On 26th May, the Scottish Women’s Convention (SWC) held an event at the Kaim Park Hotel in Bathgate, West Lothian. Women from around the area came together to discuss a wide variety of issues of relevance to them.

With much of the talk focused on the “snap” general election and its impact, the SWC was given the opportunity to focus on how this is connected to other issues relating to women. Many of the discussions emphasised the strong connection between politics and everyday life, with women dismayed at the lack of female voices within the political arena. This also brought up other issues significant to women in the West Lothian area including childcare and caring; education; employment and finances.

Women discussed issues reserved to the Westminster Government including pension inequalities, welfare reform and the so-called “rape clause”.

Presentations were given by Hannah Bardell (SNP) and Rhea Wolfson (Labour). Both were candidates in the General Election. This was followed by a talk from former local councillor and founder of social enterprise scheme “The Larder Cook School”, Angela Moohan. All three women stressed the importance of making every political party representative of the actual population and why it is so imperative women get involved in politics.

The SWC will continue to work with women at a grassroots level in order to gain their views on key policy areas which impact their daily lives. It is important that they are given an opportunity to express how political decisions impact on them, their families and communities as a whole.

The SWC would like to extend a warm thanks to the guest speakers and all the women who attended on the day.
The dominating topic of conversation was the election and the effect this has had on women. This included discussions of the “Brexit effect”, different aspects of each party’s manifestos that would specifically affect women and the representation of women in politics.

“All politics affects all women; we need to make them see that”

Political parties are currently not prioritising issues affecting women. Manifestos lack focus on how proposed policies will impact on women, families and communities.

“Parties are all picking sides...it’s either dead left or dead right...where is the middle ground for women?”

Women spoke of the distrust they have towards the electoral system given the sheer number of elections and referendums that have been called over the past few years. This has led to many feeling exasperation and that this undervalues the power of their vote. Many commented that the only reason for calling elections was to enforce “cut and dry power”.

Women remarked that the vast extent of this election in particular, and Scottish politics in general, has boiled down to whether you are for or against Scottish independence. This has had a negative impact on equality issues.

“This ultimately means running the risk that women’s rights will get lost in the mix of the Indy fight, regardless of what side you are on. It poses a real risk to democracy.”

There can often be feelings of disorder due to the distribution of powers between both the UK and Scottish Parliament. This has led to some confusion around who does what and how new legislation affects Scotland. Political news tends to be reported as UK-wide by Scottish media, despite it having no impact due to the devolved powers. It was felt that this should be implemented more clearly and more information given over this matter.

**Brexit**

A year on from the EU referendum, there is still fear and uncertainty surrounding the Brexit process and the absence of the devolved nations from discussions. Over the course of the year, this has intensified with the triggering of Article 50 in March followed quickly by the calling of the general election.

“We need to know Scotland’s position in negotiations”

In terms of women, there was much discussion on the “huge impact” that Brexit will have on equality and employment issues. With much of the UK’s human rights and equality legislation coming directly from Europe, many spoke of the “mammoth effect” this will have on future generations.

**Question One**

Following the decision by Prime Minister Theresa May to hold a “snap” general election on 8th June, 2017, what are the key issues that impact on women that need to be addressed by Westminster? Powers such as Brexit negotiations; employment and equalities legislation and key aspects of the welfare system all remain with the UK Government.

*How do you feel about the upcoming “snap” General Election? What impact, if any, do you think this will have on women in Scotland, their families and communities as a whole?*
Many commented on the “trickledown effect” Brexit is already beginning to have and how this will ultimately affect local communities. There is concern over the impact which withdrawal of European funding will have in West Lothian. Without this vital financing, many local development projects will not happen.

“I can’t, personally, see any growth from where we are now, it’s a scary position to be in.”

**Political Representation**

Despite leadership at both a UK and Scottish level being female, women continue to feel they are unevenly represented in politics across all platforms, both council and parliamentary.

One issue identified, which is less talked about in society, is the portrayal of women in politics. Political figures play a huge role in this, often resorting to under-handed insults of rivals or presenting a “bullish” front in order to compete with men. Many women noted that this is a key feature turning off participation for women, especially younger ones.

“Women have to act tough in order to be a woman in a man’s world, plain and simple.”

The media was also thought to play a huge role, encouraging bitter rivalries between female politicians and continuing to portray them in terms of appearance rather than ability. This was seen to have a huge effect on how female politicians acted, often playing up to the stereotype and thus being seen as out of touch with real women.

More should be done to combat this. Whilst it was acknowledged that the tide was slowly changing, it seems that there is a real regression back to these “underhanded and dirty” tactics.

“It’s a negative that women in power are just as adversarial as men”

**Pension Inequalities**

The increase in women’s State Pension Age (SPA) from 60 to 65 with little notice and the proposed social reforms including the removal of the pension triple lock have left many disillusioned with government. As is the case across the country, West Lothian has an aging population which is feeling the effects of these changes.

“This affects everyone. Not just older people. Parents who had planned to leave something for their family’s future can’t. Surely this is trapping entire families in a cycle of poverty? A lot of women can’t join a pension scheme in their work and have no chance to save, living hand to mouth”

“Nobody really knows what it’s about – you hear phrases like ‘triple lock’ and you don’t understand how it will affect you or your future. There’s barely any information given”

This inequality has hit many women extremely hard. The time given in order to prepare for the increase in SPA was seen as “the bare minimum” with “little warning and even less information”. There is a strong feeling in the area over these additional years and how it impacts all aspects of life. This is not only detrimental to women financially, but comes at a time when many are dealing with health problems and caring for older and younger relatives.

“They are wanting nurses to work till 65 - on their feet all day and with little reprieve. Its humiliating, degrading and dangerous!”
The UK Government’s recent welfare cap on child tax credit has stirred up many emotions. Exemptions to these changes can occur in certain cases, most controversially for children born as a result of ‘non-consensual conception’, i.e. the so-called ‘rape clause’.

This policy severely damages and sets back vital human rights. There is overwhelming disapproval of this legislation and the effect it will have on women.

“Women could be in the situation where they have to choose between having that child or not. It’s absolutely disgusting.”

This reform will not only be mentally detrimental to victims of sexual assault, but also gives the idea that the government does not fully support women who have suffered this type of horrendous abuse.

“How can a government in a first world country treat half of their population as if they are second class citizens and destroy someone’s life all for the sake of saving a few quid?”

Women have continued to face increasing financial pressure due to ongoing cuts at local and national Government level; many positions have been reduced from full to part time or removed completely. There is a real dismay over the number of cuts that have taken place over the past five years – both by the UK and Scottish Government.

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

Healthcare

Many commented on the increased waiting times that patients are experiencing just to get an appointment with their local GP. Diagnosis is often given over the phone in order to save time and resources.

On the other hand, the Scottish system for free prescriptions and the care given by NHS staff is welcomed. Compared to the rest of the UK, “Scotland seems to be in a better place.”

Access to the health service can be extremely tricky in West Lothian. Many NHS resources are located in Edinburgh, which can be especially hard to access for the elderly. This is particularly critical in terms of hospice care, with Bathgate residents having to make the journey to the city. Women commented on the barriers that this puts in their way. Not only does it impact on visiting loved ones, but can also take a toll on their own physical and mental wellbeing.

“If the nearest hospice care is in Edinburgh what is this doing to older women who have to make the journey there every day to see their partner or relatives? It adds so much stress to what is already a painful process.”

Care work is predominately undertaken by women. It is portrayed as low-skilled and therefore low-paid. This work, however, is the mainstay of many communities. More needs to be done at a government and local level to recognise the significance of the role these women play.

“No one wants to take up care work as a career as it is underpaid. If care work was more valued by society then it would be more acceptable to take up as a job.”
Childcare

Childcare is a huge issue in Bathgate with many women struggling to get employment and make ends meet due to the high cost. This, alongside a lack of flexibility in the workplace, means that the majority are severely out of pocket when working either full or part time. Local Authority nursery places, for example, are becoming harder to obtain meaning many parents are forced to take up private childcare which is expensive.

There is little recognition amongst many mothers – particularly single mothers – over Early Learning Childcare (ELC) for qualifying two year olds. Comments were made that there has been limited publicity for this.

More must be done to increase awareness of childcare eligibility, as well as criteria and enrolment information. Many parents are missing out on local authority nursery places and having to undertake expensive private childcare. Many women commented on the lack of information concerning the likes of childhood development.

“I put my child’s name down for a nursery place before he were 3 months old. I got a letter back three years later, after spending thousands on private childcare, telling me there still wasn’t a place available.”

Local mother and baby groups were seen as a great way to publicise this. Women praised these types of informal meeting places as “a lifesaver”. These were viewed as offering less pressure than more formal surroundings where experience could be shared.

Government cuts have had a huge impact on the West Lothian area. There is a real shortage of nursery teachers which has led to many places using “assistants” instead. Informal childcare by friends and relatives is commonly used in order for mothers to be able to work, leading to significant strain being placed on relationships. Others talked about the difficulty of coping when they are pegged into “sandwich” caring of elderly parents and young grandchildren. This was often seen as “routine” and “the norm” with little reprieve.

Community

There are specific pre and post-natal programmes available for young mothers in the area which are thought to be extremely helpful for vulnerable women who may not have other means of support. These are seen as a great way to increase knowledge and reduce stigma. This is essential as a number of younger mothers are often too scared to ask for help or advice for fear of being looked upon as a failure.

The community centre is described as “fantastic”, and is underestimated by a lot of people in terms of its resources. Local authority staff in the Simpson Library in Bathgate are invaluable despite the cuts they have faced in recent years. Events such as story time sessions for children are seen as “small but significant”, allowing for breathing space and respite for mothers.

There is a real desire for more community projects to be held in the area in order to better integrate everyone. Many women felt that there was a need in the community for intergenerational projects which could encourage younger people and give them the opportunity to work with skilled workers and build their confidence.
Employment

Employment continues to be a major barrier for many women. Exploitative zero-hour contracts are seen as a real issue. There is anger that the government, whilst condemning this, has made no moves to enforce criminalisation of such contracts. The issue is particularly pressing on women. Industries where women make up the majority of employees, such as hospitality and private care companies, use these for their own gains.

Many jobs have been cut from full to part time or job share whilst the responsibilities have stayed the same or actually increased in some cases. Due to a lack of employment, “many women will take this option without a fight just to be able to earn a wage”.

“In my old job, I did hours of unpaid work just to go home and look after my family. I’d field calls and emails, all because I was petrified of losing it. It’s awful but at the end of the day, you have to feed your family and a job is a job”

The geography of West Lothian means it is ideally situated for transport links to both Glasgow and Edinburgh which has aided employment. One of the largest employers in the area is HMRC. Whilst as a public sector employer, wages and work conditions tend to be better than private business, women have voiced concerns that there is constant talk of relocation to the likes of Glasgow. This would mean either a much longer expensive commute or loss of a job.

A high proportion of employment in West Lothian comes from large companies in retail and hospitality sectors. These jobs are often taken by women due to the level of flexibility and “anti-9 to 5 role”. This makes it easier to plan around other responsibilities such as caring. However, these jobs are often seen as being done out of necessity and more often than not pay the minimum wage. This has led to significant inequality in economic terms for many women in the area.

“These huge private companies should have the living wage imposed on them by the Government, anything else just lines the guys at the top’s pockets even more!”

Unemployment or part time employment is significantly higher for women than men. This is down to a number of factors such as lack of affordable childcare, the demands of caring and a lack of self confidence. Another perceived problem is that many jobs are often based out of the area in more urban locations such as Glasgow or Edinburgh. Given difficulties in commuting and flexibility, many women continue to work part-time.

Another considerable issue is the number of traditionally “male” dominating job roles such as engineering or construction which has led to a widening of the gender gap in the area.

“More should be done at a local level to encourage uptake in schools of “male” subjects by girls, we need to recognise what they can contribute in these areas.”

Education

Educational attainment levels are seen to be causing great stress on young people in the area. There is a significant toll on children’s mental health due to constant studying in order just to go onto higher education.

“Children are bullied by the education system”
Parents were thought to have a “horrendous fight” in terms of securing effective additional support resources for their children. Whilst many commended the workers in supported learning departments as being “invaluable”, their time is thought to be severely stretched. A lack of specialist teachers and adequate training has added to this.

“Proper diagnosis, suitable provision and transport leads to well-adjusted children. This benefits everyone. Parents are able to return to work and boost the economy.”

West Lothian College is a local centre for higher education. Many of the young women attend this faculty to gain qualifications which, in turn, allowed them to obtain degrees from universities or as an aid to employment.

**Transport**

There is a significant lack of adequate transport within Bathgate and the West Lothian area in general.

“Daytime is fine, but night time is terrible! It cuts back your social activities or people working shifts. I can’t imagine what young people do in the area when they want to go out and socialise for the night. The last train from Edinburgh is at 11.40pm. No wonder so many of them move to the cities when they can’t even get decent affordable transport for a night out”

Bathgate public transport was seen as “very tricky”, often trains are the only way of getting about and can be extremely expensive in comparison to buses.

“Public transport should be just that – public, accessible and affordable”

**Finances**

There was much consensus over how “scarily accessible” loan companies are, especially to young women. These are seen as using confusing jargon around APR rates to trick many into accepting finance. There is, however, a large number who are aware of the terms but are so desperate they see these loans as the only way out of money trouble.

“Young women need more awareness and confidence on how to take control of debt issues. There is huge societal pressure on mothers getting into debt just to buy their children expensive clothing and technology in order for them to fit in”

More must be done to raise the minimum wage to that of a decent living wage for everyone, not just those over 25. This will help to get women out of this cycle.

“It’s alright for the government to say its leading by example and paying employees decent living wages but do the big private companies follow this example? No! This should be law and the government shouldn’t be bowing down to businesses.”

There have been a number of rent increases in the area, both by social and private landlords. This has affected many women, most notably lone mothers, and forced them into debt. Due to a lack of social housing, a huge increase there has been in privately rented properties.

“So many people in this area are affected by money and debt problems”
One of the women who participated contributed a poem which focused on how far women have come over the past few years. The SWC would like to thank Anne Milne for adding this to the event.

A new fiver features a wummin
What are things cumin tae?
Well, in Scotland, we ken
I’ll tell ye again
About a Wummin’s Place

“A woman’s place is at the sink.”
That’s what you think!
“A wife should do as she is told.”
Aye! Those were the days
We’ve changed our ways
We’ve broken the mould!

Kezia Dugdale, Ruth Davidson and Nicola Sturgeon
All women bearing the burden
Of leading their parties in the Scottish Parliament.
But—when I went to school, the rule was
That boys were superior and girls inferior.
Wow! Look at them now
They’ve broken the mould!

And what about Presidents and Prime Ministers
In Denmark, Brazil, Malta, Chile, Jamaica, Germany
To name just a few
There’s nae goin’ back. They’ve got the knack.
Ye never thought you’d see the day.

Anne Milne
Question Three

What one thing could improve your local area?

- Removal of stigma for those with mental health issues
- Greater coordination between different parts of NHS Lothian
- Increased value placed on both paid and unpaid carers
- A public transport system which is affordable and is centred around the needs of the users, not the companies providing the services.
- More social housing to help with demand
- Improved parking for commuters
- Community projects to integrate the area
- A clean up of the area
- More social facilities for young people
- Better access to mental health provision and counselling
- Addressing the fly tipping situation
- More training on drug and alcohol issues for young people
- A return to education standards and quality teacher training

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.