



# **Portree Roadshow Report 23 May 2013**

The SWC (Scottish Women's Convention) recognises that women are having to re-train and up-skill in order to enter into, sustain or progress in employment. Barriers also exist in accessing advice, assistance and resources to support women.

The current financial climate, with cuts to public services and changes to welfare benefits, is severely impacting on the ability of women to fully integrate in employment, education and society in general.

Women also need to become more involved in discussions around the referendum on the future of Scotland. What do women want or need from decision makers after September 2014?

The 2013 Roadshow programme gives women the opportunity to discuss these topics in more detail. It is important that women are given an opportunity to express how political decisions impact on them, their families and communities.

Agnes Tolmie  
Chair, SWC

The SWC arranged a series of events in Skye and Lochalsh in order to meet with women and to discuss important local issues.

Two roadshows held in Portree were attended by women from throughout the area. Many women expressed an interest in attending the events, however were unable to do so due to a number of factors. Long working hours, (most often in the tourism and hospitality industries), women working more than one job and a lack of childcare and transport resulted in some not being able to attend the events. These women were given copies of the roadshow questions and their voices and opinions are reflected throughout the report.

The event was promoted through direct communication with organisations and individuals in the area. Discussions around the questions were facilitated by SWC staff and volunteers. Notes taken throughout the process and direct quotes from the women attending form the basis of this report.

Copies will be sent to the women who participated as well as key decision makers at local and national level.

### **What opportunities are there for formal and informal learning, training and education in your area?**

There are a number of opportunities for formal education at the local college, however not a lot of women take them up as *“they don’t see the worth”*. It is difficult to encourage women to engage with any level of education in the area. Some are of the opinion that the only beneficial education is that which is provided for children.

Literacy can be an concern, particularly when it comes to filling out application forms etc. Those for whom this is an issue are unlikely to access any education or learning to address literacy gaps.

*“The islanders are private people and don’t want others to know their business when it comes to things like being unable to read and write.”*

While there are seen to be decent learning opportunities for young people under the age of 18, the 18-24 age group needs *“more help”*, particularly with regards to Modern Apprenticeships.

*“They’re only really made available to under 18s. Anyone over that age will only be able to access an apprenticeship here in ‘really exceptional’ cases.”*

Young people in schools should be given more information from local businesses regarding ‘business start-up’. However the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is *“too tight”* to allow this to happen.

The impact of apprenticeships and training off the island means that day release from the company hiring the apprentice is *“almost impossible”*. If a company cannot afford to support day release then they are unable to grow their business. This is poor not only in terms of young people’s development but also the local economy.

If businesses are unable to continue and are forced to close, it has an impact on many other aspects of life in the area. Families may be forced to leave, leading to local school closures and shrinking communities.

Many young women who are not in education/training or employment see pregnancy as their only option.

### **Opportunities in Employment**

Permanent job opportunities on the island are restricted. Many women work two or three jobs in order to sustain themselves and their families. The lack of employment means few chances for training, development and progression in the workplace.

Underemployment is prevalent on Skye.

*“People have to change their skills to adapt to what jobs are available as opposed to the jobs they would actually want to do if they had an option.”*

Job roles also continue to be ‘traditionally’ defined - for example men are more likely to undertake work in construction, whereas women tend to work in hospitality and tourism. Much of this work is part-time and seasonal.

### **Childcare & Transport**

Nurseries are only available in certain areas around the island. Public transport to access such facilities is *“laughable”*. Women are forced to rely on family and friends to *“help out”* with childcare. While the Scottish Government currently provides 475 hours per year of early years education for 3-4 years olds, this is not always available or accessible in rural areas.

**Have any changes to services, facilities and welfare benefits affected you, your family and your community as a whole?**

### **Health**

Care services are not consistent and do not take into account how far away other family members are.

*“One family were called by their parents carer to say that nobody would be able to take lunch to their mother so could they either do it or arrange for someone else. This family live 250 miles away from Skye.”*

Care workers, the majority of whom are women, have had their working timetables cut and as a result are unable to provide the same levels of care they could in the past. Some visits to clients are being missed due to restrictions placed on workers.

*“It’s really frustrating because services are just so restricted. It’s hard for the women who work in these jobs as well as the people relying on the care. I know of one elderly neighbour who missed both breakfast and lunch one day.”*

Some villages have started to rely on voluntary services for certain aspects of healthcare. First responders are local people trained by the NHS to be able to respond in emergency situations. This is necessary due to the length of time it could take for an ambulance to travel to a remote area.

The hospital in Portree recently had an extension built. There is, however, now consultation about the prospect of merging that facility with the hospital in Broadford to create one large facility. The placement of this would have to be seriously considered.

At the moment if there are no beds at the hospital in Portree, patients are transferred to Broadford. For people living in and beyond Portree this can mean undertaking a long journey to visit family and friends. The road conditions in winter can make this especially difficult.

There are maternity services on the island, however most women have to travel to Raigmore hospital in Inverness to give birth.

*“Women have to travel in active labour. We used to be taken in just before our due date but that doesn’t happen any more.”*

Patients also have to travel to Inverness for other appointments, such as cancer consultations. No consideration is given to those who have to get to Inverness and often, for example, appointments are made for as early as 11am. The first bus from Skye to Inverness does not arrive in Inverness until lunchtime.

*“They can’t take for granted that everyone has a car. These appointments are really important and it can be stressful worrying if you’re going to be at Raigmore on time.”*

Appropriate patient transport is essential. At the moment, the bus will not travel to / from the hospital until it is full. This results in some patients being on board for hours before reaching their destination. Transport from hospitals on the mainland is also poor.

*“One of my friends spent an extra two weeks in hospital off the island as suitable transport was not available to get her and her electric wheelchair back to Skye. She had to wait until an adapted vehicle could take her.”*

Living in a rural area limits choices with regards to medical services.

*“If you don’t get on with your doctor it can be difficult as they may be the only one in your area.”*

NHS dentist waiting lists are *“extreme”*. It is not uncommon for people to have to wait 9 or 10 years to get a dentist on Skye. Many have to resort to travelling long distances, such as to Inverness or Fort William, in order to register with a practice.

## **Welfare Benefits**

Welfare reform measures will undoubtedly have an impact on women in the area. Budgeting will become an issue when Universal Credit (UC) is paid monthly in arrears to claimants, as opposed to the weekly payments at the moment. Shopping is expensive and there are limited options for local residents.

*“We need a Morrisons or an Asda. Everything is so much more expensive here. It’s like we’re being robbed.”*

Many of the businesses close at lunchtime or in the early evening which further limits opportunities.

*“The people who own the businesses do not see what they’re doing as providing a service. Instead it’s just a way for them to make a living. They don’t think about the impact on other people.”*

The high cost of living in and around Portree means that for many, being in employment is not the best option. Wages are low and, because of the hours available, people do not always qualify for tax credits.

There are concerns around women’s financial position when Universal Credit is fully introduced. At present, couples can claim benefits such as Jobseekers Allowance individually. Under the new measures, one single claim will be made by a household, meaning women will not necessarily have direct access to their money.

*“That’s a worry. If the man has control of the finances where will that leave the woman? With nothing?”*

The so-called ‘bedroom tax’ is also causing concern. There is a lack of one bedroom properties for people to move into. Some disabled women who live in adapted houses may be forced to move out of the area, away from family and support networks, for ‘suitable’ smaller properties.

The lack of new homes being built is not only impacting on families seeking suitable housing, but also the building trade. Little investment is stifling jobs and opportunities for employment.

A food bank is in the process of being established in Portree. The nearest one is in Inverness and is said to be *“inundated”*. The nature of rural living - described as ‘Highland Pride’ - means that many women are embarrassed or simply do not want to ask for help.

## **Education**

Highland Council is considering a shorter school day. This is seen as an effort to cut costs.

*“I don’t know how this would work in practice though. It’s difficult enough to try and work everything round the school day without making it shorter.”*

It has been suggested that part of this proposal would include different school hours - for example, P1-3 would finish at 3pm and P4 onwards would finish later. Logistically this could be difficult for parents with different aged children to organise after school pick up.

**Both the Better Together and Yes Scotland campaigns are setting out their vision for Scotland's future.**

**What kind of Scotland do you want to see after the referendum vote?**

*"We want a Scotland that re-invests in its own country."*

High-level politics in Scotland are seen by some as a 'boys club' who are *"only out for themselves."* A hope for the future is that a more inclusive approach will be taken to the running of the country. The referendum campaign so far has seemed to be more about *"point-scoring"* between the two sides of the debate. It should be about what is best for the Scottish people.

One of the key issues in and around Portree is how policies will be made. At present, decisions about rural areas are made by those outwith the area. Policy makers must listen to those who will be affected by the changes being considered.

*"Decision making should be taken back to local areas. Most of the decisions made at Local Government level are done in Inverness. That doesn't mean they are appropriate on Skye. Similarly decisions about, for example, crofting are made in Edinburgh. They don't take into account or understand how they will affect rural communities."*

Not enough information is being made to the public on issues such as currency, general finances, border control etc. Women also want to know how much it will cost to 'drift away' from the rest of the UK.

*"The Government is quick enough to say there's no money for more schools or to fix the roads. So how are we going to pay for independence if it happens?"*

There is a feeling that the debate is being *"dragged out"* and many do not see why Scotland has to wait so long to decide what happens.

*"People could be really scunnered by it all by the time the vote actually happens."*

**What one thing could improve your local area?**

- Better communications - faster and more reliable internet would be welcomed.
- A 'thriving capital' of the island, with investment in shops and businesses.
- Policy makers should take rural issues seriously. *"Instead of just saying 'we know one size doesn't fit all' actually do something about it"*
- Local councillors need to listen to local people, take responsibility and in turn local people will take pride in their area.

## Conclusions

Following on from the discussions, women asked the SWC to submit recommendations to the Scottish Government, relevant Ministers and Representatives at all Government levels. Copies will also be distributed to Non-Governmental Organisations.



The 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.