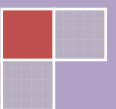


2009

The Scottish Women's Convention

Disabled Women
Roundtable Event
31st March 2009



The Scottish Women's Convention

The purpose of the Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is to communicate and consult with women in Scotland to influence public policy. Through the Convention's policy work, round table and celebratory events the SWC strives to have contact with women and relevant organisations. The SWC aims to provide an effective way of consulting with a diverse range of women in Scotland.

The Scottish Women's Convention has a network of over 300,000 women from relevant organisations throughout Scotland.

Roundtable Event – Disabled Women

The SWC endeavour to ensure its policy position represents the diverse lifestyles and viewpoints of women residing in Scotland.

In working towards this commitment the SWC held a roundtable event on **Tuesday 31st March 2009** at the Centre for Inclusive Living in Glasgow and invited disabled women to discuss issues that affect them.

The SWC look forward to repeating the success of this event in other venues throughout Scotland and in doing so capture the important contribution this group of women can make towards influencing policy issues now and in the future.

The SWC wish to extend their thanks to the women who took part in the roundtable event.

Question 1 – What are the issues affecting disabled Women living in Scotland?

Response to this question quickly established that the majority of women the SWC spoke to at this event were confronted by challenges of “double discrimination” in many aspects of their lives.

“We still face discrimination. One is because we are women and two because we are disabled.”

The women acknowledged that legislation such as the Disability Equality Duty (2006) and the shift in society away from a Medical Model of Disability - a “cure or care for” approach - towards a Social Model of Disability i.e. a focus on the economic, environmental and cultural barriers encountered by people who have some form of impairment - had improved aspects of equality and widened opportunity for many disabled women in Scotland. Nevertheless, it was apparent from feedback that the women continued to face significant barriers to participation due to attitudinal, social and environmental obstacles.

An important issue for the majority of the women was a continuing lack of self confidence. They expressed frustration that society in general and too many public/private sector workers continue to hold a pervasively negative view of an individual’s impairment that consequently influences their engagement with and response to that person.

“They still see the wheelchair not the person.”

“Despite the equality agendas, decisions about lots of issues are taken out of your control by service providers.”

The group would like more robust Scottish Government guidance provided to public sector services in how Equality Duties might be more effectively fulfilled. The women do not feel enough focus is given to the attitudinal obstacles facing disabled women.

For some participants, self confidence has been eroded due to disabling attitudes they had experienced in the past. For some of the women this continued to have an adverse effect on their personal development. They felt assumptions of their capabilities by educators or a lack of mainstream curriculum in a segregated school for the disabled had disempowered them from an early age.

It was felt this educational barrier has a particularly adverse impact on disabled women due to gender challenges already faced by women in educational streaming and career opportunities. Participants believed that this multiple barrier too often confined disabled women to low paid subsistence employment or a status of being unemployable.

“It makes it particularly difficult for disabled women to be financially independent and self sufficient.”

Participants strongly believe it is unacceptable that pay inequalities continue to blight the lives of women in Scotland today. Furthermore, they felt that women who face multiple barriers including ethnicity, disability and social exclusion are disproportionately disadvantaged in educational opportunity and career choice. They would welcome efforts by the Scottish Government to address this fundamental gender injustice.

The women unanimously agreed that “hidden” impairments were frequently the least tolerated by mainstream society and the women whose disabilities fell within this category confirmed it was especially difficult in workplaces or when dealing with retail and public services.

“There can be any number of impairments of the mind, body or senses which cannot be seen and accessing support and engaging understanding from services or the public can be difficult”

It was felt that society was increasingly visual in the comprehension of other individuals and assessment was often based on what was seen.

“If you look “normal” then you are expected to react and cope normally. It is so difficult; you face so much impatience and intolerance. It is terrifying quite frankly. Without the Brain Injury Support Group I would find it very hard.”

The women agreed that in present day social realities it can be extremely difficult for those who do not conform to the very narrow societal definition of “normal”, especially for individuals whose impairment is not visually informed to the public. Participants felt that a campaign of awareness should be undertaken by the Scottish Government to emphasis the hidden nature of many aspects of disability and to widen the understanding of diversity in society.

There was strong feeling that whilst disability awareness had arguably improved; the achievement of disability equality was still some way off. It was suggested that there was an underlying belief by many employers and service providers that minimum standards of evaluation and compliance were sufficient to meet the needs of disabled individuals.

There is too much tick boxing, too much of a “We have a ramp that covers it” approach.

It was agreed by the women that access audits need to be dealt with from the point of view of removing as many barriers as possible not just complying with legal minimums. The group thought it was important that companies monitored employee attitude as part of any disability equality programmes – they suggested it should be about improving ways of thinking not just raising awareness.

“Equality for disabled women is about really thriving in the workplace not just coping. It is about having equal access to services and organisational opportunities, not just improved access.”

The women believe there is still an insidious attitude within many workplaces that disabled individuals should “appreciate” the opportunity to be employed with employers and colleagues failing to recognise their expertise and skills. The group suggested that Scottish Government/employer initiatives to recruit and retain disabled workers must ensure that these employees are not defined or patronised as “special”. Management practices should attempt as far as possible to be inclusive.

They also felt that Job Centre Plus “Access to Work” programmes, while providing a positive means of support, needed to be improved significantly through programme awareness and increased funding. There was significant criticism of the timeliness and consistency of support from this agency.

“It can take too long to get the support or adjustments you need and you end up just leaving the job.”

As feedback suggested that the “Access to Work” programme was difficult to use and not widely known about the women felt the Scottish Government should advocate for increased UK Government funding to develop and improve this service.

The under-representation of women within the Disability Rights Movement was also issue for participants who overwhelmingly felt their gender needs were subordinated or overlooked due to the high proportion of male protagonists within various lobbying and support groups.

“It they are looking for a successful role model it is usually a man e.g. - David Murray. More women are needed in positions of influence within Inclusion Scotland.”

The group believed that disabled women lacked suitable role models to aspire to and that contributions to public debate or areas of influence by disabled women were frequently the result of tokenism. They strongly recommended that resources should be made available to develop leadership programmes for disabled women to encourage greater participation

Further discussion focused on the “spread effects” of disability especially for women. Comments were made on conjectures made by many in society that an individual’s disability negatively affects other senses or abilities i.e. the whole person is impaired.

The group felt that this was an issue particularly illustrated by attitudes towards disability and sexual relationships and more specifically a woman’s reproductive system.

“You can tell the whole topic is outside the comfort zone of a lot of people. There is an assumption you can’t or won’t have children or surprise that you are a sexual being at all.”

Distressing experiences of discrimination reported by participants included one participant being offered sterilisation on both occasions she underwent a caesarean section. Several of the group confirmed sexual education was curtailed or denied in school as it was assumed it was inappropriate.

The women hope that these brief insights will encourage the Scottish Government to ensure that all public policy enshrines the right of all women and especially disabled women to control all aspects of their sexual health and in particular their fertility.

Reference was made to data that suggests disabled women are twice as likely to be a victim of domestic violence as non-disabled women. The group were particularly dismayed that set against this alarming statistic was the view from several women's aid groups that while disabled women suffer proportionately higher levels of abuse than non-disabled women they have fewest suitable safe refuge places available to them.

“Disabled women are seen as the problem not the perpetrators of violence. Too many disabled women are told by social services a residential home is the only option as refuge provision is not suitable.”

Participants strongly felt that residential accommodation is not set up to support or protect disabled women who are victims of domestic violence. They recommended that the Scottish Government prioritise resources to ensure that refuge availability is made suitable for all women in Scotland.

Several women commented that engagement with Health Services or Social Work Departments is not always a positive experience. They said there is frequently a lack of sensitivity in a professional's response to the reactions of a disabled person, especially when the impairment makes it harder to deal with stressful or traumatic situations. The group also suggested that some workers were too quick to make assumptions about a person's needs or comprehension.

“Too much is taken out of your control. Unfair stereotypical assessments are made of a disabled person. They have very low expectations your life style. You drive, go abroad! You have kids?”

The group suggested support and communication could be made more positive through improved training and impact awareness about disability being in place at entry levels in these professions. They felt this should be encouraged and promoted and by policy makers and service providers as a key competency within these services.

It was clear from personal experiences the women shared with the SWC that attitudinal barriers that lead to illegal discrimination cannot be overcome simply through legislation. The group strongly felt that cultural change is needed to eliminate widespread societal evaluations and categorising of the disabled. Core values should be underpinned by respect for every individual's right to self determination.

Question 2 – What is the impact of the recent changes in welfare provision for Disabled Women?

Response to this question confirmed a great deal of concern amongst the women about the introduction of Employment Support Benefit (ESP) and the phasing out of Incapacity Allowance.

Reservations were expressed about the level of claimant responsibility imposed by the new processes especially for those who may have cognitive and intellectual impairments. There was a widely held view that many disabled people who are unsure what is required of them will be disadvantaged rather than supported by the new conditions.

“There are unreal expectations underpinning the responsibilities. The potential loss of benefits for failing to respond to work related interviews for example puts enormous pressure on these individuals as non-compliance could leave them financially unsupported.”

All participants agreed that the majority of disabled people welcomed opportunities to work and they supported the principal of utilising their many talents through employment. The women however remain convinced that private sector agencies will be motivated by profit rather than altruism.

“Disabled women with complex issues need specific and structured support in order to make the transition into work that takes up resources and these services are paid by results.”

They believed that disabled women could be particularly exploited by profit incentives and be pushed into low pay work which leaves them financially worse off.

There was clear concern amongst the group that personal advisors will not have the necessary expertise to effectively assess the capabilities of those with permanent or long term impairments. They believe there could be a blurring of opinions between those acting for work placement agencies and the health services which will expose them to multiple anxieties.

“What do I do, take a job and risk deterioration in my physical or mental health or refuse the job and risk having no income?”

The women feared that given the overall agenda of the Welfare Reform Bill, arguably to reduce the number of claimants; vulnerable clients could be shoehorned into roles without the necessary degree of support for long term job opportunity.

“Who decides when someone is job ready? What about the huge personal barriers to be overcome such as confidence or poor communication skills? I am really scared I will be pushed into work before I am capable emotionally, never mind my other issues.”

Women within the group reported they had experienced problems with the Pathways to Work Programme and access to the ESA. Most admitted they had encountered difficulties in getting relevant or specific information.

“The whole regime is totally unfriendly to anyone with a long term impairment or disability. It is very hard to know the where, when and how of the system. It is not easy to get advice.”

Some of the women had particular issues with helpline referral which they felt did not deliver the level of specialist advice they might need. There was also a high level of frustration that automated selection programmes can be very challenging for those with memory or cognitive impairments.

There was substantial negative comment about the underlying punitive elements of benefit conditions placed on those with long term or permanent impairments. It was felt expectations of work related activity have to be balanced against the right support being available at the right time for disabled people on an ongoing and sustainable basis.

Overall the group thought that forcing people to work for benefits when there is no real opportunity or financial benefit is basically forced labour.

“If there are jobs available which are fairly paid and provide real opportunities for disabled people, then I am sure most of us would want to take them without the threat of sanctions being needed.”

It was suggested that if one of the determining factors in reforming welfare provision was to assist those who wanted to work in being able to do so, then it was also important to embed responsibilities with employers.

The women believed that the majority of UK employers do not have a sickness management policy that has the flexibility to be supportive of long term impairments. It was felt the Disability Discrimination Act offered only limited protection within the workplace and that many significant and disabling conditions were in fact the catalyst for disciplinary action.

“I feel as a disabled woman I need to continually demonstrate my capabilities and general good health more than my colleagues who are not disabled. They might hire you but many still see you as a risk.”

Overall the group indicated that the concerns raised in response to this question demonstrated the necessity of robust and flexible frameworks to support individuals with impairments. Their hope was that policymakers and service providers fully resourced and recognised and the importance of complying with promises of pertinent and personalised programmes of assistance for the disabled.

If you require further information or copies of this report please contact Isabelle Lannon, SWC Policy Officer on 0141 248 8186 or email isabelle.lannon@scottishwomensconvention.org



Scottish Women's Convention
Blythswood House
200 West Regent Street
Glasgow G2 4DG
0141 248 8186