

Scottish Women's Convention

General Election 2017 Priorities for Women

On 18th April, Prime Minister Theresa May announced that a 'snap' general election will be held on Thursday 8th June this year.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) has consulted with individuals and women's organisations throughout Scotland on the key issues which impact on women. Powers such as Brexit negotiations; Employment and Equalities Legislation and key aspects of the welfare system all remain with Westminster.

Women account for over 50% of the adult population in Scotland. It is vital that their voices are heard and listened to during the campaigning process.

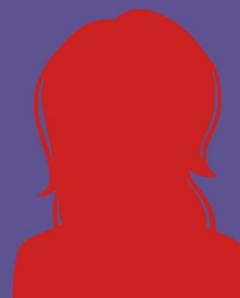
Brexit



Employment



Equalities



**Social
Security**



Brexit Negotiations

A strong gender focus is essential when considering the impact of Brexit. Much of the discussions concerning negotiations have occurred only at a higher ministerial level. There has been much talk of a 'hard' or 'soft' Brexit, whether we should stay in the Single Market and what it will mean for international trade. However, there has been very little information as to how this will impact on women and communities throughout the country.

Many of the legislative and policy decisions that offer legal protection for women and recognise that inequality still exists are implemented through the power of Europe. Women have spoken of their concerns around the future of these. Words such as “*uncertainty*”, “*fear*” and “*anxiety*” are commonly used. Further clarification is needed around the Brexit process, as well as specific issues about particular areas of policy and legislation.

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

What Women Want

A guarantee that the range of rights brought about by membership of the EU, such as equality, employment and human rights, are maintained and built upon post-Brexit

Fear of the potential impact on European legislation that Brexit may have is common. Issues such as sex discrimination laws and the protections guaranteed around Working Time and Agency Workers directives have all been raised as essential legislative frameworks.

An open, transparent and accountable Brexit process.

Women have reported that the UK Government has not been forthright during the process so far. There is a lot of uncertainty around Scotland's position within these proceedings. A coordinated, four nations approach which protects the interests of citizens in devolved countries is essential.

“There is no obligation for these important measures to be adhered to. Without this, there's a real possibility that the UK Government won't see fit to do anything to ensure they're being carried out domestically. If this happens, it will be a step back in time for women's rights.”

Maintaining the Equality Act

The Equality Act, 2010, must be maintained. This legislation protects women from discrimination within the workplace and in wider society. Pregnancy, maternity and parental rights all rely on the Equality Act. Protection as an employee, consumer, user of public services and in education ensures that women are treated fairly and without prejudice.

What Women Want

A commitment by the UK Government to maintaining the Equality Act

Without laws in place that recognise gendered inequality, discrimination will continue to increase. The Equality Act protects women in all aspects of society. Failure to safeguard this legislation could result in women being further discriminated against or marginalised.

“It's so important that, regardless of what happens, women's rights are protected. We've fought too long and hard for them to be reduced or lost altogether.”

Maintaining the Human Rights Act

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is enshrined within domestic law through the Human Rights Act 1998. The current UK Government had a previous manifesto commitment to repeal this legislation and replace it with a 'British Bill of Rights'. This approach has raised a number of issues.

What Women Want

A guarantee that the Human Rights Act will not be repealed. The replacement of this vital piece of legislation with a 'British Bill of Rights' has the potential to significantly jeopardise citizens most fundamental freedoms.

"Even though technically Brexit doesn't mean we are outwith the protection of the ECHR, there's still a worry that our protections will be eroded as a result of the vote. Human rights are universal and guarantee every citizen's most fundamental freedoms. This cannot be forgotten."

Media Portrayals of Women

Women are still victims of harassment in all manners of society today. This is in part due to the normalisation of many forms of offensive behaviour by the media. Cat calling and online trolling are often perceived as "harmless" and "a bit of fun", failing to recognise the impact that this can have on women's mental wellbeing. The gendered nature of society means that this can lead to an increasingly accepted perception of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). More must be done at a legislative level to regulate the media and how they portray women.

What Women Want:

Government to use influence to inform and direct the media as to how women should be represented.

Without intervention, the cycle of VAWG will continue. The media should be used as a platform for highlighting gender inequality in its many forms, not for showcasing and influencing it.

"We do not have to be depicted in a picture to be objectified. We are objectified simply by being women in a society where images like this are normal, accepted and widespread."

The Minimum Wage

Women undertake low paid, low skilled work, often on a part-time basis, with little opportunity for training and development. Not only does this contribute to the gender pay gap, but often pays no more than the National Living or Minimum Wage. Women and families are struggling to be able to make ends meet and are being forced to rely on Tax Credits and other forms of 'top up' benefits to supplement their incomes. Conditions for state support are changing, which is making them more difficult to claim.

What Women Want

An increase in the National Living Wage for all workers, regardless of job type or age.

This has the potential to lift women and their families out of poverty, as well as reducing reliance on welfare benefits. It would not only be beneficial to the workers who receive it, but also the economy as a whole.

"Young workers are exploited enough with the widespread use of zero hours contracts and blatant age discrimination with the varying minimum wage rates. Is it any wonder so many are disenfranchised?"

Pension Inequalities

The UK Government's State Pension Act 1995 set out plans to increase women's state pension age from 60 to 65. This has meant that women born on or after 6th April 1951 have been hit particularly hard. Significant changes to the age at which these women will receive their state pension have been imposed with little or no notice. As a result, many are suffering financial hardship, with not enough time to re-plan for retirement.

What Women Want

Fair state pension arrangements for women affected by the equalisation in men's and women's pension ages.

Too many women are facing significant financial hardship once they finish work as a result of the state pension increases. This discriminatory policy should be reversed as a matter of urgency so as to ensure that significant numbers of women are not plunged into poverty.

"Women don't know at what age they're going to be able to retire and when they can claim their pension. They shouldn't have to worry about these issues at that stage of life."

Political Representation

Despite the positive steps forward in recent years concerning the number of women becoming interested in politics, much still needs to be done in order to achieve a 50/50 gender balance. Although women represent over half of the population, they are still under-represented in political life.

What Women Want:

A commitment by all political parties to ensure that equal numbers of women and men stand for election at both a local and national level.

Without a clear 50/50 balance, women will continue to be misrepresented at a political level. This should be a clear manifesto commitment by all parties moving forward.

Mandatory publication of gender specific statistics following elections.

Statistics which deal with political representation of women will not only illustrate the number of women partaking in political life, but also identify any gaps that can be addressed.

Recognition of Maternity Rights

Currently, expectant mothers can be dismissed, harassed or discouraged simply for attending routine antenatal appointments. The belief that the female has a responsibility as the primary carer is still apparent across society. The majority of maternity pay still stands at less than the National Living Wage, whilst shared parental leave legislation is often financially impossible.

What Women Want

Greater legislative powers in place to prevent discrimination, both direct and indirect, against working mothers

Attitudes towards women, such as that they cease caring about work upon becoming a mother, must be changed. Tighter laws on maternity discrimination can provide a foundation for this.

An increase in maternity and paternity pay to that of the National Living Wage.

Any system must be beneficial for both parents, allowing both mother and father to be able to share caring duties equally. Under the current system, it is "*just not financially viable*" to do this, often leading to women having to sacrifice their careers.

"The Government has to recognise that one of the main reasons as to why women take on the primary role is to do with how employers treat childcare in financial terms."

Tax Credits Changes and the Rape Clause

The UK Government announced that it would limit the payment of child tax credit to the first two children only. Exemptions to these changes were announced in certain cases, most controversially for children born as a result of 'non-consensual conception', i.e. the so-called 'rape clause'. A woman can claim for a third or subsequent child if it was conceived as a result of a sexual act they did not or could not consent to, or at a time when they were in an abusive relationship, under ongoing control or coercion, by the other parent of the child. A woman cannot claim this exemption if she lives with the other parent.

What Women Want

The abolition of this policy.

The 'rape clause' will impact on women when they are at their most vulnerable. They will be forced to re-live one of the most traumatic, life-altering experiences they have gone through. There is no place for this Victorian style policy in a progressive UK in 2017.

Zero Hours Contracts

Many of the jobs available in the current climate are undertaken as zero hours contracts, often in areas where women predominate. Workers on these contracts do not accrue holidays and are not paid for sick days. There are no guarantees of work from day to day, therefore no fixed income. The nature of a zero hours contract means that it is impossible to claim financial assistance through tax credits to top up income and pay for childcare costs.

What Women Want

A ban on the use of zero hours contracts.

Women need work to be flexible, which is often an argument put forward for the use of these contracts. The reality, however, is that these exploitative working conditions are not flexible and instead create uncertainty and, in many cases, poverty.

"Where I work, they're trying to get people who are on full-time contracts to move to more 'flexible' contracts, saying they'll be good for working parents. They're really just zero hours contracts by another name."

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded by the Scottish Government to consult with women in Scotland to influence public policy. The organisation was set up in 2003 to enable grassroots women to discuss issues relevant to them. Since its inception the SWC has engaged with a wide range of women throughout the country.

The SWC engages 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.

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