

Stornoway Roadshow Report

**Mental
Health**

Childcare

**Low
Paid**

Disability

Work

**Social
Security**

**Public
Services**

Caring

**Equal
Pay**

Schools

**Welfare
Reform**

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Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention held roundtable discussions in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis in order to gauge what issues were the most important for local women.

The work and community spirit of women to their communities cannot be underestimated. The unique geographical nature of the Western Isles throws up a variety of different issues for inhabitants as opposed to more urbanised areas within Scotland. Policy makers should be aware of both the structural and societal issues that impact on women's inequality by incorporating their views and experiences.

A number of opinions were raised throughout the day including adaptable solutions and comments it was felt should be taken forward in order to augment policy on the island. The likes of higher living costs than the mainland, accessibility of services and an aging population are key issues which affect the island areas in a unique and escalating way which should be looked upon as a priority.

Failure to include the voices of women in the policy making process denigrates not only their experiences, but also links back to a systematic disassociation to fully work on equality for women of all ages and backgrounds. This report is intended to showcase the real situations faced by women everyday in a unique setting for both local and national policymakers and encourage women at a primary level to become more involved. It seeks to extoll the advantages of qualitative evidence from people who are most acutely affected by policy decisions but are often not part of the process.

The SWC would like to extend a warm thanks to all the women who attended on the day.



6 Main Points from Stornoway Roadshow:

- ◆ **Underemployment and undervalued jobs, particularly in the care industry**
- ◆ **Shortage of quality housing with many houses left empty and a limited private rental market**
- ◆ **Absence of female representation in public life**
- ◆ **A lack of flexible and affordable childcare, especially for younger children**
- ◆ **High living costs with little to no competition**
- ◆ **The need for improved access to public transport**

Question One

Scotland's geographical lay out is extremely important in terms of employment for people in all walks of life. Many rural areas have lower wages on average due to the nature of the work undertaken. Highland and Island areas often attract more seasonal work than in the central belt and south. However, this problem is particularly acute for rural women for a number of reasons stemming from structural gendered inequality. It is crucial that policies take into account the complexities of rural areas.

Have these issues impacted at a local level on access to health and social care services, availability of education and employment opportunities? How have the changes affected local women and communities?

Childcare

Key Issues:

- Limited childcare options in terms of flexibility
- Inaccessibility for those outwith town
- Costly private childcare
- Lack of options for children under three years of age
- Administration and practices around gaining Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) funding can be laborious

Shortage of childcare is a major issue on the island and is a main reason for women unable to get employment due to such inflexibility- if it is available and accessible at all. If there are no relatives to help out, this can cause many issues affecting employment and wages. A major problem is that Stornoway, as the main town, has the most provision whereas other areas that are some distance do not.

Private childcare, as is the case throughout Scotland, is extremely expensive with some women noting it can cost more than a mortgage or up to a third of wages. This is also seen as a problem in terms of attracting younger families to the island. After school clubs are patchy depending on location and can be extremely expensive.

Childminders are seen as a great benefit. Many felt, however, that publicising how these women can be provided with ELC funded childcare options is needed. This could be an alternative to an actual nursery which may not be feasible given inaccessibility in many areas.

The expansion of ELC funded childcare for a proportion of two year olds was seen as a great way of helping women back into employment and encouraging childhood development. However, whilst this policy is seen as brilliant "*on paper*", in practice many nurseries do not cater for children under the age of three.

Key Recommendations:

- Community engagement around childcare to understand access issues
- Initiatives to encourage employers supporting women returners such as "phase in" schemes and shared parental leave for fathers
- Support for childminders in gaining ELC funding including suitable resources to meet requirements
- Childcare strategies to take account of the different forms of employment and hours women work out with the stereotypical 9 to 5.

Employment

Key Issues Raised:

- Recruitment problems in the caring industry
- Lack of promotions for women to senior positions
- The complexities of precarious contracts
- Limited returning to work options post-pregnancy or caring

Like many rural communities, the two biggest employers for women on the Isle of Lewis are both in the public sector: the Local Council and the NHS. These are seen as beneficial places to work in terms of flexibility. The private sector is still thought to be quite limited in terms of advanced roles, however. Many noted the still pervasive stigma of the motherhood penalty, ingrained societal attitudes and masculine culture for this.

The caring profession is seen as having a major recruitment struggle at present. The number of young people leaving the Island combined with an aging population means that more and more employed carers are desperately needed.

Seasonal work is undertaken via precarious contracts, with a definitive toll on women and their personal finances. Women often undertake low paid, low skilled jobs on a part-time basis, with little opportunity for training and development. Not only does this contribute to the gender pay gap, but more often than not pays poorly and is looked on as of very little value.

Zero hours contracts, like elsewhere in the country, raise conflicting views. For many, these can be beneficial and adapted around the likes of caring responsibilities allowing them flexibility. However, a large number of women employed on these precarious contracts are young women who do not do so out of choice. These contracts are somewhat of a double edged sword. They may offer expanded flexibility, however, there are other issues which this feeds into. The likes of discrepancies with social security payments and the toll that the unpredictability of this form of work can take on both physical and mental health often goes overlooked.

Women returning to work after taking time away to care for children or other relatives can often face additional barriers including a lack of flexibility and confidence issues.

"When someone returns to work, they start at the bottom again."

Key Recommendations:

- Government drives for the private sector to raise awareness around gender diversity in senior positions
- Drive an uptake in mothers and older women returning to work, including raising awareness of night classes and college programmes
- Strategies to help drive uptake for more young women into male dominated fields in terms of employment
- An increase in the value placed on the caring profession and the opportunities that this can offer

Political Representation

All political representatives at a local and national level are male. Last year's local elections saw a "*handful*" of women stand. However, none, including incumbents, were elected. A major problem is the number of barriers to increasing political engagement, particularly in younger women, who may feel shut out of the process.

Key Issues:

- Continuing stereotypes of male-dominated politics
- Lack of confidence for many women
- Issues around flexibility for women in terms of caring if standing for office

There is a perception that these issues around representation can often be more profound than in other parts of the country due to the patriarchal nature of society: "*the church, the politics and decision making are dominated by men.*"

Many noted that this can often lead to women not putting themselves forth for positions due to confidence issues and a culture that does not often speak to young women. Alongside this, it is felt that politics is more about "*who you know*", with many commenting that a lot of women, although keen, do not have the right information to gain a foothold.

"Women do not put themselves forward because of bullying and harassment. Some can feel worn down and it's done in ways that you feel you can't really raise a complaint. As the culture is so male dominated it makes it ten times more difficult for women to get the same result as a man."

"There is a 50/50 gender ratio put forward and aspired to but this has not reached us."

"The community is strongly run by women. It is us that are running and organising community events. However, as soon as these raise awareness and become public a man steps in which can be very demoralising."

Additionally, many raised awareness of a need for flexibility in terms of representation when it comes to women due to the added commitments they tend to have outside the stereotypical 9 to 5 day such as caring responsibilities. It was felt putting procedures in place such as job sharing and adjustable hours for this could help.

Key Recommendations:

- More resources around education and politics for women
- Promotion of mentorships to increase confidence
- Increased flexibility for mothers and carers
- Initiatives to increase community engagement for women
- Awareness raising of the benefits of female representation

Education

Key Issues:

- A lack of young women's uptake in STEM subjects
- The prioritisation of university education as opposed to other options
- Imbalance between Gaelic and English teaching

Lews Castle College which is situated in the grounds of Lews Castle, Stornoway, offers various courses from Degree Level to Occupational subjects. Some women have attended courses when they are ready to go back to full time employment and have found good and satisfying work. There are seen to be a wide range of courses available with options for part time and evening classes with most being locally taught. Due to public transport issues, however, these are not always an option for some living further afield.

"If you don't have a car, then you are stranded and can't get to these things at all."

There is seen to be a potential to do more, including looking at having local accommodation available. A major problem is that young people are still encouraged to leave the Island to get their education which can impact on the amount of funding received by the college.

Initiatives and funding in order to raise the number of Gaelic speaking individuals have been greatly welcomed on the Island. Many described it as exciting and refreshing that this has been so invigorated, particularly amongst young children from an early age. Drives that encourage parents to adopt the choice of Gaelic medium from nursery school age have been wholly welcomed and seen as a great way to promote bilingualism.

Whilst on the whole the strategy is positive, concerns were raised about what was felt as an unequal deficit in terms of those children whose parents do not uptake due to not being fluent in the subject themselves. There are more classes for parents wishing to learn Gaelic themselves in order to help with studies being provided now, however, it is hoped that these will have increased flexibility and access for the likes of lone parents.

"What if you are a single mum and can't speak Gaelic? There are classes for parents but what if you can't access these due to work or transport or childcare?"

Key Recommendations:

- Resources available for parents of Gaelic medium
- Increased awareness around benefits of Gaelic for children from single parent and lower class families
- More drive to increase youth retention on the island such as programmes for employment with college placements
- Heightened discussions around gender awareness and identity in schools

Youth Retention

Key Issues

- Rise in non standard jobs and zero hours contracts
- Limited opportunities for progression in precarious contracts and a lack of training and educational programmes
- Lack of confidence in community leaders

A number of women noted the ongoing problem within rural areas in general, but specifically to the Western Isles, in terms of an aging population and more young people moving away to urbanised towns and cities.

This is due to a number of issues related throughout. For instance, the problems with employment are seen as a real concern in terms of the lack of youth retention with no fixed strategies to combat this.

There is a perception that some jobs are filled internally, with limited options for promotion. Many noted that for young people there is often a view that moving to the mainland provides ample opportunity for jobs in both the public and private sector with increased room for growth and promotion.

Additionally, it was noted that higher education in terms of university was given strong emphasis at the detriment of other forms, meaning many young people are shaped to see the mainland as more attractive, thus leaving and potentially not coming back.

“University is given such emphasis which means the mainland is the place to go. So why would you want to stay in the community?”

Key problems were discussed in terms of young people feeling isolated and looking for opportunities in more urbanised settings where there was diversity in identity and lifestyles with many feeling that they could be themselves in more open settings.

“Strategies are aimed at the very young or older people. There is no emphasis on keeping or attracting youth in the middle.”

“There is not enough talk around identity with young people and issues such as LGBT.”

Key Recommendations:

- Empower youth communities so they can voice individual abilities and how to follow up skill sets. Including engaging on the likes of healthcare and politics
- Encourage high value jobs, placements and internships
- Encourage social engagement and promotion of social aspects for youth
- Joined up approaches with businesses to showcase opportunities and career mentoring
- A specific role within the Council aimed at increasing youth retention
- Council and Government should encourage work experience placements and entrepreneurship programmes aimed at young people

Health and Social Care

Key issues:

- Stigma around mental health
- Impact of digitalisation on the health of young women
- Shortage of female doctors
- Lack of anonymity around violence against women in all its forms
- Social isolation
- Under resourced social care provision

Mental health is a problem across all ages for women. This issue is felt to be compounded by the increasing move towards digitalisation leaving little time for face to face dialogue. In terms of the island, however, many did note that mental health strategies are beginning to be redesigned and be given much more notice within the community.

“There is a visibility and confidentiality issue as well as stigma when seeking support.”

A key problem is that societal stigma can often stop many women going into places of support due to a lack of anonymity within the community which has a “*much tighter*” relationship than more urbanised areas. There was talk of some times when some women have accepted help but then reneged on it due to fear of being talked about. For instance, if a Community Psychiatric Nurse is calling at a house, the car is easily recognised. Health care workers are seen as being utmost professional, however, and will clearly stipulate the strict confidentiality procedures to put women at ease.

“We need safe spaces for women to go to.”

A number of women noted some difficulties in obtaining a doctor's appointment due to what is seen as a shortage in the Western Isles. A lot of the services tend to be male dominated which can result in women not going if having to discuss their issues with a man.

Third sector organisations are seen as invaluable and do amazing work. Befriender services go “*above and beyond*” with their focus on tackling social isolation for a range of different individuals within communities.

Maternity is seen to be of high standards on the Island. There are excellent services with both pre and post-natal care providing a range of different options including baby massage.

“A health visitor will visit once a week then a dietician then a dentist, so you get a different opinion every week which is really invaluable for a new mother.”

Social care provision is very pressured with many staff finding their time limited due to high demand. A huge problem is the low wages that come with paid caring which leads to under staffing.

“What if you’re needing help and live alone. How do you get hold of social care? Adverts with people asking for help in local shops stay up for months due to low uptake.”

“The minimum wage for caring is so low. It’s a real insult.”

“Social care provision is so stretched that you may have three carers a day in severe cases, however, these are only for short periods at a time. Due to these time constraints, they often do not know what time they will get to their client. This can often lead to older people having to take care of the likes of neighbours.”

Services which could befriend older people are brilliant but are dependent on volunteers and transport. Care homes on the Island are seen to be very pushed with a limited amount of supported accommodation for older inhabitants. Under staffing is a critical issue with many worried about heading towards a crisis in terms of an aging population.

Key Recommendations:

- Services to link up better and involve the community
- More discussions with people around social care to incorporate a strategic response that benefits individuals
- Increase awareness of funding for third sector organisations
- Strategies to take into account the likes of accessibility and digitalisation
- Initiatives and awareness raising to drive uptake for volunteers
- Strategies to tackle under staffing including higher wages and awareness raising of the valuable work health and social care staff do

Other Issues

The accessibility of commodities on the Island can be a major issue. Public transport, whilst improving, is still rather limited, notably on evenings and Sundays. Transport is not just about getting from point A to B. It feeds into everything: decisions about work and childcare. Joined up approaches to transport including community engagement are needed.

Car ownership is seen as a necessity meaning that women on lower incomes who cannot afford this are systematically hit twice as hard due to the inaccessibility of public transport. For instance, if buses are the only option to get to the job centre, then missing it may mean sanctions with hugely detrimental consequences for individuals and their family. It is a vicious cycle that means those most in need suffer the worst.

The population is declining and aging. A lot of older people are reliant on services such as public transport. Without bus passes, a lot of the community would be stuck at home.

Question Two

The Scottish Government has made a commitment to invest £756 million in housing over 2018-19, as part of a promise to deliver £3 billion by 2021, including continued investment in rural Scotland. However, whilst housing remains an issue across Scotland, rural areas have distinct and unique problems. Lack of quality, affordable homes whether for rent or to buy is a major issue. Decent accommodation has a positive impact on women and children's health and wellbeing, training and employment opportunities, as well as the benefit of social integration. Rising living and rent costs have led many women into rent arrears or eviction.

What are the key priorities in your area around housing and living costs? What should the Scottish Government be doing to help rural women and their families?

Key Issues:

- Scale of empty houses
- Imbalance in conditions of housing
- Problems identifying who owns empty homes on the Island
- New homes being built away from amenities such as schools and local transport links
- Limited competition in the private rental market leading to high prices
- Shortage of construction workers for building new properties

Housing is seen as a huge issue on the Island. There are a number of larger houses with fewer ones that could house single people or smaller families such as one and two bedroom properties. There is also provision in the range from homelessness accommodation to social housing, which is scattered all across the Island.

A major problem is the scale of houses lying empty. Many new houses are built by people whilst the old ones are left to deteriorate. There is thought to be around 1000 houses lying empty across the Western Isles. Whilst some are lying derelict, there are others in good condition. A house may be left to relatives on the mainland who do nothing with it, or only come at certain times in the year.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar Council have appointed an Empty Homes Officer to bring these houses back into use. This is seen as a positive step forward in housing provision and making an active move to distribute housing more equally. A key feature of this new role is hoped to be in identifying who owns these houses and then encouraging sales.

“There needs to be a strategy as to how much we project to build to increase the population and how we find the balance between inside and outside the main parts, such as the towns, in terms of housing.”

The quality of social housing can be differing with many noting problems such as extremely bad damp when they have first moved in.

"I called the local authority who told me to put the heating on and open a window but when my husband phoned they came straight away. It's a battle for something like damp and it is the most deprived people who suffer."

Whilst homelessness is seen as less pervasive than on the mainland, those that have been put in such a situation usually having to wait longer for permanent accommodation than more urbanised areas.

There is also a key problem with many houses built on the Island being located in areas where schools are being closed and public transport is less accessible. Fixing this was seen as key to encouraging the likes of young families to relocate.

"You could have a trendy new house but the transport, schools and shops may not be available where the house was built".

"There have been Community buyouts and some have bought Wind Turbines which has generated income. This is being used to help their Community."

There is seen to be a shortage of trade in the likes of construction for those looking to build their own homes which can be a problem. There is a need to train more young people in construction and engineering, but gender lines are generally followed. It is not the norm for girls to uptake these trades.

If you want a house built you can sometimes wait up to 2-3years.

Key Recommendations:

- Ensure community engagement around empty homes
- Strategies to turn empty council owned buildings into community properties
- Strategies to tackle housing problems to take into account issues such as access to schools and transport
- Solving the housing crisis should be looked upon as a key part of retaining youth
- Housing schemes for first time buyers
- Increasing regulatory mechanisms around the private rental market
- Schemes to take into account encouraging young women into male dominated trades
- Property that is in good condition should be more widely showcased for those looking to move to the Island, including the benefits of living there

Question Three

What are the key priorities for women in your local area?

- We just want equality - if the representation changed then this would filter down through the society. Meetings have to be held at a more convenient time as women can not leave children to attend because these are usually only on at night.
- A community hub to reduce the likes of alcohol consumption. More women are drinking due to mental health issues and this needs to be looked at.
- A place where women can go in a safe space should be there, where they can open up about abuse without stigma and without fear of being found out.
- Something in each individual area where women can go and banter, just to talk. This could help with coming up with solutions for the likes of informal childcare practices and networking to share these responsibilities.
- Better preparedness for emergency planning: there was a power cut recently for five days. Enhance resilience across localities together and encourage private businesses to work with communities on this.
- More stores are needed - the lack of big companies means that the ones that are there face no competition and can charge higher prices for food.
- Electricity is 15% higher than in the mainland. The price of coal is expensive. The winters are harsh.
- There are extremely high shipping costs and sometimes a company will not ship to the Highlands and Islands. This has been brought up in both Holyrood and Westminster but nothing has been done.
- More discussion around violence against women and gender identity to help women come forward in a safe space.
- Transport to run later at night and be more accessible for those living outwith the main areas.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy.

This is achieved in a number of different ways - through roadshow, round table, conference and celebratory events. Following each event a report is compiled and issued to women who attend and relevant policy and decision makers.

The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.