim of making the UK a 'hostile place for illegal immigrants' (White, 2024).⁹

The problem: in practice, even if you are British, the 'hostile environment' enforcement powers, which have increased year-on-year in the last decade, affect every part of your daily life:

- When you started your job, did you have to show your passport or birth certificate to pass a 'right to work' check because your driver's licence was not sufficient photographic ID? That's immigration law.
- If you are a student at college or university, does your lecturer require you to sign a register or use a QR code or 'check-in' app to report to the Home Office physical attendance by students in class? That's immigration law, too.
- When you opened a bank account or applied for a driving licence, whether or not you realised it, your right to live in the UK was also routinely checked, as part of the application process.

9 The 'hostile environment' policies are most closely associated with a series of policies introduced in 2012 when Theresa May was Home Secretary for a UK Conservative Government, an approach that she recently admitted in a 2024 documentary that she felt she had got 'wrong'. It was a Labour Party Immigration Minister, Liam Byrne, however, who said in 2007 when launching a range of new policies, that the aim was to 'create a much more hostile environment in this country if you are here illegally'.

The hostile environment does not just affect migrants in the UK – it cannot, by definition, it affects all of us.

THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT: RACIST BY DESIGN?

Hostile environment policies are also not neutral – they are racist by design, based on a long history of the use of immigration law in the UK to exclude ‘unwelcome’ groups of migrants based on colonialised constructions of race, deservingness or who can be economically ‘useful’ to Britain (Migrants’ Rights Network, 2024).

Not unsurprisingly, the history of UK immigration practices was also deeply entwined with misogynistic and Islamophobic practices, like the dark history of ‘virginity tests’ for immigration brides arriving in the 1970s from India and Pakistan (Travis, 2011).

Multiple research studies conducted over the past decade concluded:

- Hostile environment policies violate UK equalities laws, according to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2023).
- They foster racist practices, which are destructive for people and communities (Bulman, 2020b) and are bad for our health (Essex et al, 2022).
- A report on the Home Office’s own 2023 review concluded that hostile environment policies disproportionately impact people of colour – discriminating against people based on race. For example, because of a ‘right to rent’ scheme that forces private landlords to check the immigration status of potential tenants, one in 10 landlords surveyed said they knew of a case in which a landlord discriminated against a potential tenant on the basis of race (Atkinson, 2023).
- As a result, it takes BME (Black and minority ethnic) people and migrants up to twice as long to find a home to rent as a white British person (JCWI, 2025).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SCOTLAND TODAY?

The increasing use of immigration powers by the UK Home Office to negatively impact every aspect of our lives has not been halted by the current UK Labour Government. To the contrary, additional powers have been proposed by the UK Government in its 'landmark' Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill 2025.

What this means, is that women and girls in Scotland who are migrant, whose families are migrant, or who are racialised and therefore likely to be considered 'migrant' – face a real, and increasing, risk of racism and exclusion, when they seek protection, safety and support of Scottish public services for access to things that they are, or should be, entitled to. For example, racialised and migrant women are routinely, and wrongly, locked out of support from social work services, social housing support, the education system, employment opportunities and the NHS – because of racist policy and practice that has been fostered and embedded by UK immigration law (Scottish Government, 2024; Watts-Cobbe et al, 2024).

CASE STUDY: MIGRANT WOMEN LIVING IN SCOTLAND

In late 2024, we (the authors) contacted more than 400 refugee and migrant women living in Scotland, by attending women's groups and reaching out on WhatsApp and Facebook to explore how race, religion and migrant status affect their daily lives.

We were disappointed to hear that many women faced discrimination, but they feared sharing those experiences (even anonymously) via a survey because they felt unsafe and were afraid that doing so might affect their futures negatively.

For those who did complete our survey, we learned that women and girls in Scotland face daily discrimination based on:

- Their nationality and race.
- Their religion and religious appearance, particularly for women who wear a hijab or niqab.
- Their economic status, with a feeling that appearing to be poor means that you are socially weak or undeserving.
- Sometimes just for being women.
- They also reported facing additional barriers to building healthy and safe lives, including:
 - Feeling culturally isolated, leading to loss of social connection and poor mental health.
 - Lack of access to ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) and interpretation support leading to serious barriers in:
 - accessing health care
 - helping their children to access support or challenge racism or other discrimination in education
 - accessing banks to handle finances.
- Forced poverty and unsafe housing, because of the asylum support system and immigration rules like NRPF (no recourse to public funds).
- Fear of reporting racist attacks and domestic violence because of the real risk that doing so will affect their immigration status and may result in being deported.

This is concerning because racialised and migrant women are also at increasing risk of racist attacks, with 10 per cent of ethnic minority people in Scotland reporting both experiences of recent racist attacks and also high levels of racist insult and unfair treatment from police (Finney, de Noronha and BEMIS, 2024).

This is particularly worrying when migrant and racialised women and girls are fleeing violence and need to turn to the police for protection. In reporting a crime, including domestic abuse or sexual violence, they not only run the risk of a racist response but the twin risk that Police Scotland will share their information – without their consent – with the UK Home Office, and in a quarter of those cases, this could lead to being threatened with deportation (Briggs and Goodwin, 2023).¹⁰

The current political and social landscape has become increasingly hostile for migrant and asylum-seeking women and girls. The dangerous rise of far-right movements in Scotland has been illustrated by violent rallies outside hotels housing asylum seekers and an increase in racist and xenophobic rhetoric. In particular, the far-right has attempted to weaponise protection of women and children as a guise for their racism and anti-migrant agenda; however, their activities risk creating more hostile and harmful environments for all women and girls. Data on hate crime reporting in Scotland reveals that out of all race aggravated hate crimes recorded by the police in Scotland, 35 per cent of victims were a single female or an all-female group (Scottish Government, 2024). These influences must be taken seriously as they pose a further crisis for racialised women's safety and rights as well as community cohesion, and democracy as a whole.

CONCLUSION

What can be done to dismantle the hostile environment in Scotland and redress the wrongs that have fallen heavily on the shoulders of racialised and migrant women and girls?

i. Challenge Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities

10 Across the UK, more than 2,000 people were referred by police to immigration enforcement between May 2020 and September 2022. A quarter of the 451 domestic abuse victims were 'served with enforcement papers', meaning they faced deportation.

to end their silence and complicity with the hostile environment, calling for:

- a. A pledge by essential services like Police Scotland, social work and social housing, and education to follow the lead of NHS Scotland to never share private data about individuals with the UK Home Office, without consent (NHS Inform, 2025).¹¹
 - b. A comprehensive review of law and policy with the aim of explicitly rewriting them to include, not exclude, migrant women and girls (Ang, 2025).
- ii. Call for a clear and consistent approach, from Scottish politicians, public figures and influencers, to talking about the impact of UK hostile environment laws as racist, harmful, unwelcome in present day Scotland – where we are building a welcoming and inclusive environment, where all women and girls can flourish, find safety and feel valued as important members of a vibrant and inspiring future Scotland.
 - iii. Politicians and media must take a stronger stance against far-right movements, rather than appeasing them by repeating their rhetoric or pursuing further unevidenced anti-migrant policymaking.

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CHAPTER 13

AI and women in Scotland's future

Steph Wright

- **Scotland's AI future risks being built on a foundation of existing gender, disability and racial inequalities, with women underrepresented in tech and the women who experience multiple inequalities overexposed to automation biases and risks.**
- **Public sector and generative AI systems disproportionately affect women and marginalised communities, from biased service tools to online harms.**
- **A feminist, intersectional approach to AI challenges existing power structures and offers a path toward more just, democratic, and inclusive technologies.**

INTRODUCTION

Technology is often imagined as a force that arrives from somewhere else – fast-moving, inevitable and unstoppable. But what if we viewed it instead as something we can shape? A collective project, rooted in care and justice, designed not just to automate systems, but to reimagine them?

AI is already reshaping life in Scotland. It is being used to support cancer diagnosis, help match jobs to candidates and power conversational public services. The Scottish Government's AI Strategy, launched with principles of 'trustworthy, ethical and inclusive AI,' (Scotland's AI Alliance, 2021) reflects a sincere desire to steer this change with care.

But Ruha Benjamin reminds us, 'Better never means better for everyone . . . It always means worse, for some' (Benjamin, 2019). If we are not intentional about whose values are encoded into AI systems, we risk reproducing inequality under the banner of innovation. And AI researcher Atoosa Kasirzadeh (formerly based at the University of Edinburgh) argues that 'algorithms are neither constructed nor adequately represented independently of the specific social contexts, institutions, power relations, and values in which they operate' (Kasirzadeh, 2022).

Women's experiences, often on the frontlines of both innovation and inequality, offer vital insight into what is at stake, and what is possible. This chapter explores how Scotland might lead in a more expansive direction; harnessing women's experiences not only to minimise harm but also to use AI as an opportunity to build a society that centres relationality, equity and collective voice.

THE FUTURE IS BEING BUILT ON UNEVEN GROUND

To imagine a just AI future, we must first acknowledge where Scotland stands now. Women remain significantly underrepresented in digital and tech work: they make up just over 23 per cent of Scotland's digital workforce, and around 18 per cent of digital technology occupations (Flavell, 2024). Persistent gaps remain in access to senior roles, technical pathways and design leadership.

More broadly, Scotland's gender pay gap has narrowed in recent years, falling from 11.8 per cent to 8.3 per cent (PwC, 2025), but structural inequalities endure, particularly in sectors undergoing rapid technological change. Critically, women are overrepresented in roles at high risk of automation. According to Close the Gap, women make up around 70 per cent of workers in jobs most likely

to be replaced by AI or algorithmic systems (Close the Gap, 2020).

Even well-intentioned technologies can deepen inequality when deployed without context or care. AI systems do not operate in isolation – they are built within, and shaped by, the structures of the societies they serve. In a labour market already marked by gendered disparities, automation risks amplifying existing injustice. That's why equity across gender, class, race and disability cannot be an after-thought. It must be embedded at the core of how we design, govern and deploy AI. Otherwise, we risk scaling systems that entrench exclusion under the guise of innovation.

Left unchecked, AI risks embedding misogyny into core systems – from biased decision-making in welfare and healthcare – to deep-fake abuse and surveillance technologies that disproportionately target and criminalise marginalised women. AI is at the forefront of emerging forms of abuse, especially tech-facilitated violence (Barker, 2024), all of which build upon existing gender disparities and inbuilt algorithmic biases (UN Women, 2024). Tools such as facial recognition at borders, predictive policing and algorithmic monitoring in social care reproduce gendered and racialised assumptions about who is suspicious, who is risky, and who deserves support (Imam, Manimekalai and Suba, 2025). These same systems threaten to automate job losses in feminised sectors, entrenching economic precarity. For many women and marginalised communities, the danger isn't just about exclusion, it is about perpetuating existing injustices without recourse.

GENERATIVE AI AND PUBLIC SECTOR TOOLS: WHO DOES AI WORK FOR?

Scotland's public sector has taken early steps to promote AI transparency, including the development of the Scottish AI Register, a platform that allows citizens to see how AI is being used in areas such as healthcare, digital access and service delivery. Early examples include Connecting You Now (Scottish Government, n.d.), a conversational assistant intended to help residents navigate complex public systems and Mi, a tool piloted in NHS Grampian to support

breast cancer detection (NHS Grampian, 2025). These pilots show AI's potential to augment human services.

Yet technologies like these must be held to account for how they work in practice, not just in principle. A virtual assistant might improve access, or it might replace nuanced human support with inflexible automation. A diagnostic tool may extend reach or replicate biases embedded in unrepresentative training data. For women, who are often both service users and carers, such systems affect how easily help is accessed, how people are treated, and what happens when something goes wrong. Amazon's gender biased recruitment algorithm is a well-documented example (BBC Technology, 2018). And more recently, a study on age and gender distortion in online media and large language models showed that age and gender biases were woven into these models (Guilbeault, Delecourt and Desikan, 2025). When recruiters use AI-based tools incorporating these models, these biases and stereotypes negatively impact women and in particular, older women.

As Scotland expands its devolved powers over social security and public health, there is a real risk that AI tools introduced to improve efficiency could inadvertently replicate bias, especially if driven by performance metrics rather than people's lived experience. Systems must be designed with care and caution, especially where trust is already fragile.

Meanwhile, generative AI is reshaping how we write, draw, search and learn. And with it, reshaping how gender is represented and misrepresented. Studies show women are less likely than men to adopt generative tools, reporting higher AI anxiety, greater ethical concern and lower confidence even when skills are equivalent (Russo et al, 2025). This reflects not a lack of interest, but a refusal of systems that often feel extractive or unsafe.

Generative image models frequently reproduce stereotypical depictions of women – smiling caregivers, passive figures, background roles, sexualised – whilst men appear in leadership and technical positions, reflecting biases of presumed authority (Sun et al, 2023). Text generation models mirror these patterns, associating men with action and intelligence, and women with beauty, kindness or emotion (Girrbach et al, 2025). At the sharpest end, tools used

to create deepfakes and eroticised non-consensual content overwhelmingly target women, including in Scotland, where such cases are rising (Watson, 2025). This is an evolution of the ongoing violence against women and misogyny that Scotland's education and justice systems must be effectively equipped to tackle.

These harms are not peripheral concerns. They are predictable outcomes of systems trained without consent, deployed without oversight, and governed by corporate priorities. As Broussard states, 'If training data is produced out of a system of inequality, don't use it to build models that make important social decisions unless you ensure the model doesn't perpetuate inequality' (Broussard, 2023).

INTERSECTIONALITY AND POWER IN SCOTLAND'S AI FUTURE

Feminist and intersectional approaches to AI don't just benefit women, they benefit society as a whole. They centre the right questions: who has the power to decide what is fair; who can say no; who gets to design the future?

Scotland's AI strategy principles of transparency, inclusion and public benefit offer a valuable starting point. But principles must be made actionable: through procurement, legislation, public redress and participation. That means building public infrastructure that allows AI to be explained, interrogated, tested and even refused. It means investing in the public sector's ability not just to adopt tools, but to challenge and redesign them. AI tools must be ethical, accountable, responsible, transparent and secure, but it must be acknowledged that when they cannot be made so, the most ethical decision is not to develop or deploy them.

Yet despite these promising principles, Scotland's policymaking and political spaces often lack the critical capacity, structural literacy, and confidence to meaningfully engage with AI's social impacts. Too often, it is treated as inevitable or inherently beneficial, something that has to be adopted no matter what, rather than challenged or shaped. Whilst ethical language has become more common, it is rarely matched with concrete accountability mechanisms or

investment in community-led approaches. Declaring values without building and investing in the infrastructure to enjoy them risks becoming one of Scotland's greatest missed opportunities.

An intersectional approach demands that we listen not only to experts but also to those living at the sharpest edge of impact: carers, disabled people, women of colour, young people and migrants. It demands we reframe innovation not as speed, but as alignment with values. And it requires that we understand AI not as a neutral tool, but as a social infrastructure: shaped by those with power, and capable of being reshaped by those who demand more.

'The danger to our humanity from AI is not really coming from AI itself. The call is coming from inside the house; AI can devalue our humanity only because we *already devalued it ourselves*.'

Shannon Vallor, The AI Mirror

CONCLUSION

The future is still *ours* to shape. These challenges also point us toward possibilities. Around the world, communities are actively reimagining what more just, inclusive, and democratic AI could look like. Initiatives such as Data for Black Lives (2019) in the United States are centering equity and lived experience not just in policy conversations, but in the design, governance and teaching of AI systems, and wider intergenerational digital literacy. These are not just speculative exercises; they are working examples of reclaiming technological futures from the ground up.

Intersectional perspectives are essential not only for fairness but for functionality. A disabled woman misclassified by an eligibility algorithm, or a migrant girl misrepresented in a generative AI model, isn't just a statistical error – she is the result of a system that failed to include her from the start. These are not isolated examples. They are the cumulative consequence of whose experience is consistently excluded from the design process. Addressing

this means not only improving accuracy but reorienting the goals of innovation itself.

As Browne (2015) and Costanza-Chock (2020) have shown, classification, pattern recognition and surveillance technologies have long histories rooted in oppression and control. AI is not exceptional in its capacity to harm; it is exceptional in its speed and scale. But what has been built can also be unbuilt, redirected or entirely remade. That is the promise of this moment, if we choose it.

If we want AI to serve a fairer future, Scotland must go beyond principles and invest in the practical infrastructure of justice. That means ensuring that public registers and audit mechanisms are not just visible, but truly accessible, transparent and accountable to the communities most affected. It means strengthening the public sector's capacity to interrogate and shape AI systems with the very public it serves, rather than merely adopting them. It calls for sustained funding of community-led and feminist tech initiatives that can reimagine what technology might look like if built for care, consent and collective flourishing.

A future shaped by AI is not inevitable (Duarte et al, 2025). It will reflect the values we choose to uphold and the people we centre in its design. If Scotland truly wants to be better for women and for all those pushed to the margins, then we must build technological systems that reflect justice and collective accountability. The window is narrowing.

What we choose to do now will shape who these systems serve and who they fail. Realising this opportunity will require political will, public investment, and sustained accountability – but it is still within Scotland's grasp.

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CHAPTER 14

An equally digitally safe Scotland

Kim Barker

- **Eighty-five per cent of women who use the internet have witnessed harassment and online violence in some form, whilst 38 per cent of women report experiencing online violence directly (EIU, 2021).**
- **For many women and girls in Scotland, the digital world is shaped less by opportunity and more by exclusion, harassment and technologically facilitated violence.**
- **Digital inclusion strategies need to address consent, relational ethics, misogyny and the socio-technical structures underpinning harm to reduce TFVAWG because TFVAWG cannot be addressed through criminal law reform alone.**

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have become deeply woven into everyday life to the extent that the issue is no longer whether Scotland will be a digital nation, but what kind of digital nation it will be. The digital sphere holds real promise, offering opportunities for connection, participation, service delivery, education, democratic engagement and social transformation.

Yet these possibilities are not evenly distributed. For many women and girls in Scotland, the digital world is shaped less by opportunity and more by exclusion, harassment and technologically facilitated violence. Even a snapshot of figures paints a stark reality for women and girls living and seeking to participate digitally. Eighty-five per cent of women who use the internet have witnessed harassment and online violence in some form, whilst 38 per cent of women report experiencing online violence directly (EIU, 2021). One in eight children worldwide was a victim of non-consensual image abuse in 2024 (Inspiring Scotland, 2025), whilst 78 per cent of UK teenagers have experienced some form of harm facilitated by technology (Horeck et al, 2023). These statistics are shocking enough, but when set against the emerging knowledge of potential pathways into TFVAWG and associated offending, the picture is even bleaker. For example, research shows that 61 per cent of perpetrators search for child-sexual abuse material (CSAM) on the open web, whilst 88 per cent of perpetrators report viewing CSAM depicting girls, with 29 per cent viewing violent CSAM (Protect Children, 2026).

If Scotland is to become digitally inclusive, online safe and recognise its digital promise, it must do so through a feminist lens – one that places equality, care, justice and dignity at the centre of its online safety and digital governance agenda. This requires sustained attention to technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (TFVAWG) and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), not as marginal concerns, but as foundational barriers that constrain who can meaningfully participate in Scotland and its digital future.

TFVAWG AND TFGBV AS BARRIERS TO THE DIGITAL PROMISE

The expansion of TFVAWG in Scotland continues to undermine women's digital citizenship, participation and inclusion. For girls in secondary schools, experiences of image-based bullying, sexual harassment and exposure to misogynistic influencers are increasingly routine. For women in public life, too, including MSPs, councillors,

journalists and campaigners, online abuse remains a defining feature of their work (McTernan, n.d.; Barker, 2024c), increasingly leading to self-censorship or withdrawal from public life (McTernan, n.d.) altogether. For victims of domestic abuse, digital technologies are frequently repurposed to extend surveillance and control.

These harms matter not only because they cause individual distress, but because they function as structural barriers to opportunity (Lühiste et al, 2025; McTernan, n.d.). They determine who speaks, who is believed, who stays silent and who withdraws. They dictate whose views shape public debate and whose expertise is dismissed or chased offline.

Addressing TFVAWG must therefore be understood as a democratic imperative. It is not possible to build a feminist, inclusive Scotland whilst women and girls are systematically excluded from digital public space.

THE DIGITAL PROMISE AND ITS UNEVEN REALISATION

Digital technologies shape how people in Scotland access public services, connect with the community, learn, work, debate and organise. The promise of these technologies lies in their capacity to improve lives – to expand access, enhance participation, reduce inequality and support public good.

Yet, as feminist scholars have long warned, technological progress is rarely neutral (Wajcman, 2015) and frequently compounds existing inequalities and discrimination, including racism (Noble, 2018). Without careful attention to power and inequality, digital tools risk reproducing or amplifying existing harms and present particular issues surrounding digital exclusion (Mhor Collective, 2025). For women and girls in Scotland, this is clearest in the domain of TFVAWG: image-based abuse, deepfakes, online harassment, sexualised threats, digitally enabled coercive control, sextortion, AI impersonation and other emerging harms. These practices limit digital participation, curtail expression and undermine the very benefits the digital sphere is supposed to offer. The evolution of

technological abuses and the resulting harms threaten the participation and inclusion rights of women and girls, driving them to self-silence and to withdraw from digital interactions.

Digital promise cannot be realised whilst online spaces and technology-facilitated environments remain structurally unsafe for women and girls. Ensuring safe and inclusive participation is not a peripheral concern – it is the precondition for realising everything else the digital world has to offer.

SCOTLAND'S FEMINIST ORIENTATION IN DIGITAL SAFETY POLICY

Scotland has begun to articulate a distinctly feminist approach to safety and equality in digital contexts. Frameworks such as *Equally Safe* (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2023), Scotland's Digital Strategy (Scottish Government, 2020), the AI Strategy (Scottish Government, 2022a), and the emerging policy architecture on violence against women and girls demonstrate a political willingness to confront the gendered dimensions of technology. These documents are not merely symbolic; they articulate a vision in which public values, rather than market logics, shape technological futures.

However, realising this feminist ambition will require a more co-ordinated approach – something that is beginning to emerge through international frameworks (Council of Europe, 2025). Scotland's digital policies frequently gesture towards fairness, inclusivity, transparency and accountability. But unless these values are concretely operationalised, through procurement, governance, regulatory influence, education and investment, they risk remaining aspirational. A feminist approach to online safety demands that Scotland embed principles of equity and justice into the design, deployment and oversight of digital systems. It also requires that there is a concerted and holistic approach to online safety, prevention of violence against women and better understandings of pathways into misogyny for men and boys, not least to allow prevention and intervention strategies to be specific, tailored and

appropriately designed, and to allow supportive and informed decision making (Walker, 2025) about next-steps for victims and survivors of TFVAWG.

SCOTTISH LEGAL AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS: STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Scotland has made notable progress in addressing digital harms. The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 is internationally recognised for its incorporation of coercive control, including technological abuse. The Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016, strengthened through subsequent reforms, provides avenues for prosecuting image-based abuse and threats. Work by the Misogyny and Criminal Justice in Scotland Working Group has recommended a standalone offence targeting misogynistic behaviour, including online forms (Scottish Government, 2022b). Government consultations on the potential for criminalisation of new forms of TFVAWG offer an indicator of the potential progress that *can* be made (Scottish Government, 2026) – albeit the focus often falls on criminal actions, sometimes to the detriment of other initiatives.

These initiatives demonstrate Scotland's commitment to tackling TFVAWG. Yet significant limitations persist:

i. Fragmented implementation

Inconsistent police responses and digital forensic capacity vary across regions, with frontline practitioners highlighting uncertainty around evidence thresholds, despite some emerging practices (Barker, 2024b). Similarly, responding to TFVAWG requires wider involvement from a range of stakeholders – within and beyond law enforcement. Initiatives such as Many Good Men (Civic Digits) and Cybersafe Scotland (n.d.) offer promise as to the potential of intervention and implementation – collective rather than fragmented responses across different dimensions of society.

ii. Regulatory constraints

Many digital harms occur on platforms governed outside Scotland's jurisdiction, limiting domestic control. The UK's Online Safety Act (2023) provides some avenues for intervention but lacks Scotland-specific mechanisms or a feminist framing of online safety. Similarly, an overreliance on 'criminalisation' efforts risks suggesting that criminal responsibility is the 'solution' to TFVAWG.

iii. Insufficient integration

Policies addressing digital and technology-facilitated harms often remain siloed: AI governance on one side, online safety on another, violence against women and girls on another still. A feminist digital approach requires integrating these domains, rather than treating them as discrete policy territories (Barker and Jurasz, 2022). This also requires a holistic, trauma-informed and gender-sensitive responsive approach (Barker, 2024a; Barker, 2024b).

FEMINIST SHAPING OF SCOTLAND'S DIGITAL FUTURE

A feminist approach to digital transformation in Scotland does not simply involve mitigating harm. It involves setting priorities for what kind of digital society Scotland intends to build. But this requires us to take a number of bold, ambitious steps. We *should* embed feminist values into design and governance. Public sector procurement must require safety-by-design principles in every digital system used in education, health, policing and social care. Platforms used by Scottish public bodies must demonstrate robust protections for women and girls.

Beyond embedding values, this must be matched with investment in specialised support and expertise. Police Scotland, the Procurator Fiscal and local authorities require specialist training and

digital forensics capability to respond effectively to TFVAWG. Support services must be adequately resourced to meet the growing demand for digital services. Interventions need to be tried and tested to ensure that prevention becomes a cornerstone rather than an experiment.

None of this will matter if the same problems keep being repeated. To prevent that, it is necessary to strengthen digital citizenship and education. Future generations will be more digitally immersed than we can imagine. So too, digital literacy strategies must be reframed to address consent, relational ethics, misogyny and the socio-technical structures underpinning harm. Education must move beyond risk-avoidance to challenge harmful masculinities and empower young people to reject TFVAWG. It must be integrated and evolve alongside our engagement and the realities of our unfolding digital nation.

This will be essential to ensure democratic participation and representation. Institutional protections are necessary to support women in public life, including clear reporting pathways, accountability mechanisms and political leadership committed to tackling online misogyny.

Above all else, whilst advocating for Scotland and Scotland's future, influencing the UK and European regulatory frameworks will become more important. Whilst Scotland lacks full regulatory autonomy, it can shape debates on the implementation of the Online Safety Act, EU digital governance dialogues and international human-rights instruments relating to TFVAWG (Council of Europe, 2026).

CONCLUSION: CLAIMING SCOTLAND'S DIGITAL PROMISE

The digital promise – of connection, opportunity, participation and justice – remains real. But it will not be realised unless Scotland confronts the gendered harms that currently define too many digital experiences. TFVAWG and TFGBV are not aberrations. Instead, they are symptoms of systems designed *without* the needs of women

and girls in mind, and *without* safety at the forefront. Improvements to criminal offences and enhanced protections are welcome developments, but are not, on their own, sufficient to address the wider, societal challenge posed by TFVAWG.

Scotland stands at a pivotal moment. The groundwork has been laid through feminist policy commitments, progressive legislation and a willingness to engage with TFVAWG as a matter of equality, dignity and democratic participation. The challenge now is one of implementation, coherence and political will. Claiming Scotland's digital promise means not leaving women and girls behind, ensuring their safety, and offering protection. It also means this needs to be tackled from a holistic perspective, one that does not pursue criminalisation at the expense of safety considerations. A shift in approach is required to ensure that protection, prevention and response mechanisms are all part of an equally, *digitally* safe Scotland.

A digitally safe Scotland is not incidental to a feminist future; it is central to it. The digital sphere can become a place of opportunity, care, equality and empowerment – but only if Scotland makes deliberate, feminist choices about how that future is *designed*.

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CONCLUSION

Where crises meet courage, a feminist future is possible

DRAWING TO A CLOSE

As this volume draws to a close, it is worth returning to the simple yet urgent invitation that we offered at the beginning: Scotland stands at a crossroads, but we invite *you* to imagine its future differently.

The chapters you have just explored clearly outline that the challenges facing women in Scotland are complex, interconnected and deeply rooted.

Yet the contributions here show that the country holds extraordinary potential. A feminist future is not only desirable – it is within reach.

All that remains is the work of building it.

Throughout this book, the voices of the contributors trace how women's lives in Scotland are shaped by power – by who has it, how it is distributed and how institutions use or neglect the authority they hold. They have also shown that feminist transformation is not limited to a single policy area or conversation. Instead, feminist potential spans the political, economic, social, environmental and technological foundations of Scotland herself.

Together, these chapters create a picture of a Scotland that is striving, struggling, learning and imagining – one that is both held back by inequality but alive with possibility.

This conclusion takes these threads but does not dwell on the crisis. Here, we look ahead, offering a snapshot of potential and of a trajectory, rather than a summary.

... BUT ONE FINAL ASK

Our conclusion has one headline message:

There is a path towards a feminist future that Scotland can *choose* to walk.

POWER: THE GAP BETWEEN POSSIBILITY AND PRACTICE

Perhaps one of the clearest themes running through this book is the sense of unmet potential.

That is particularly apparent with the potential offered by Devolution. It opened doors that Scotland has not (yet) fully walked through. Devolution offered tools to build a fairer society, yet across many areas – gender equality, local democracy, reproductive rights, social care, racial justice and economic reform – these tools have been underused or inconsistently applied.

Several of the contributions in this book highlight the persistent challenges of implementation and the resulting implementation gaps: Scotland often knows what needs to be done and has policies pointing in the right direction, yet delivery fails or falls short. Whether these gaps appear in violence prevention efforts, economic planning, local service provision, or climate policy, the effects are the same and negatively impact one group. Women.

Scotland's women continue to face barriers that Scotland has the power but not – yet – the will to remove.

This is not a failure of individuals but of systems.

Above all, it is a reminder that progressive rhetoric cannot replace structural change.

For Scotland to build a feminist future, it must be willing to stretch

the boundaries of its powers – to be bolder, braver and more ambitious than it has been as yet.

This does not necessarily require radical change – much of what is asked for in this volume is the logical *next* thing – but those things have not been adopted. This volume offers a roadmap of inequalities. It also offers possible policy changes.

CARE, VALUE, AND THE WORK THAT HOLDS SCOTLAND TOGETHER

Part I shapes the opening pages of this book by very firmly outlining the glue that holds together our nation – hidden, unrecognised and unrewarded. A feminist nation must start with the recognition that care is not an afterthought. Care is the very backbone of society. Yet, Scotland continues to rely on the unpaid labour of women to hold together underfunded systems and overstretched services. The chapters on care and the economy reveal how deeply embedded this undervaluation is. They show how poverty amongst carers, the collapse of social infrastructure and the rising demands of caring responsibilities undermine women's autonomy and wellbeing.

The pandemic made visible what has always been known to be true – society depends on women's labour, often without acknowledgement or fair compensation, if there is any compensation at all.

A feminist future requires a radical reshaping of how care is funded, shared, supported, delivered and valued. It calls for investment in services, not as a cost but as a foundation for collective flourishing. And it insists that carers, both paid and unpaid, must be central, not peripheral, to political decision-making.

BODIES, AUTONOMY AND THE ONGOING STRUGGLE FOR SAFETY

Part II of this collection brought us directly to the realities of women's bodies, health, autonomy and physical environments. These are areas where the global rollback of rights is felt most sharply. The chapters

made clear that healthcare is not neutral, but rather, it is influenced by cultural norms, medical biases and the invisibility of women's needs in clinical research and practice. Reproductive rights, too, remain contested despite recent progress. Progress is a positive development, but challenges here, too, persist.

Violence against women runs through the entire volume as a thread that cannot be separated from any other issue, and nor should it. Violence against women – in all its forms – is both a consequence of gender inequality and a driver of it. Whether through coercive control, sexual harassment, economic abuse or technology-facilitated violence, too many women in Scotland live with the daily impacts of harm. The justice system, in turn, often compounds trauma rather than addressing the societal roots of violence and inequality.

A feminist future demands more than piecemeal reforms or ad hoc 'solutions'. It requires a reimagining of justice – one that positions healing, prevention, accountability and the lived experiences of survivors at the centre. It requires health systems that listen to women, value their expertise and place their needs at the heart of service design. And, above all else, it requires a cultural shift that challenges stereotypes, dismantles misogyny in all its forms and spheres of influence, and recognises women's bodily autonomy as a non-negotiable right.

PLACE, PLANET, AND THE FUTURES WE ARE BUILDING NOW

The chapters in Part III pull the lens outward to consider Scotland not only as a nation but as a set of interconnected places, including local communities, ecological environments, migration landscapes and digital futures. The message here is also clear – feminism must be rooted in the everyday, but it must also look to the horizon and beyond.

Local delivery is not an administrative detail; it is the point at which women actually experience or are denied the benefits of national policy. Climate justice is not a side issue; it is the context

against which all future inequality will unfold. Migration is not a niche policy area; it is a test of Scotland's humanity, its values and its willingness to see women in their full dignity. And AI is not a distant technological concern, nor should it be an afterthought – it is already shaping the structures of tomorrow's economy, public sector and civic life. But it, like other technologies, also replicates bias and perpetuates inequalities – often in the form of violence – which reinforces exclusion and a lack of safety for women in Scotland.

These chapters highlight the importance of future-proofing Scotland's feminist ambitions. A feminist nation cannot rely solely on correcting past harms. It must also anticipate the new forms of inequality that emerging technologies, climate pressures and shifting demographics may bring.

Our future will not wait for Scotland to catch up.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VOICES NOT YET HEARD

This book has amplified many voices – activists, academics, practitioners, community organisers and women with lived experience. But it also acknowledges its own limits. No collection can speak for all women in Scotland; no group of contributors can capture the full breadth of experience, insight or imagination that a feminist future requires.

Recognising what is missing is, itself, a form of feminist practice. It reminds us that building a feminist nation is not the task of a single generation, discipline or political moment. It is a collective and ongoing process that must grow as new voices are welcomed in.

A feminist future must be shaped by women whose stories remain unheard – women of colour, migrant women, disabled women, young women exploring their place in the world, women in rural areas, women in poverty, women whose experiences defy easy categorisation and women who have been historically overlooked in public life.

Feminism cannot be transformative unless it is inclusive in both intention and practice.

A CALL FROM SCOTLAND'S FEMINIST FUTURE

This book was written during a period marked by overlapping crises. Even as the book was being written, crisis seemed to be the theme of the societal narratives.

Economic precarity, climate change, rising authoritarianism, strained public systems, fiscal chaos, the outbreak of conflict(s) and the unfolding, global rollback of rights form the backdrop against which feminist nation-building must take place. For many women in Scotland, these crises are not separate events but interlinked pressures shaping daily life.

Understanding this as a polycrisis is not an analytical flourish or an academic quirk, but rather a lens that reveals the interconnectedness of women's struggles – and the need for interconnected solutions.

A feminist response to the polycrisis is not simply reactive; it is proactive. It does not patch holes in the existing system; instead, it imagines a different system altogether.

The experiences and themes mapped through this book are challenging and designed to be provocative. But taken together and offered as a whole, it is also full of hope.

Each chapter, in its own way, gestures towards a Scotland that *could* be – a nation where care is valued, where local democracy thrives, where migrants are welcomed with dignity, where climate action is fair, where women's health is prioritised, where justice heals rather than harms and where technology serves equality rather than undermining it.

This book is not a work of fiction. A feminist future for Scotland is not a dream.

It is a political, social and cultural project that is already underway – driven by campaigners, community groups, researchers, practitioners and countless women whose everyday acts of resilience and resistance form the foundation of real progress. They are experts, leaders, advocates, supporters and changemakers. They are the collective voice calling out the inequalities that hold Scotland back, all whilst daring to push for a different, feminist future.

To build that future, Scotland **must**:

- ⇒ Use the full power of devolution to advance equality.
- ⇒ Transform economic systems so that care is central.
- ⇒ Embed women's health and autonomy in every level of policy.
- ⇒ Treat violence against women as a structural issue.
- ⇒ Ensure justice systems support, rather than retraumatise.
- ⇒ Make local democracy inclusive and responsive.
- ⇒ Pursue a feminist, just transition.
- ⇒ Build a humane, rights-based approach to migration.
- ⇒ Ensure women shape the digital and safe, AI-driven future.
- ⇒ Commit to listening – to the voices already raised, the voices not heard and the voices still emerging.

A feminist nation is not built by accident. It is built by intention, determination, imagination and solidarity. It grows from the belief that justice is possible and from the courage to demand more than what we have inherited.

This book does not claim to have the answers, and that was not the ambition. What this book claims to do is offer a starting point – a set of perspectives, reflections and provocations that can help Scotland move from aspiration to action and from inequality to equality.

The feminist future Scotland needs will require all of us – not just some of us.

The work begins now. We cannot do it alone.

Join us at <https://buildingafeministScotland.org>

Moving forwards: a feminist future checklist

To build a feminist nation, Scotland must:

- ✓ Use the full power of devolution to advance equality.
- ✓ Transform economic systems so that care is central.
- ✓ Embed women's health and autonomy in every level of policy.
- ✓ Treat violence against women (in all its forms, including tech-facilitated violence) as a structural issue.
- ✓ Ensure justice systems support, rather than retraumatise.
- ✓ Make local democracy inclusive and responsive.
- ✓ Pursue a feminist, just transition.
- ✓ Build a humane, rights-based approach to migration.
- ✓ Ensure women shape the digital and AI-driven future.
- ✓ Commit to listening: to the voices raised, the voices not heard, and the voices still emerging.

Beyond the book – <https://buildingafeministscotland.org>

Building a feminist nation: Scotland in the era of polycrisis is intended as both an analysis and a proposition. It situates Scotland within intersecting crises – economic, ecological, social and democratic – whilst advancing feminist approaches as necessary, not optional, to systemic transformation.

This work does not conclude with the final page. It is designed to be taken up, interrogated and extended.

ENGAGING WITH POLICY AND PUBLIC LIFE

Feminist analysis insists that structures of power are neither fixed nor distant. They are shaped through institutions, decisions and public participation. If the arguments in this book resonate with you, one direct route to engagement is through your MSP (Member of the Scottish Parliament).

At <https://buildingafeministscotland.org> you will find:

- template letters corresponding to the themes of each chapter
- guidance on adapting these materials to reflect your own perspective.

These resources are not prescriptive. Rather, they are intended to lower barriers to participation and support considered, evidence-informed engagement with policy processes.

DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING

The concept of *polycrisis* requires ongoing learning across domains. No single text can fully account for its scale or implications. To support further exploration, our website provides:

- free downloadable versions of this book, including additional materials
- summaries of key policy areas and thematic discussions covered in this book.

These materials are offered to encourage critical engagement – whether you are encountering these ideas for the first time or working within them professionally.

CREATIVE RESPONSES

Feminist nation-building is not solely a policy project. It is also cultural, spatial and imaginative. Creative practice – across art, music, writing, architecture and design – plays a vital role in:

- interpreting complex social realities
- challenging dominant narratives
- prototyping alternative futures.

We invite responses and dialogue that move beyond the written argument. On our website, you will find selected materials and prompts to support creative engagement. Contributions that re-interpret or expand upon the book's themes are part of the broader project of feminist transformation. Visit the website for more of Malini's BFN artwork and a curated playlist by Louise Mason, DJ, producer and podcast co-host of 'Have You Frozen Your Eggs Yet?'

Further resources, materials, and ways to engage, and even drop the editors a line, are all available at: <https://buildingafeministscotland.org>

Building a feminist nation: Scotland in the era of polycrisis

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

- What does the idea of a 'feminist nation' mean to you, and how does this collection challenge or expand that understanding?

Consider the different dimensions presented in the book – political, social, economic, cultural, technological – and reflect on which feel most urgent or overlooked.

- Which voices or experiences in the book felt most powerful or surprising, and why?

How did the inclusion of lived experience, professional insight and political analysis shape your engagement with the themes?

- Across the chapters, where do you see the biggest gap between Scotland's feminist aspirations and its current realities?

Which examples stood out to you? What barriers appear most resistant to change (societal, structural, cultural, political)?

- Several chapters emphasise intersectionality – class, race, disability, migration, sexuality. How well do you think Scotland is addressing these intersections today?

Where do you see progress? Where do you see stagnation or regression?

- What would your key three asks of the next Scottish Parliament be, having read this book?

If Scotland were to take one bold, transformative step toward becoming a feminist nation in the next five years, what should it be?

- The book argues that building a feminist nation requires 'all voices', not just some. Do you think there are any voices that are missing from the book and from Scotland?

If so, which voices? How might they be better included? Reflect on inclusion, representation, and whose experiences are being centred.

- The book suggests that 'change' is for the reader(s) to build. Do you agree with the policy changes this book advocates for?

Does your book club reach agreement on the changes this book advocates for? How could we put those changes into action?

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Despite some impressive legislative change under devolution, structural inequality persists across every facet of modern life in Scotland, worsening women's lives. In too many cases, superficial progress can often mask a more complicated regress.

Impatient with the pace of progress and frustrated by data – where it does exist – being in such disparate sources, the editors of this volume have created a radical roadmap for a feminist Scotland by giving a concise overview of the current inequalities in one brief, accessible publication and by setting out what can be done using tried-and-tested case studies that can help every woman in Scotland thrive beyond the current – and deeply inadequate – status quo.

This volume shows that the core injustices within paid and unpaid labour, as well as the pervasive deficiencies around the safety and well-being of women in Scotland, are having a profound effect on the life of every woman in Scotland. This is why they go to the heart of the major political, economic and social preoccupations of women in Scotland today.

This short book aims to set an expectation of understanding and knowledge on gender inequality that will assist in creating a Scotland that moves beyond rhetoric and into action which centres the most marginalised women.

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