

CASE STUDY 7: ENGAGING WITH DEVOLVED GOVERNMENTS

In the UK, the legislatures and executives in the countries that comprise the UK are known as devolved governments.

SCOTTISH WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP

The budget process in Scotland allows for consultation and engagement. A significant achievement was the production of an **Equality Budget Statement** presented alongside Scotland's annual Draft Budget.

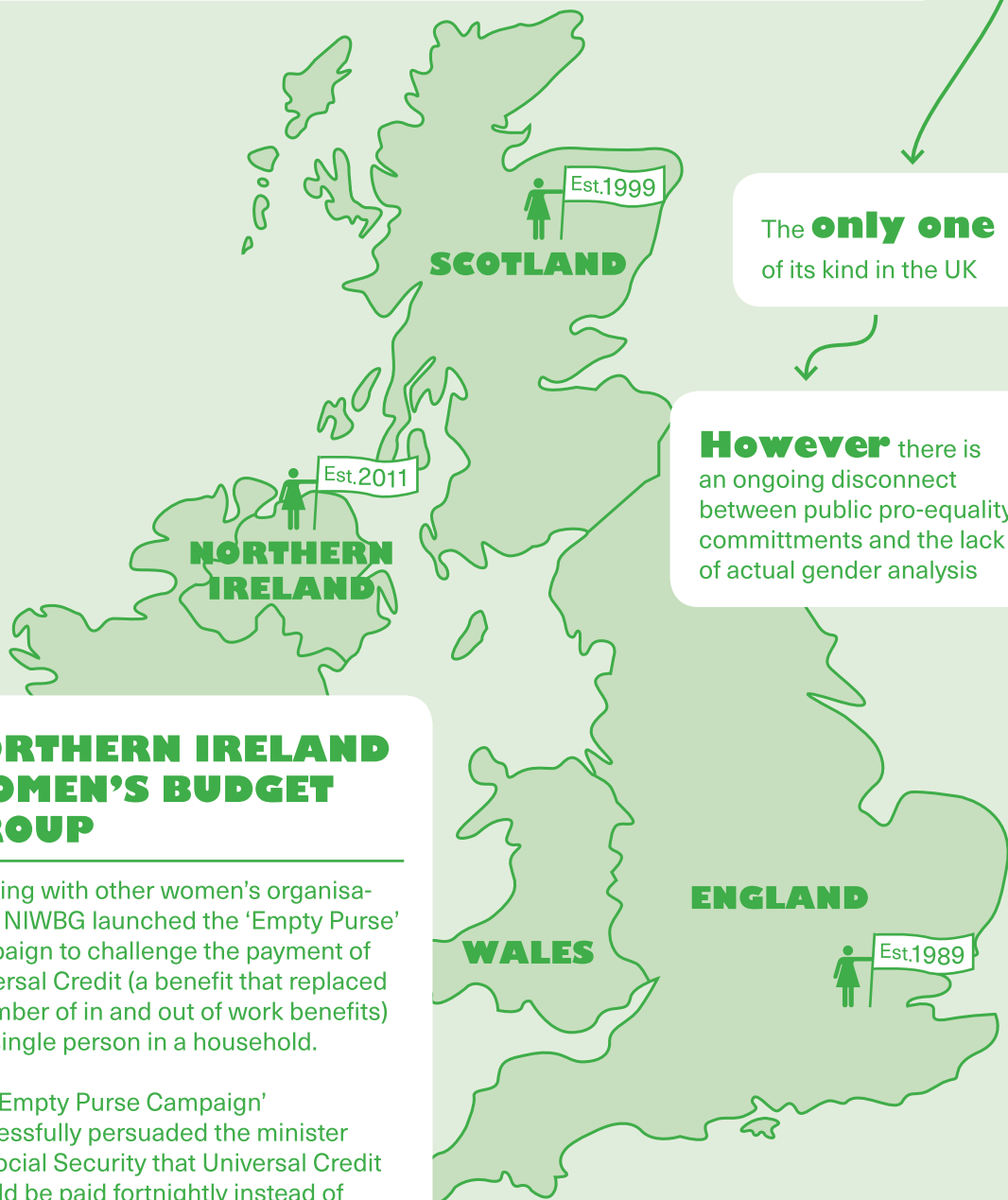
The **only one** of its kind in the UK

However there is an ongoing disconnect between public pro-equality commitments and the lack of actual gender analysis

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S BUDGET GROUP

Working with other women's organisations NIWBG launched the 'Empty Purse' campaign to challenge the payment of Universal Credit (a benefit that replaced a number of in and out of work benefits) to a single person in a household.

The 'Empty Purse Campaign' successfully persuaded the minister for Social Security that Universal Credit should be paid fortnightly instead of monthly and offered the option of a split payment to the main carer of children.



CASE STUDY 7: ENGAGING IN DIALOGUES WITH DEVOLVED GOVERNMENTS

Governments at different levels, including at autonomous regional or sub-national level, are legitimate arenas for gender responsive budgeting. In the UK, the legislatures and executives in the countries that comprise the UK are known as devolved governments, and operate in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Devolved government offers unique opportunities for the participation and representation of women in elected politics, and for the promotion of gender equality policies. In the UK, the devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Scottish Parliament in 1999 opened up such opportunities.

The women's budget groups that emerged from Northern Ireland and Scotland adopted different approaches. In Scotland the focus was on process, while in Northern Ireland protest was key. Scottish feminist activists used the creation of new budgetary processes and fiscal responsibilities as an opportunity for gender budgeting. In Northern Ireland, the budget process was less accessible to feminists. They turned their attention to campaigning against specific policy reform that would hit low-income women. Both are useful case studies in the different ways feminist groups can lobby for greater governmental consideration of gender impacts.

SCOTLAND

In 1999 feminist activists introduced the idea of gender budgeting to Scotland. The political context was favourable. The Scottish parliament proclaimed its commitment to equal opportunities, transparency and accountability. Equal representation in the new parliament was taken seriously.

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG), an unfunded voluntary civil society organisation, was formed in 1999. The core concern was the adoption of gender budgeting to advance gender equality policy. SWBG membership drew on a wealth of personal experience and expertise including professionals in gender analysis, public administration, civil society, academia and business.

In the early years the Scottish Women's Budget Group had access to new government ministers and parliamentary committees. Using these networks, the group lobbied key players in the Scottish policy-making community, encouraging them to consider gender matters in the budgeting process.

Early challenges

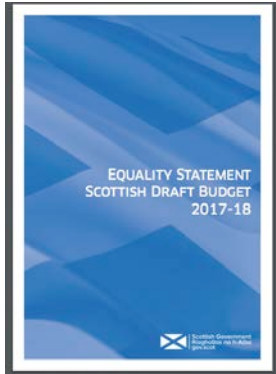
The Scottish Executive was reluctant to focus on gender specific solutions to inequality and pushed back on gender budget analysis. Instead, ministers preferred a wider analytical framework of equality, which reflected the overarching equality strategy being developed at that time. This favoured a wider socio-economic lens, within which broad concerns for equality were implicit rather than explicit policy objectives.

The Scottish Women's Budget Group argued that looking at the impacts on women and men would in fact support these wider equality goals.

Using gender analysis would develop competence among policy-makers to consider the diverse lived realities of women and men, and the intersecting discrimination of race, class, age, disability, gender and sexual identity.

Working with government from the outside

In 2000 the Scottish government convened the Equality Budgets Advisory Group, a regular forum that included civil servants, arms-length government bodies and non-government equalities charities including the SWBG. The Equality Budgets Advisory Group advised on the links between policy-making and resource allocation, and ways to integrate equality analysis into decision-making.



A significant achievement was the production of an Equality Budget Statement presented alongside Scotland's annual Draft Budget. This is the only one of its kind within the UK. It is an attempt to make visible money spent on the advancement of equality and how such decisions are made. However, it is a work in progress; more needs to be done to evidence the link between policy proposals, spending decisions and equality impact assessments.

Contradictions in political rhetoric and policy decisions

Reflecting the founding principles of openness and transparency, **the budget process in Scotland has a long period of consultation and scrutiny. This helped ease the way for an environment where gender budgeting could take place.** However, in reality the extent of gender analysis of the budget in Scotland is still limited.

There is an ongoing disconnect between public commitments to pro-equality, pro-women policy and the lack of actual gender analysis around spending decisions. Little effort has been made to apply evidenced data and analysis to economic policy.

This has resulted in contradictory policy lines which have a greater impact on gender equality. Up to 2017 there was a freeze on public sector wages, for example. A majority of women working in the public sector in low paid and part-time jobs will suffer as a result. On the other hand, since 2013 the government has committed to increasing publicly funded childcare provision. The expansion of the childcare estate is part of Scotland's infrastructure plans and its commitment to inclusive economic growth. And in some of its spending decisions the Scottish government has sought to limit the impact of changes to social security benefits introduced by the UK government.

Reflections

Discursively as well as operationally, Scotland's attempt to integrate gender budgeting differs from experiences elsewhere in the UK. Developments in Scotland reveal a relatively open door where influential voices inside government and parliament have been prepared to listen to external voices demanding feminist policy change. The pace of change has been slower than feminist advocates may have wanted. Alternative proposals for spending, revenue-raising and the equality dimensions of budgetary analysis have often revolved around the institutions of government rather than translating into progressive change.

NORTHERN IRELAND

The context for feminist organisations and women's groups in Northern Ireland contrasts significantly with that experienced by sister organisations across other regions of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. **Almost 20 years on from the 1998 Peace Agreement, women in Northern Ireland are still pressing for change in their economic, social, political and cultural status post-conflict.**

Given the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, where the formal institutions of government have not always functioned, there have been some opportunities for feminist organisations directly to contribute

to improving gendered analysis in policymaking. Initial attempts include a Gender Equality Strategy created in 2002. The Northern Ireland government initially engaged with the women's movement and other civil society organisations. However, these efforts were inconsistent, leaving feminist organisations and women's groups to seek change and influence government from a distance.

Fighting austerity

While the Northern Ireland government is devolved with some control over its spending, it was still hit by the austerity policies introduced by the UK government from 2010 onwards. In 2011 the Women's Resource and Development Agency published an influential report, 'The Northern Ireland Economy: Women on the Edge? A Comprehensive Analysis of the Impact of the Financial Crisis'. This report describes how the position of women was ignored after the 2007/2008 financial crash and in subsequent government policy responses. Just as elsewhere in the UK, women bore the brunt of public spending cuts.

Seeing little institutional response to their plight, women were galvanised. The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group (NIWBG) was established in 2011, inspired by the work of sister budget groups elsewhere in the UK. Lynn Carvill, a member of the NIWBG, attributes the clear and disproportionate impact of welfare reform policies on the financial situation of women as the impetus behind forming the budget group.

The Empty Purse Campaign

The Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group focused on a specific policy proposal that would have a major effect on poorer women's incomes. This policy was Universal Credit, which combines several social security payments, such as housing support and money for children, into one monthly payment. The policy was developed by the Westminster government in London but would be rolled out in Northern Ireland too. Only one Universal Credit payment could be made per household to a nominated person.

Working with other feminist and women's organisations, the NIWBG created the 'Empty Purse Campaign' to challenge the Universal Credit payment to a nominated person in the household. They were concerned that 'nominated person' equated in perception and reality to being a male 'head of household'. Women mobilised against this potential transfer of resources from women to men. These were arguments for women's economic autonomy fought and won in decades past.



The 'Empty Purse Campaign' engaged in a mix of actions. They hosted a series of seminars for grassroots women's groups, presented evidence to committees in the Northern Ireland Assembly, lobbied politicians at party political conferences, created an online campaign where over 5,000 constituents sent letters to their political representatives and conducted a media campaign.

"The 'Empty Purse Campaign' provided a rare opportunity to amplify women's voices on social and economic policy issues in Northern Ireland above the ongoing, largely bi-lateral male narrative on issues relating to the conflict."

– Lynn Carvill

Reclaim the Agenda, a feminist collective, emerged from the discussions and actions around the 'Empty Purse Campaign'. Women wanted a space where feminists from a wide range of backgrounds could work collectively and unrestricted by the boundaries of their organisations. From this space came the Empty Purse street protests, whereby women and children marched against the inherent gender bias in the new Universal Credit proposals. This was a powerful and important facet to the 'Empty Purse' campaign. It provided a rare opportunity to amplify women's voices on social and economic policy issues in Northern Ireland above the ongoing, largely bi-lateral male narrative on issues relating to the conflict.

Reflections

The 'Empty Purse' campaign secured two key wins. The minister responsible for Social Security proposed changing Universal Credit payments to fortnightly rather than monthly and offered the option of a split payment to the main carer of children. This would be determined by the government and paid into separate bank accounts. These commitments have yet to be operationalised but represent a significant victory for feminist activism and the power of gendered analysis in public policy and resourcing decisions.

Facing instability in Northern Ireland's political institutions and the added uncertainties of Brexit, activists hope that

the Northern Ireland Women's Budget Group alongside other feminist and women's organisations will find opportunities to influence progressive social and economic policies. Historically, it has been times, such as these, when social movements have matured and flourished!

Lynn Carvill, NIWBG

Despite the differing institutional contexts, there are similarities in the feminist activism of women's budget groups in Scotland and Northern Ireland. An important aspect of the work in both jurisdictions was the need to learn from the work of sister organisations, locally and internationally.

Both groups made use of existing networks, working with women's, feminist and other advocacy organisations. Through collective efforts they built voice and visibility to the question of women's economic status and the gendered effects of UK and devolved government policy.

Crucial to creating a women's budget group is the tenacity and commitment of members. In these case studies members have limited resources but work to maintain a consistent and continuous presence in discussions on budgeting and policy.

The focus of a women's budget group will depend on the make-up of its members. A dominance of members with links to women's organisations and NGOs created conditions for direct protests and campaigns in Northern Ireland, whereas a membership dominated by academics and civil servants led to more policy analysis in Scotland.

It is clear though, that while the nature of the tension with government may be different, women's budget groups have a common need to maintain pressure from outside of governmental institutions and hold government to account for its promises and actions.