

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.