

2008

The Scottish Women's Convention

Report on Fort William Roadshow

August 2008

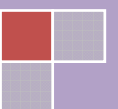


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Introduction

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.

Background to Roadshow Events

In 2007 the SWC undertook a series of "Roadshows" across Scotland to consult and engage with women in order to draw together their views and comments on issues of concern in contemporary Scottish life. These were presented to relevant policy makers, interested parties and also made available to our wider network. The response was enthusiastic and SWC recommendations were delivered to appropriate decision making bodies on behalf of the women who have taken part.

The SWC Roadshows have proven to be a popular and effective way to reach a large and diverse population of women who might otherwise have no opportunity to present their opinions or concerns.

Our third regional visit of 2008 took place at the Ben Nevis Hotel in Fort William on Thursday 21st August.

24 women registered for the event. The format for discussion was centred on aspects of Poverty, Employment and Education, Sexual Health and Violence against Women and Children.

The wide age range of the participants from 16 years right up to senior years ensured a topical mix of views and opinions which were representative of women in the area.

The SWC would like to thank the women of Fort William and Lochaber for their enthusiastic participation in this event and for the warm welcome we received.

Fort William and Lochaber

The area of Fort William and Lochaber is a huge rural landscape and covers more than 4,864 square kilometres of the Scottish West Highlands. The Lochaber population of about 20,000 often expands to several times this number in the peak summer periods

Lochaber is just one part of the Highlands, situated in the South West corner and covering from Mallaig and the Small Isles down to Glencoe. It is an area rich in diversity and extremes. Its 4,468 square kilometres encompass Britain's highest peak, deepest loch and most westerly mainland point. With a population of 19,620, its rurality is demonstrated by a population density of 4.6 persons per square kilometre. The main town is Fort William with a population of around 12,000 (including the villages of Caol and Corpach). Since the elevation of Inverness to city status, Fort William is now the largest town in the Highlands

It is a major transport node comprising the A82 trunk road (Inverness/Glasgow), A830 Road to the Isles, a railway terminus, port and canal.

<http://www.lochaber.com/highlandcouncil/index.htm>



Poverty

“What are the issues of poverty which affect Women in Fort William and Lochaber?”

Key Points raised by the participants:

- A lack of affordable, suitable housing.
- Low paid jobs/seasonal employment.
- High cost of transport and fuel.
- A lack of affordable leisure facilities for families.
- The loss of postal services in rural areas.
- High food costs/lack of choice/poor quality in rural areas.
- Low income/low asset fee of £100 to address debt.
- The Welfare and Benefit System - access and process.

It was unsurprising that many of the issues which have an impact on conditions of poverty in Skye should be reinforced during our visit to Fort William.

A lack of affordable property and social housing was overwhelmingly the first issue raised by the discussion groups when asked about poverty in their area.

The women felt that the popularity of the area for tourism skews the perceptions of rural housing poverty. They also believed it is well recognised that scenic enticements which draw people to the area inflate house prices and put property purchase beyond the range of many local residents.

“In some areas 50% of the housing can be lying empty as they are holiday homes. The fact is locals are struggling to get affordable accommodation.”

“There is an acute lack of affordable housing in rural areas especially for our young people and for single people.”

The high demands placed on local accommodation by tourism also meant that when affordable private tenancy can be procured it is too often sub standard, damp and expensive to heat or only available with a short tenancy option.

“In cities they would certainly class some of this housing as slum. Believe me it is still that here, even if it has a view.”

A number of women expressed concern that there was a tendency by the Local Authority to group “problem” families together creating an environment of isolation for those also living there. This further exacerbated feelings of exclusion and deprivation for them which was difficult to escape due to the lack of alternative housing.

The participants who were in receipt of housing benefit expressed frustrations due to a lack of local contact to deal with problems. A few women stated that delay in

We are determined to improve transport links across Scotland so that communities and individuals can make the fullest possible contribution to our goal of increasing sustainable economic growth.

Transport minister – Stewart Stevenson 29th August 2008
www.scotland.gov.uk/news

People in rural areas are less likely to find that services are convenient relative to people in the rest of Scotland.

Workers in remote rural areas are more likely than others to have a second job.

In remote rural areas 43% of households are classed as being in fuel poverty compared to 30% in accessible rural and 21% in the rest of Scotland.

www.scotland.gov.uk
 Rural Scotland key facts 2008

Rural areas include fragile spots, particularly in the periphery and the islands. These are deprived in several ways, including income, employment, skills and health and suffer from inadequate infrastructure, higher costs and lower access to services

The Scotsman - Divided Land – by John Ross- 21st February 2008

investigations, which they felt would have been resolved promptly locally, had put the security of their accommodation at risk.

Overall the women said if communities and families are to flourish and economic growth is to be sustained in the area then affordable, high standard social housing is a priority throughout the Lochaber region.

Although more accessible to main transport connections than other parts of the Highlands, the issue for the women of Fort William and Lochaber was the cost of transport for those on low incomes. Especially for those who live in the more remote parts of Lochaber.

“Car ownership is expensive, taxis out of the question and buses, when available, are not cheap when you have a family.”

What the women would like policymakers to provide is a transport system in rural areas which lessens the reliance families have on cars. They would welcome subsidised travel being extended in recognition of the unique demographics of the Highlands of Scotland and the difficulties this presents in accessing employment and services.

“It becomes a matter of necessity for most to have a car but using it to service the needs of the whole family for travel becomes prohibitively expensive. Those on low income are particularly limited in opportunity because of this when faced with the cost of public transport as an alternative.”

Participants said unemployment is undoubtedly a factor in socio-economic barriers encountered by those on low income deciles in the region. However, they also emphasised the commonness of “working poor”. Seasonal employment conditions, for example, in tourism and agriculture and the low wage remuneration within these employment sectors meant that being in work did not always offer financial security.

“Too many within the area cannot rely on long term jobs and or wages that can sustain a family. Minimum wages and high living costs don’t lift families out of poverty.”

They also said that there was a predominance of part time employment openings for women. Participants said there were much fewer full time opportunities in the area available to them. This severely reduced career development prospects and also the means for women to support themselves independently.

Because of the limitations of part time work or limited seasonal availability too many women, especially lone parents or single women, found themselves in a welfare/work income struggle where there was no clear advantage and more often a distinct financial disadvantage in taking up employment due to travel cost and childcare.

The women believed that most people do want to work and those on benefits confirmed this would be their choice if possible. They suggested more support through affordable childcare, enhanced housing benefits provision and contribution to travel costs would go some way to making work economically viable for them.

It has long been argued that the complexity of the welfare and benefit system can disadvantage those most in need of its services. The women commented that the continued centralisation of services is having an additionally adverse impact on those furthest away from social inclusion. They believed it exposes vulnerable people to multiple deprivation due to their lack of awareness of what support is

available and the pressure on services reduces the capacity for personalised support. The women were critical of what they saw as a one size fits all approach and a lack of communication between agencies.

“It is so hard to know what is out there and where to go for help. There is no local connection for benefits. People in need in the Highlands are losing out I think.”

“There can be a lack of geographical understanding of the Highlands. Explanations of why something might be difficult because of accessibility aren’t understood which is frustrating”

Some younger women said there is a dependence on having a phone to obtain help or advice. For some living in hostels or temporary accommodation privacy is difficult and they may only have access to a mobile phone. This can be costly when waiting in a call queue or having to go into lengthy detail. The women said that all calls to benefit providers should be connected universally free of charge.

It was clear that delays in dealing with any benefit request coupled with inflexible criteria procedures often has detrimental repercussions not only on individuals but more often their families.

“My child benefit took 12 weeks to process. I found it impossible to get any assistance to sort it quicker and I was alone with a small baby.”

One participant who was without family support was working during the school holidays and would have liked to continue to work on a Saturday or Sunday on return to school but due to the potential loss of benefits could not.

“I think the system discriminates against those who want to work. I can’t go on Income Support now until I go back to school and I can’t get a grant for school clothing until I am on Income Support and I can’t work even one day a week or I am worse off.”

Widespread evidence suggests deprivation caused by poverty limits choices. For low income families in remote rural areas a lack of choices is further magnified due to limitations already inherent in the locality such as physical isolation, limited access to services and reduced employment opportunities. Comments from our participants confirmed that poverty in their area is not confined to fiscal deprivations.

There was dismay at the reduction in postal services in remote rural areas and an increasing worry that the tendering for the post office card service will remove this service from the Post Office and see a further reduction in services ¹

“The vulnerable and elderly in rural areas need the post office. It is an essential part of small communities.”

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/jun/02/post/print> - Post office closures will set off outcry, say MPs

“The current Post Office Card Account is the only financial service available in many of our rural areas and is also vital income for many sub post offices. If the Post Office were to lose this contract it would be the death knell of many more sub post offices and we would face yet another round of savage cuts.”

Mike Weir MP, SNP Spokesperson on Post Office – SNP News 6th July 2008 <http://www.snp.org/node/13908>

A number of women commented on the high food costs in remote communities where provision was usually only one shop. They were especially critical of the quality and price of fruit and vegetables which they said made it difficult to comply with healthy eating guidelines.

“The fresh produce in our shop is ordered remotely by the main distribution centre. They will not approve the delivery of more until the supply in the shop is exhausted no matter how deteriorated it becomes.”

“There is a direct link between poverty and diet. We pay too much in Lochaber for poor provisions. These local stores are connected to national businesses focused on profit. There always seems to be plenty of alcohol on sale. They think more about what holidaymakers will spend money on than what local communities need.”

Leisure facilities were scant in rural areas and participants felt more could be done to provide access to family friendly activities in the region that focused on the needs of the community rather than solely attracting tourism. The cost of leisure facilities in Fort William was also referred to as prohibitive if you were on limited income.

“It costs £4 for a child’s swimming session. It is a lot of money if you have 2 or 3 children.”

Some participants also expressed concern that access to mental health support was difficult as contact with the Community Mental Health Team was through referral only. They would welcome a more proactive approach to engage with this service.

A particular mention was made of the requirement to provide a £100 fee in order to address debt issues.

The Low Income Low Asset scheme will be available to those with an income of less than £220 (the minimum wage for a 40-hour week) and no assets worth more than £1,000. It will allow them to be declared bankrupt for a fee of £100.

Ministers will lay regulations under the Bankruptcy and Diligence Act 2007 to let the Accountant in Bankruptcy provide this service. The scheme is aimed at those whom their creditors consider not worth pursuing through the courts, who have no way to declare themselves bankrupt.²

The participants are concerned that a fee of £100 would be prohibitive for someone in this extremely difficult position and would like this administration charge to be waived.

² <http://www.journalonline.co.uk/News/1004854.aspx> 3rd January 2008 – The Law Society Journal Online

EDUCATION AND WORK

“What are the barriers women face when returning to education or work?”

“What career advice did you receive?”

Key Points raised by the participants:

- Limited course choice in the area – out-migration of young people
- A lack of childcare in the area
- Legislation on childcare too complicated
- Benefits are not flexible enough
- Not enough personalised career support
- A need for more employers to support family friendly working policies

All of our participants were positive about having a college situated in Fort William as part of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). They welcome the access it gave the population to Further Education and training locally. It was agreed by most of the women that Higher Education opportunities however were limited by course choice availability and they would like to see this widened.

“The UHI as a whole do offer a wider choice for degree courses. Availability in Lochaber College is quite restricted if you want to pursue a BA or MA.”

“Too many of our young people who want to pursue academic courses leave and don’t come back”

Younger participants expressed criticism of the apparent lack of communication and interaction between benefit agencies and Lochaber College administration. They said it can be very time consuming and complicated trying to access further education when in receipt of benefits and this can be discouraging for them in their efforts towards personal/career development.

“I am waiting to hear from Income Support if I have permission to go to college. I only have until a week on Monday until the course starts. I asked Income Support on the 6th of July. They need to communicate a lot quicker.”

“The local college has little knowledge of the relationship between benefits and courses. There is a lack of joined up advice and support. It needs to get better.”

There was a lot of concern about the impact of pursuing further/higher education and the potential detrimental impact on benefits income. It was clear from discussions that stronger communication between educational institutions and welfare providers would strengthen advice given to applicants allowing them to arrive at informed decisions before any financial crisis threatened because of a lack of information or the wrong information.

Around 28% of parents with children under 18 who are on incomes of less than £15,000 a year after tax said they had been unable to get a job or could not continue with an existing job because the cost of childcare was simply too great.

The typical cost for a full time place with a childminder for a child under 2 in Scotland is £139.

[Childcare costs in 2008
www.daycare trust.org.uk](http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk)

The current average award through the childcare element of the Working Tax Credit is £48.45 per week. There is no extra help for parents with three or more children.

[HMRC 2007 Child and working Tax Credit Statistics](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk)

Gender segregation in the workplace is a key cause of the gender pay gap. The pay gap will not close if women continue to be trapped in low wage sectors of the job market.

www.unioison-scotland.org.uk Response to Discussion paper on Tackling Poverty, Inequality and

Fact – 90% of engineering jobs are held by men: 93% of primary school teachers in Scotland are women.

Should your job choice and earning power be limited by whether you are male or female?

www.careers-scotland.org.uk/whichcareer/knowyourself/positivecareer.asp

Participants suggested a college drop in centre at the local Citizens Advice Office would assist in improving the continuity and accuracy of support and information.

The women felt that similar barriers are encountered in attempting to access work.

“The barriers to people on benefits who want to access work or training are horrendous!

“I want to be able to work but part-time work may lead to a loss of benefit and I would be worse off. You have to think – is it worthwhile? Benefits need to be a lot more flexible.”

It was felt that the prevalence of low skilled/low paid job availability in the area did not encourage women back into the workplace as the additional financial outgoings such as transport and childcare costs outweigh potential benefits. The women on the whole found this very unsatisfactory especially in light of imminent benefit changes which will require lone parents on benefits with a youngest child over 12 years (reducing to 7 years by 2010) having to look for work.

“Too many low paid, low skill jobs are forcing women to live below the poverty line in rural areas add the additional burden of childcare costs and transport and there is no real incentives to encourage women back to work,”

In every area of Scotland the SWC have consulted with women, the topic of childcare availability and cost is raised as a major barrier to employment or education for women. The women of Lochaber strongly agreed with this position and added that societal expectations placed upon women to accept the burden of caring - in every manifestation of that role - made it very difficult for women to develop personally or economically.

This expectation to provide familial caring is further compounded by workplace constraints due to shift and weekend work and a lack of flexibility from employers, often due to the size of businesses in the area.

“A lot of family friendly legislation is not enforceable; it is down to management discretion and business needs. When there is a small workforce there is not a lot of flexibility available”

Affordable and accessible childcare provision is at a premium in Scotland. Childcare is appreciably even more of a problem for women where communities lack registered child-minders or nursery provision and families may live some distance away.

“You may have to rely on neighbours or friends and provide them with a reimbursement. You can't claim for this so it leaves you out of pocket.”

The women would like the issue of childcare to be made a priority by the government with particular attention paid to the specific problems facing rural and remote rural communities.

Many of the women felt that vocational routes to career progression were severely hampered in the area as local employers lacked the facilities and resources to develop or even offer worthwhile career training opportunities. The younger women said this presented a number of young women with a dilemma when considering pursuing further education in the area. They see no point in getting into debt to be overqualified for many of the jobs available in the area.

“Local employers are trailing behind local educational opportunities.”

It was the opinion of the group that this lack of career opportunity can be responsible for a disinclination to remain in school if you were not academic. They thought this was especially true of young girls who were particularly limited in the sectors of employment open to them in Lochaber.

Overall they did not feel there was evidence of any focused attempt by potential employers or advisors to reverse conventional gender preferred occupational segregation. Career discussions often followed well established patterns for any young women not entering higher education such as: hairdressing, hospitality or tourism. There was little evidence of the active promotion of alternatives.

"I don't feel that the advice is personalised enough. I was told to "aim higher" not sure what that meant. To what and how?"

"You are either a clever girl or forget it - you get lost in the system."

The participants were not critical of career advice overall, a number of young women praised the advice they received from Careers Scotland. However, they did want to emphasize that advice and support was not always consistent and for that reason a lot of potential is lost and confidence depleted early in life.

"At some schools you get it really good advice and support – but at others you don't."

It was also pointed out that there is much encouragement to do a variety of further education courses however there is not always any connection to the local employment opportunity. This leads to expectations being unfulfilled and a long term loss of confidence which takes some women further away from the job market due to deteriorating confidence levels.

Many expressed their disappointment that trade apprenticeship opportunities were much diminished and they felt that more effort could be made by the Government and employers to invest in this type of enterprise.

They said there needs to be a real prospect of vocational career options for women in order to achieve economic parity with men and increase employment prospects. They felt there was still a cultural barrier to women being given access to predominantly male employment sectors which severely restricts potential and increases the risk of real skill shortages in Scotland.

"I think trades are under-supported and the value of apprenticeships much demeaned through short term training. We need investment in our skill base and we need to ensure there is equal opportunity for girls to access training at all levels and in all sectors of employment"

The second National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal 2000), which included over 11,000 men and women aged 16–44 in Great Britain found that:

The average (median) age at first heterosexual intercourse was 16 nearly a quarter of women aged 16–19 had heterosexual intercourse before they were 16

About 80 per cent of young people aged 16–24 said that they had used a condom when they first had sex

Less than one in ten had used no contraception at all when they first had sex

Nearly half of young women aged 16–24 said they wished they had waited longer to start having sex. They were twice as likely to say this if they had been under 15 when they first had sex

SEXUAL HEALTH

What types of services are available to women in Skye and Lochalsh when dealing with issues of Sexual Health?

How can these services be improved?

Key points raised by the participants

- Lack of appropriate sexual education – relationships
- Media can have negative influence on young people
- Children are sexualised too young
- Peer group educators

As you might expect with a broad age range of participants there were different levels of perception about the availability of sexual health information and support in the area.

Although there was a broad consensus that wider sexual health provision and support would be available in the main centres of Inverness and Fort William there seemed to be an age related gap in knowledge of what that provision might be. Teenage participants seemed to relate to contraceptive aspects of support where the broader implications of sexual active such as STD's were highlighted by the other participants.

There was a fortnightly clinic in the Fort William Health Centre where advice on contraception and free condoms were available for young people. There was a general agreement that these services could be given a higher profile as they did not think G. P. surgeries promoted the availability or type of support robustly enough.

This view was endorsed by some younger participants who pointed out that while provision was there too many young people in the area are unaware of this.

"I don't know a lot about what is available in the area. You might get to hear by listening to friends. There could be better information out there. Young people are often too embarrassed to ask."

A drop in centre providing advice was also available at Elgin Hostel at the High School for students which the women thought provided a more accessible service for young people perhaps too self-conscious to seek advice at the health centre or doctors.

In rural areas, both accessible and remote, the SWC have found the issue of confidentiality and privacy to be of paramount concern to women of all age groups when access to sexual health support is discussed.

"There are a lot of fears around confidentiality in small places. This lack of trust may stop someone seeking help and advice."

The women felt that information is too often confined to leaflets and posters and this can be unhelpful to women in small communities who also find it difficult to talk to local G.P.'s

"It can be awkward to lift brochures or be seen to attend Family Planning Clinics. Privacy is scant in small communities and this is an issue that many women particularly wish to keep private."

The women felt that there needs to be more understanding of this when providing sexual health delivery in the Highlands and they would welcome a more innovative support and advice channels such as: options for phone line consultancy with Sexual Health Clinics where appropriate or more “Well Woman” clinics operating as opposed to specifically Sexual Health clinics.

It was felt that “Well Woman” services would be more encouraging for all age groups of women and could be an umbrella venue for all aspects of woman’s health and wellbeing including domestic violence or mental health. This would provide support and advice without the any of the stigma that can prevent women accessing services in rural areas in the first place.

It was strongly felt by participants that external influences must be taken into account in any sexual health education programmes. There was over-riding consensus that media stimulus has an overall negative influence on the sexual behaviour of too many young people.

“It typifies behaviour often with subtle suggestions that if you are not actively engaged in sexual activity or consensual to it then it is not the norm.”

“It puts far too much pressure on young people to conform to a stereotype fashioned by the media.”

Further group debate suggested that media influence in society was exacerbated by the pressures placed on family life due to a long hours culture in Scotland and a lack of flexible working opportunities for all parents. What they thought was even more crucial was what society increasingly expected of women as multi-taskers.

Participants said that women increasingly feel the impact of time poverty in their lives. The work/life/family demands on them mean the opportunity to discuss many value based issues with children can be severely curtailed. Men are often reluctant to take on the role of advisor especially with young girls. Young people revert to other sources of information most often magazines, TV or they look for role models and for some the lines of respect and responsibility become distorted.

The women felt that one of the key issues was that boys and girls should be provided with better awareness of each others emotional needs at an earlier age. It was felt that as the sheer scale and access to media technology was particularly influential today a stronger focus was needed on relationship understanding and not merely the consequences of sexual engagement.

“The media can sometimes suspend feelings and emotional involvement at a time that it is critical for young people to be aware of the impact it has.”

The women were quick to point out that they welcomed the freedom within both media and advertising. Nonetheless participants felt that there was little effort by the industry to offer balanced perspectives and that prevailing values were being shaped by what sells, what shocks or what titillates.

They would like the Scottish Government do more to encourage positive role models for young women and in raising responsibility awareness within the advertising industry about the portrayal of women for marketing purposes.

“The female body is used to sell just about everything. What does that say to children and young people?”

There was also general agreement amongst all age profiles that children are becoming sexualised too early however conversely they thought that sexual education or awareness is provided too late. They felt that children are often confused by messages delivered by fashion and pop culture and that sexual education has not caught up with the reality of their exposure to wider influences.

“Sex education must be delivered in a meaningful and direct way. Some of my friends had babies at 12 or 13 years old. I had friends who told me about sex long before any teachers.”

Several younger women suggested that a baby doll simulator would deliver a good learning experience. They felt it would encourage young people to avoid unwanted pregnancies and encourage responsible sexual behaviour.

“Giving every young person between 10 – 12 years a doll to look after could be a great way to get the message across that looking after a child is not easy. I wish I had got one to try.”

Feedback from the SWC Young Women’s Conference and our Roadshow programme highlighted enthusiasm amongst younger delegates for using peer group educators in numerous areas of health and wellbeing. This approach to educating older teenagers was also endorsed by Fort William participants who were enthusiastic about informing young people through experiences rather than theory. They believe that young people will buy into the reality far more than “what if” scenarios.

Opinion also supported the belief that sexual activity was often linked to drug and alcohol abuse and that in the Lochaber region there was not enough support services for these health issues and this consequently undermined sexual health wellbeing initiatives.

MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Are you aware of any support services in Fort William for women who find themselves victims of male violence?

Do you think Government's efforts to highlight issues of male violence is raising awareness of the issues and changing attitudes of the general public of Scotland?

Key Points raised by the participants

- Distance to nearest refuge centre.
- Male attitudes to VAW
- Lack of Legal Aid solicitors in Lochaber
- Effectiveness of anti violence advertising campaigns
- Funding for Support Organisations/more rural outreach funding

The women at this event had a similar level of understanding of services available within the Highlands and Islands for victims of male violence. The majority of our participants were aware of National Helplines for Scottish Woman's Aid and Rape Crisis. They also acknowledged the role statutory agencies, such as the police or health services, might undertake if contacted by a victim of abuse. Several women mentioned "Vashti" - A Church of Scotland organization to raise awareness of domestic violence.

There was overall praise for the work of both statutory and voluntary organisations when dealing with victims of violence against women. Those who had experience of needing services commended the support at the point of access.

One of the main concerns for the women in this area of the Highlands is a lack of emergency accommodation in the vicinity. They were appreciative of the work done by the women's refuge centres in Dingwall, Inverness and Caithness, however due to the remoteness of the west coast of Scotland and the large area covered by these centres there is a strong desire amongst the women of this region for additional refuge provision being funded.

"The refuge centres can be over-crowded. There is clearly additional need in the area. Uncertain funding does not allow these agencies to plan ahead this needs to be resolved. Women and there families must be assured of a place of safety."

"It is at least a one and a half hour journey to Inverness. Further to the other refuge centres. In any emergency situation with a family it can seem like the other side of the world."

Feedback suggested the majority of participants agreed that overall there is a heightened awareness about the pervasiveness of male violence against women in society. Furthermore, they felt that recent Scottish Government initiatives to highlight the type of behaviour that constitutes abuse have been positive.

"The more subtle adverts are the most effective in that it portrays a realistic view of many women's experiences – mental abuse is a big part of any violence. It was also important that it showed how children are affected by what they see and hear."

'There is a crisis of violence against women which as a society we need to address.'

Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights

Domestic abuse is not an isolated incident. It is usually a pattern of controlling behaviour which gets worse over time. Controlling behaviour includes telling someone what they can do, who they can see, how they can spend their time and undermining their self-confidence and self-esteem. Physical violence and threats may be used to maintain control.

<http://www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk/understanding-domestic-abuse/what-is-domestic-abuse>

In 2006, the UN published a summary definition of gender-based violence against women as:

"Violence that is directed against a woman, because she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty".

There was less confidence amongst the women that the subtlety of the advertising is reaching men in Scotland. They believe there is still a culture of exaggerated masculinity inherent in the psyche of a large number of men, especially in the Highlands, where there is a strong tradition of drinking, silent complicity and embedded patterns of behaviour that condone the chastisement of women as a male right.

The women were unanimous in their condemnation of this “learned behaviour” and strongly felt that there must be more done to address attitudes that underpin much of the male mind-set towards violence against women and children.

“The pattern of behaviour must be addressed. I think sons are favoured in the Highlands and that influences how they are brought up. They can grow up very aware of the hierarchy of men within families which has a huge bearing on male attitudes to women long term.”

Participants said that more should be done to support a multi agency response to tackle this issue inclusive of statutory, voluntary and non-secular bodies.

They felt education should not shy away from highlighting what are healthy relationship environments. They thought it was particularly important to stress to children at an early age to respect and recognise sexual equality. Schools should have the support of specially trained advisors to respond to any issues raised by students relating to abuse.

The women were especially critical of the poor conviction rate for charges of rape in Scotland³.

“There has to be more visible support for rape victims within the justice system to encourage women to come forward and a review the sentencing limits as current legislation does not appear to be an effective deterrent to men who choose to rape.”

There was clear concern that in the Lochaber area there is only one solicitor who dealt with Legal Aid work. A number of women were very concerned about the safety implications of this lack of access to the law to support them.

“Clients are waiting up to 6 weeks for an appointment to obtain an interdict.”

Our participants agreed an increase in legal aid services in this part of Scotland was urgently required.

Overall there was support for more secure funding and long term funding of agencies which support victims of male violence and domestic abuse in rural and remote rural areas.

“Funding can be limited or very specific and rural areas need long term solutions to fully support a very wide outreach programme that will reach all communities.”

Finally it was suggested that the government should consider the creation of a portfolio which was focused on the gender impact of all government legislation.

“It would help if there was a minister specifically for Women’s Issues in Scotland. There are a lot of policy issues where the women’s perspective needs to be given more priority.”

³ Only 2.9 per cent of rapes currently lead to a conviction in Scotland - <http://www.rapecrisisScotland.org.uk/news.htm> October 2008

Recommendations

SWC Key Recommendations on Issues of Poverty

- ❖ Remote rural communities in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland are dependent on a complex range of services and transport requirements to meet the needs of a sometimes small but often diverse population. The SWC would welcome the unique requirement of these communities to be given specific attention in any transport planning. We support the need for integrated ticketing and subsidised travel for low income families as well as physically accessible services for the elderly and women with children. The SWC also believe the safety of young people and women must be the focus of provision especially for night travel throughout rural communities.
- ❖ Scottish Government recognition of the acute shortage of affordable homes in Scotland is welcomed by the SWC. We therefore recommend that provision of social housing in rural areas is given priority as the prevalence of second home ownership is reducing the availability of affordable housing in Highland and Island communities.
- ❖ We further recommend that the Scottish Government encourage the building of homes in rural areas which are economically accessible for first time buyers. There should be more provision of assisted ownership in rural areas.
- ❖ The SWC are concerned that any further reduction in Postal Services in rural areas will be detrimental to community wellbeing and will further reduce access to services for those most in need of them. We recommend the Scottish Government firmly resists any sell off of the Post Office Card Account to another provider.
- ❖ The SWC strongly recommend the abolition of the £100 Low Income Low Asset Fee.

SWC Recommendations on Issues of Education

- ❖ The SWC are concerned that women could be losing the opportunity for development through education and training because they are receiving inconsistent or incorrect advice on benefits. Any failures in the accuracy of information can result in financial jeopardy or lost opportunity. The SWC therefore recommend that the communication and understanding between welfare agencies and education providers recognise the importance of accessible accurate and timely support.
- ❖ Although benefits are a reserved matter the SWC recommend that the Scottish Government actively argue for increased benefit flexibility to allow more women access to educational opportunities that do not compromise housing benefit or any other welfare income.
- ❖ The SWC strongly recommends that the Scottish Government provide the resources required to ensure that access to affordable childcare is available for all pre-school children in Scotland.

- ❖ The SWC believe that “out of school hours” care provision is very difficult to procure in rural areas, especially in school holidays. Increasing numbers of women tell us finding affordable and sufficiently flexible childcare can be a major obstacle to securing employment. The SWC recommend the Scottish Government prioritises adequate childcare in Scotland as a matter of urgency or sustainable growth in Scotland may be compromised due to a shortage of workers.
- ❖ The SWC believe the integration and encouragement of women into employment sectors where they are under-represented is vital to the ongoing success of Scottish economic growth and a world class skill base. The SWC therefore recommend the Scottish Government support a positive action apprenticeship and training programme supported by employers to give women greater equality in the workplace.

SWC Recommendations on Issues of Sexual Health

- ❖ The SWC believe that rural areas have more complex service access issues in relation to sexual health information or support, including distance and transport and also the intimacy of social relationships in small communities. The SWC are concerned that services delivery may be constrained due to a lack of funding and a lack of understanding by policymakers that delivery of sexual education should not be homogeneous. The SWC therefore recommend that rural health partnership funding is sufficiently flexible to allow them to prioritise services and delivery and enhance outreach services and support in rural and remote rural areas.
- ❖ The SWC support the “The Baby Doll simulator” initiative and encourage the Scottish Government to consider a national roll out of this programme. The SWC also recommend that educators consider peer group delivery of information to young people on aspects of health and wellbeing.

SWC Recommendations on Issues of Male Violence against Women and Children

- ❖ Women’s refuge centres provide a much needed place of safety for women and the SWC welcome continued Scottish Government support of such services. We believe the resources available to the women in the Highlands would be enhanced by the funding of an additional centre in Fort William to serve the needs of the women of West Highlands and Lochaber.
- ❖ The SWC believe rural communities need assurances that education, awareness raising and support to address the problems of violence and abuse will be available at a level that can promote change in entrenched cultural or traditional precedents. This will clearly not happen overnight, therefore the SWC recommend long term funding assurances are given by the Scottish Government to voluntary agencies and public services that will guarantee a targeted and sustainable initiative to deliver a real change in male attitude to violence and abuse towards women.
- ❖ The SWC are concerned that women have restricted access to legal aid assistance in Lochaber due to a lack of service availability. This restriction may compromise their safety and that of their family and the SWC would therefore welcome the establishment of further Legal Aid practices in the area.

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



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