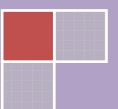


2009

# The Scottish Women's Convention

Women in Faith  
Roundtable Event  
30<sup>th</sup> 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 – Women in Faith.

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 **Monday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2009** in our offices in Glasgow and invited women of faith 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 our thanks the women who took part in the roundtable event. Their enthusiastic input contributed to an interesting and informative session.



## **Question 1 – What are the issues affecting women of faith in Scotland?**

There was significant consensus among the women that patriarchal structures continue to operate in sections of contemporary Scottish society and to widely varying degrees within faith communities. They believed this paternalism inhibits the empowerment of women to influence decision making and has failed to provide a robust gendered focus on many present day concerns in both secular and religious life in Scotland.

The women also suggested that, in most faith affiliations, rationalisation of theological doctrine is predominantly undertaken by men. They believed this has subordinated women to male interpretations of religious dogma and contributed to inequalities in, for example, education, social inclusion and secular and religious participation.

*“It can take a lot of guts for women in faith to challenge the established practices and tenets of their faith.”*

**The participants felt that women in diverse faith communities often share many common concerns and values. Policymakers and religious leaders should therefore ensure that the views of women in faith are presented by them and not merely interpreted for them.**

It was unanimously agreed by participants there has been a breakdown of the values which previously underpinned the moral and ethical framework of society in Scotland.

*“There is a basic lack of respect in society, a loss of core values, increasing moral indifference and a lack of understanding of civic responsibility.”*

The women pointed out these comments were not a collective censure of individual lifestyle choices.

They felt however, it should be recognised that religious affiliations place not only spiritual obligations on their congregations but often supported commitment from individuals to be a positive influence on civic relationships and to be an example of stability within families.

There was overall agreement among the women that the increasing secularisation of western society has contributed to a more individualistic code of conduct and a lack of understanding or support of collective responsibilities.

**The group concluded that declining numbers practicing within the main faiths groups in Scotland can mean a lack of exposure to a moral reference base for many in society. The women would therefore welcome a robust targeting of resources by policymakers towards supporting increased public awareness of citizenship and initiating a programme of “moral science” education from nursery to secondary education.**

Further discussion focused on the speed of societal change and particularly the influences the women felt had a detrimental impact on family and community structures.

*“The speed of intimacy in relationships and the consequence of this physically and emotionally, especially for women, has a huge impact on the structure of families and communities in Scotland.”*

**The women re-affirmed feedback the SWC have received at past events. They would like policymakers to ensure education and information on sexual health encompasses more in-depth evaluation of wider relationship responsibilities and the building of mutual respect.**

Feedback suggested there was concern across the reference group that sophisticated methods of communication and social networking can have a significant detrimental influence on peer group activity among young people. It can also be an additional means of bullying and harassment towards individuals perceived as “different” because of their expression of faith.

For women within minority religious groups in Scotland, especially those who have been part of in-migration or asylum situations in the last few decades, the pace of change in western society has been a particular issue. These women also said the volume of western influences coming through channels such as the media, advertising and social networking can cause generational and gender conflicts within their families and in the wider faith communities.

*“They can feel especially vulnerable in dealing with the exposure their children have to influences that are directly at odds with the teaching of their faith.”*

Fear of this situation is especially acute for women who are catapulted into a new culture without language comprehension, education or economic independence.

*“It is difficult for a significant number of religious women in minority faiths. They don’t want their children to mix out-with their faith communities. It is the easy way to control exposure and what they see as adverse influences.”*

**The women felt that the Scottish and UK Governments should do more to engage advertisers and the media to exert a more censored approach to a number of communication strands with young people. The women gave examples where more responsibility should be considered such as the portrayal of women in advertising, the depiction of sexual relationships, the consumption of alcohol or other substances of potential addiction and attitudinal behaviours.**

Issues of segregation were discussed and the women acknowledged that religious bigotry was not new to Scotland. Indeed they suggested that inherent bias and prejudice was still an issue for a sizeable number of individuals and communities in Scotland and sectarianism continues to be an impediment to Scotland being a truly pluralist society.

Some participants believed migration figures had increased in recent years.<sup>1</sup> The women suggested that although these numbers are a small fraction of the approx five million population of Scotland there will be some agencies and individuals who will exploit numbers to instigate discord within society.

Furthermore tensions and conflicts created by local, national and international events in which religion is implicated can threaten religious identities and affiliations.

**The participants suggest that within this environment ignorance can overtake understanding and a strong lead by the Scottish Government is required to implement programmes of education, integration and tolerance.**

The group unanimously supported the view put forward by several participants that women of faith frequently tolerate violence within a relationship for a substantial period before seeking help or advice.

*“It can be down to a belief that it is a burden they must bear or a real fear of the consequences confiding in anyone even within their family or wider faith community.”*

For those in some minority faiths the reality of “honour” killings or the consequences of “shaming” the wider family can have a serious impact on their safety. Access to places of refuge for women facing this potential threat is essential as seeking sanctuary with family or friends can place them at risk also.

The women felt that refuge accommodation in Scotland is at a premium in many areas; more specifically accommodation that meets the requirements of women in minority faiths. Critically this severely limits the choice or opportunity for them to leave a violent relationship.

**The women said that long-term Scottish Government funding for agencies supporting women and children experiencing male violence is imperative. They also believe resources are urgently required to provide for increased access to refuge support for women whose faith or culture requirements cannot be supported in mainstream accommodation.**

It was interesting to note that in respect of issues affecting women of faith in Scotland our participants felt that their concerns were mirrored by the issues of inequality which also have an impact on women in secular society in Scotland e.g. under representation and gender streaming.

**It was therefore suggested that a much improved gender focus and needs analysis was required within policymaking decisions in Scotland.**

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<sup>1</sup> According to the General Register Office for Scotland 2009 in-migration has doubled in the last five years from 18,357 in 2001/02 to 37,800 in 2006/07.

## **Question 2 – What restricts or reduces the participation of women of faith in wider events?**

Responses to this question showed that several issues of restriction to participation were fairly consistent across the faith groups represented. However, there were also additional problems encountered by minority faiths that illustrated notably more limitations in accessing both representation and participation in wider public life in Scotland.

All of the women agreed that the importance of faith groups as a valuable resource for regeneration and renewal in their communities should be more widely recognised and supported by policymakers and public services. They believed however that too many women of faith participation in many wider events in public and political life is restricted as service providers and official agencies can lack understanding about faith communities which in turn can result in significant inequalities for faith groups in their ability to engage.

*“Location of events, timing and dietary requirements are very basic issues organisations can get wrong, when they do, this restricts participation immediately.”*

Examples provided included: place of worship venues, holding events on the date of important religious festivals or on the designated day of worship. Faith values being overlooked in catering provision or religious observation necessities such as suitable areas for prayer.

**While equality legislation has addressed many barriers to participation the women believed more efforts were required by secular agencies in “religious literacy” i.e. better understanding and recognition of the diversity and values of different faith communities.**

Unanimous support was given to the view put forward by one participant that the naming of events is very important. “Inter-faith” labels can be extremely off putting especially when the events may be addressing wider societal problems for example – poverty or housing.

*“Women arguably will be more attracted to events which are about topics that can impact everyone regardless of faith. Interaction and communication at these events can be more open-minded and constructive once friendships are established through common ground on other issues.”*

The group referred to women who, in view of complex needs, face additional barriers to participation. When these women also have faith considerations it can increasingly isolate them from many avenues of participation.

*“For some women it can be down to basic permission to attend, a lack of economic independence or the confidence to attend events alone.”*

A number of older participants also suggested that women of their generation frequently face barriers which can significantly reduce inclusion in wider events. Due to the increasing secularisation of younger generations many common denominators are eroded within families and in society for older women of faith. This can reduce confidence about their abilities to contribute and increase isolation from society outside their faith community.

It was particularly felt by the whole group that societal assumptions can have a significant and widespread impact on the ability of many women of faith to participate in wider events in Scottish life. It was suggested that ethnicity is often mistakenly used to make assumptions about a person's faith or beliefs and these value judgements can have a very detrimental impact on improving integration and eliminating prejudice.

*“It is a very visual society and assumptions are made on the basis of appearance/colour/language or cultural background when in fact there is a lot of diversity now. For example there are Chinese or Indian Christians or ethnically white people who are Muslim.”*

The women said that “lumping together” people from the same ethnic group without recognition of the possible diversities within the groups e.g. religious affiliations or practices can create barriers or tensions which can sometimes isolate individuals even further from mainstream society.

*“It can create minorities within minorities who find it much more difficult to overcome prejudice within their ethnic community and that of wider society.”*

The women suggested that Scottish society is increasingly secular however it is also becoming more culturally and religiously diverse and there is a need to challenge assumptions.

**They would welcome a stronger focus by the Scottish Government to ensure that respect for individual differences and equality of opportunity to participate becomes a matter of priority for public policy.**

Participants thought prioritising of this was particularly important for women as assumptions of gender power are still deeply engrained in many facets of Scottish society in general and in the low numbers of women participating in public and political life in particular. This is exacerbated for women of various faith affiliations where there is a tradition of women being more silent than men on many critical issues which affect their lives.

**Question 3 – What can/should be put in place by the Scottish Government to ensure full participation?**

**1. Scottish Government focus applied to issues of funding criteria.**

It was felt that access to funding can be very daunting to small faith based groups, who without expertise, can find it difficult to demonstrate that they are working in ways that enable key policies and strategies to be delivered. The group said that funding sources frequently have “strings attached” stipulations which faith groups find difficult to overcome due to religious viewpoints. The funding environment can be potentially confusing for public sector officers and faith communities and participants would welcome targeted support and information from the Scottish Government to allow small organisations equality of opportunity and access to resources.

**2. Scottish Government and COSLA clarification on funding guidelines.**

Participants suggested that there is a historic assumption that public sector funding should not be used to 'promote' religion and this fails to recognise that the activities of many faith organisations are overwhelmingly based on achieving social action. The group suggests the Scottish Government engage with COSLA in order to ensure funding guidelines are set for all Local Authorities on the basis that faith organisations who demonstrate action in mainstream funding activity are evaluated on that criteria and not their faith credentials.

**3. The standardisation of local Gender Equality Policies.**

The women stressed the need for the Scottish Government to ensure that focus on gender equality is not part of a post code lottery dependent on Local Authority priorities. They believe local policy on women’s issues must be standardised across all authorities to ensure full and equal participation and support for all women in Scotland. They look to the Scottish Government to lead on this as a demonstration of the government’s commitment to the elimination of gender inequalities.

**4. Society – exclusion v engagement – Improved Policy Focus.**

The group suggested that perhaps social cohesion has been depleted due to an unwillingness by Scottish people to confront the differences between indigenous and immigrant cultures and faiths. They believe a common commitment to society from all faiths and no faiths within Scotland is needed ensure every citizen enjoys respect and inclusion, especially women, many of whom have been marginalised by male interpretations of faith doctrines. The women would welcome a Scottish Government undertaking to promote respect and increase the time allocated in school curricula to promote improved social, family and cultural understanding and acceptance.



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