



## Women's Budget Groups 4-Nations Conference: Women and the Cost of Living Crisis across the UK

### **Summary of third session: *Responding to the crisis – experiences and lessons we can learn***

The third and final session of the conference took the form of a panel discussion and Q&A with political representatives from each of the four nations. Chaired by Katie Gallogly-Swan, Convenor of the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG), the concluding segment brought an eye to the different policy solutions that have been implemented in each nation to address the crisis and any future work that may be undertaken to tackle the economic vulnerability of women across the UK. It also enabled attendees to ask our political representatives – Rebecca Evans MS, Welsh Government Minister For Finance and Local Government; Natalie Don MSP, Convenor of the Scottish Social Justice and Social Security Committee; Clare Bailey, former Leader of the Green Party in Northern Ireland; and Baroness Ruth Lister, Labour Life Peer – their own questions about women and the cost of living crisis in the UK.

### **Panel Discussion**

Following an introduction by the SWBG's Katie Gallogly-Swan, each panellist was invited to share their own reflections on the impact of the crisis on women within their respective nations and the policy interventions which have/need to be implemented to address these. Each panellist contribution is summarised below.

### **Rebecca Evans MS, Welsh Government Minister For Finance and Local Government**

Rebecca Evans MS kicked things off by acknowledging the dire impacts being felt by women across Wales - and those with intersecting characteristics in particular - as a result of the cost of living crisis. In terms of policy solutions, Minister Evans emphasized the difficult context the Welsh Government finds itself in, with inflation having eroded its budget to worryingly low levels. Despite the lack of uplift from the UK Government, the Welsh Government has worked - through a process of reprioritisation - to ensure that help is reaching those most affected by the crisis in this year's [Draft Budget](#). Short-term measures implemented by Welsh Government include; increased funding for the [Discretionary Assistance Fund \(DAF\)](#), which provides immediate cash support for those facing financial hardship in Wales, as well as a number of household support measures such as council tax support, heating support and support for those on pre-payment meters. Welsh Government have also taken action to support parents with the cost of the school day by increasing funding for the Pupil Development Grant, widening eligibility for free school meals and increasing its Period Dignity Grant so that products are freely available throughout schools and colleges. In addition to these short term actions, the Welsh Government are also investing in a range of longer-term interventions to address the deep-rooted inequalities that women in Wales face. These include; the Welsh [Childcare Offer](#), the guarantee of the Real Living Wage for social care workers and the work being undertaken by Welsh Government to embed gender budgeting into the Welsh budgetary processes.

### **Natalie Don MSP, Convenor of the Scottish Social Justice and Social Security Committee**

Natalie Don MSP then presented the situation from the Scottish perspective. She stressed the unequal impacts falling on women in Scotland, where they make up the majority of those on Universal Credit, in part-time or zero hour contracts and of those with higher energy needs. Natalie also highlighted the worrying effect that the cost of living crisis has had on domestic abuse levels in Scotland, with 73% of

women experiencing domestic abuse stating that the financial barriers created by the crisis have made it harder for them to leave abusive households. Like the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government has also found itself in a difficult financial position, with a limited budget and no borrowing powers. Nevertheless, as Natalie pointed out, the Scottish Government has implemented a number of measures to support women and other vulnerable groups during the crisis. These include; the [Scottish Child Payment](#) which gives eligible families on low incomes £25 per child per week, the uprating of devolved social security payments in line with inflation, the provision of free school meals for Primary 1-5, the boosting of the Carer's Allowance and the allocation of more money to the Fuel and Security Fund. The Scottish Government also provides free travel and prescriptions for women and other vulnerable groups, and has expanded its [Childcare Offer](#) to all 3-4 year olds. In her own work with the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, Natalie is currently undertaking an inquiry into [Child Poverty and Parental Employability](#), to help the Scottish Government tackle poverty and support parents in to better, more suitable employment opportunities.

### **Clare Bailey**

Next, we heard from Clare Bailey, former leader of the Green Party in Northern Ireland. Clare began by explicating the precarious political situation of Northern Ireland - which currently lacks a functioning Executive and Assembly - and stressed how this has hindered the support available for those most impacted by the crisis. Clare compared the impacts of the cost of living crisis with those of the larger intersecting crises we have experienced over the past few years – the health crisis, poverty crisis, domestic violence crisis, political crisis, energy crisis and the climate crisis – and established a common root cause - the patriarchy. In terms of policy response, Clare highlighted the need for policies which address this root cause, rather than 'tinkering around the edges and begging for breadcrumbs off the table.' She noted that as we are aware of the problems and the gendered nature of the crises impacts, all that is missing is the political will to make the changes. During her time as Green Party leader, Clare was able to implement some important measures such as the [Climate Change Act](#), which included the just transition principles and gender proofing, and a motion for debate on gender budgeting. However, she acknowledged that such interventions are not enough. Referring to the UK political system as 'broken Britain,' Clare emphasised that the only way to eradicate the unequal impacts of successive crises on women is deep, radical change, calling for women in the UK to follow the example of 1970s Iceland and go out on strike.

### **Baroness Ruth Lister**

Finally, we heard from Baroness Ruth Lister who condemned the lack of real awareness in Westminster Government of the gendered impacts of the cost of living crisis, stressing that all women are disproportionately at risk and typically bear the burden of managing poverty. With regards to policy interventions, Baroness Lister referred to the UK Government's 'cost of living package' which includes energy bill support, cost of living payments for those on eligible means tested benefits, the extension of the [Household Support Fund](#) and the April 2022 uprating of benefits. While welcoming these measures, Baroness Lister also identified a number of issues. Firstly, the benefit uprating of 3.1% is a real terms cut, as is the increase in the benefits cap, which is in effect 9.8% lower in real terms than it was in 2016. Baroness Lister went on to note that the Government's one-off payments cannot compensate for this and in effect exclude those who are not receiving a qualifying benefit at the right time. As a result, many women – especially mothers and carers – are suffering even more hardship than usual this winter. Baroness Lister stated that the only positive from the situation is the increased public awareness of the deep poverty many are suffering, which has added to political pressure. She concluded that we need to build on this and focus attention on the underlying inadequacies of the social security system, to ensure that women's poverty is a key issue as the general election approaches.

## Q&A

The session then moved on to a Q&A, during which panellists were asked questions from the Chair Katie Gallogly-Swan and conference attendees. The session covered six questions in total, two of which were general questions put to all panellists and four of which were individual. These include;

**Q1. (For Baroness Lister): Current polling points towards Labour winning the next general election. If that does turn out to be right, what do you think Labour's priorities should be, particularly for addressing the impacts of the cost of living crisis on women?**

In response, Baroness Lister acknowledged the incredibly difficult economic situation that the Labour Party would face but stressed the immediate need for short-term support measures such as abolishing the benefit cap and two-child limit, unfreezing the local housing allowance and addressing the inflexibilities associated with Universal Credit. In the longer term, Baroness Lister stated that Labour must undertake fundamental reforms of the social security system, reducing its reliance on means testing and ensuring benefits are adequate. In addition, the Party must continue to prioritise other important gendered issues such as childcare.

**Q2. (For all panellists): How does lived experience inform decision-making and how has it influenced policy interventions responding to the cost of living crisis?**

All panellists stressed the importance of speaking to people with lived experience in the development of all policy interventions, including those addressing the impacts of the cost of living crisis. Rebecca Evans MS highlighted the Equality, Race and Disability evidence units that have been established by Welsh Government and the new cabinet subcommittee created to allow individuals with lived experience, experts, service providers and other organisations to engage directly with Ministers regarding the current crisis. Minister Evans remarked on value of a recent subcommittee session involving young people and demonstrated how that session had contributed to the recent expansion of free school meals eligibility in Wales.

Natalie Don MSP also underscored the emphasis that the Social Justice and Social Security Committee places on lived experience within all of its inquiries, including the current inquiry into [Child Poverty and Parental Employability](#). Natalie also raised the issue of parliamentary lived experience, and the importance of diversity in Parliament to ensure that people with different life experiences are setting policy agendas.

Speaking in regard to her work on a just transition, Clare Bailey stressed the importance of engaging with people at a community level, seeing as each community has very different resources, capacity, goals and priorities. Clare remarked that engaging with people at this level not only redresses the often top-down heavy political approach of UK Governments, but also gives permission to - and instils a duty in - elected officials to respect and implement the demands of the local community.

To conclude, Baroness Lister underscored the importance of involving people with lived experience in the development of social security policy – both recipients and those working in the system, who bring important perspectives. Ruth also lauded the value of lived experience in her own academic work on poverty, and its centrality to a human rights approach to tackling poverty.

**Q3. (For Natalie Don MSP): Parents working in low-paid part-time work in Scotland are often ineligible for many of the protections that the Scottish Government have implemented. Is this an issue that the Social Justice and Social Security Committee will be looking at?**

Natalie acknowledged that while the protections implemented by the Scottish Government are helpful for some, for ineligible parents on low-paid, part-time work, the additional expenses of transport and childcare significantly impact the money that those individuals can bring home. She noted that she fully expects this issue to arise in the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's current inquiry on [Child Poverty and Parental Employability](#) and hopes that the work being done can help to address it. Natalie also encouraged attendees to contribute to the enquiry's upcoming [call for views](#) to ensure that the issue is raised.

**Q4. (For Natalie Don MSP): What support is being provided by the Scottish Government to women who felt forced to turn to sex work to generate income during the cost of living crisis?**

Natalie explained that addressing this issue is a commitment within the Scottish Government's Programme for Government and that they are currently working to reduce the stigma and criminalisation experienced by women in this work. She also pointed out that the Scottish Government have recently increased funding to encourage and facilitate better access to support services for women in this position. However, Natalie stressed that the common denominator for this, and many other issues in the context of the cost of living crisis, is women's poverty and that it is necessary to put an end to women having to make these types of decisions.

**Q5. (For Baroness Ruth Lister): Does Labour view investment in the care economy and its social infrastructure as part of a critical economy strategy?**

Baroness Lister explained that the emphasis that the Labour Party is currently placing on childcare as part of an economic strategy shows that they do place value on the care economy. However, she noted that in her own experience as a member of the Women's Parliamentary Labour Party, the issue of social infrastructure being part of economic policy, while being understood by Shadow Ministers, is perhaps not as explicit as it should be. She therefore encouraged attendee Labour Party members to influence thinking through the [National Poverty Forum Consultation](#) which launched a week prior.

**Q6. (For all participants): What advice would you give the four Women's Budget Groups of the UK in order to move forward and progress our objectives in 2023?**

Baroness Ruth Lister's advice for the Women's Budget Groups was to keep on going, even more loudly, to place gender at the heart of the political conversation.

Clare Bailey encouraged the Groups to break down what is being asked for across the four nations into accessible, bite-size chunks so that women across the four nations can hold their political representatives to account.

Natalie Don MSP described the numerous barriers that women across the UK still face and urged the Groups not to hold back, to continue fighting the cause and raising these issues in the appropriate forums.

Finally, Rebecca Evans MS' advice for the four Women's Budget Groups was to start now. Minister Evans highlighted that as soon as a general election is called, politicians are bombarded with the manifestos of different organisations. However, the optimum time to do this is a year before the general election, when politicians are formulating their own manifestos. Minister Evans also encouraged the Groups to 'speak the same language' as the people they are trying to influence by highlighting the gendered issues within the specific policy areas that Ministers are most interested in.