

Scottish Women's Convention

European and External Relations Committee – Call for Evidence - Scotland's Relationship with the EU

August 2016

The Consultation

On 23 June in the referendum on EU membership, the UK electorate voted to leave. In Scotland, 38% voted to leave and 62% voted to remain, with a majority in all 32 local authorities wanting to remain in the EU.

The European and External Relations Committee is conducting an inquiry into the implications for Scotland's relationship with the EU after the referendum result. In order to support the inquiry, the Committee has agreed to issue a call for evidence on a range of issues relating to the implications for Scotland.

The Committee is seeking the views of individuals and organisations in relation to the undernoted:

- Case studies on how the prospect of a withdrawal from the EU is affecting Scotland
- Scotland's future relationship with the European Union
- Alternatives to EU membership
- The withdrawal process
- The domestic process for dealing with a withdrawal from the EU
- The position of EU citizens in Scotland

Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) believes that a strong gender focus is necessary when considering the impact of 'Brexit'. Many of the legislative and policy decisions which have had a positive impact on women's lives, such as protection for part time workers, were gained in Europe. There are, therefore, real concerns around the future of these vital workers rights.

"Women are the cornerstone of communities – both socially and economically. Their voices and concerns must be a key focus of this process."

The SWC has been consulting with women on issues which are important to them around Scotland's relationship with the EU. There is a degree of uncertainty, particularly with regard to how long it will take Britain to leave the EU, as well as Scotland's position within that process.

General Comments

Many women are disappointed with the result of the EU referendum. This is primarily due to uncertainty around what is going to happen as a result of the decision to leave.

“The result is raising anxieties and fears amongst families where one partner comes from out with the UK. People who have followed the rules and who live legally in Scotland now fear for their futures.”

“I feel frustrated, fearful and helpless. We’re already seeing a rise in hate crime and the normalisation of racism. The decision will have an impact on the opportunities and decisions of young people in the future.”

“There are big concerns around human rights and equalities. We have struggled to get to where we are now. It would be terrible if this was lost because we are being forced to leave the EU.”

It is extremely important that, going forward, the public are kept up to date with all information regarding Brexit. This must be presented in a concise, non-jargoned way and should be accessible to everyone. Some of the concerns expressed by individuals may be easy to alleviate through clear and effective communication.

Some women see that there is potential for Scotland and its people in the wake of the referendum result.

“Hopefully this result can free us to have another referendum on Scottish independence.”

“This new beginning has to be taken in a positive way so we can make sure we get the best outcomes for Scotland. Our future is in our hands. There has to be time and space for the new Prime Minister to work with others to do her best for us all.”

This is particularly the case in rural and coastal areas, where farming and fishing are an integral part of the community. The amount of ‘red tape’ placed on these industries is seen to create barriers.

“Perhaps fewer EU regulations on crofting and farming communities will ease some of the pressure for women living and working a croft. They are often supporting and subsidising their husbands and families and are struggling.”

Specific Issues

The ERASMUS Programme

Many women are concerned as to what will happen to the ERASMUS (European Region Scheme for Mobility of University Students) programme in the wake of the referendum result. Erasmus encompasses all aspects of educational exchange for students, academics and relevant institutions within European countries.

It has been successful in uniting people of varying nations, promoting understanding and breaking down prejudices. It has enhanced the lives of many young women who have been able to take advantage while at university.

“To be removed from this historical and enlightened structure would be extremely damaging for future generations, who could miss out on this fantastic and often life changing opportunity.”

It is not clear what the impact of Brexit will have on ERASMUS at the moment. There are, however, suggestions that its future cannot be guaranteed. This is an aspect of the process of leaving the EU which must be taken into consideration.

Worker’s Rights

Unite the Union¹, Great Britain’s biggest trade union, has voiced significant concerns about the impact of Brexit on worker’s rights and human rights.

“Human rights are both devolved and reserved. This creates issues around the UK’s vote to leave the EU, as well as the UK Government’s proposals to repeal the Human Rights Act (HRA) and replace this with a Bill of Rights. These are both likely to impact on Scottish citizen’s rights, including employment rights, as well as the ability to access fair treatment. It will also impact on the employment protections EU membership has given workers, with many enshrined within the HRA.”

Unite, along with other social justice groups, made representations to the United Nations (UN) in June this year on the Scottish and UK Government’s failure to adhere to the principles contained within the UN Convention on Human Rights.

“This is particularly true with regards to the high incidence of part time work, precarious self-employment, temporary employment and the use of “zero hour contracts”. It also applies to the high number of low-paid jobs, such as the cleaning and homecare sectors, in which women predominate.”

It is, therefore, vital that the impact on these hard fought worker’s rights are considered throughout the process of leaving the EU. The impact that the removal of these would have on women cannot be underestimated.

Moving Forward

There are both concerns and opportunities following the EU referendum result. Despite this, women see the importance of looking to the future and ensuring that the process is carried out in a way that both benefits and befits the people of Scotland.

“Our government in Westminster needs to work internationally to ensure we have new deals with the rest of the world. We need to take charge in these fragile times and work collectively to secure the future of EU citizens in Britain. We have to look after the interests of everyone.”

“Trade with Europe has to be re-negotiated, ensuring that we strive to get the best outcomes for all. This is a new beginning. We must make sure that our children get the best future chances possible.”

¹ <http://www.unitetheunion.org/>

Conclusion

The uncertainty around what it will actually mean for Britain to leave the EU, as well as a degree of discontent by many in Scotland that we are being *“forced out against our will”*, makes it very difficult for women to have a clear idea of what will happen now. The SWC is acutely aware that whatever happens in the coming weeks and months will require significant consultation and input from the people of Scotland, in order to ensure the best result for all. It is vital that women’s voices are heard.