

Scottish Women's Convention

Ullapool Roadshow

Thursday 20th August 2015

Flexibility Family Modern Apprenticeships
Sanctions **Childcare**
Maternity **Low Paid** Community
Ullapool
Low Skilled **Roadshow** Affordable Progression
Living Wage Benefits Mental Health
Training Schools Barriers
Development **Welfare Reform**
Caring Council Tax **Employment**

Health and Social Care

Disability

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) visited the Ceilidh Place, Ullapool, on Thursday 20th August 2015. We met with local women and discussed a variety of issues including employment; childcare and caring; training, development and education; welfare reform and women's representation.

The SWC would like to thank all of the women who attended. The information gathered on the day will be used to inform a number of SWC documents, including responses to consultations, calls for evidence and international reports.

www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Introduction

Women face barriers in sustaining and progressing in the labour market. There are also difficulties in accessing further learning and education, training and development. With increased pressures from family responsibilities, women often struggle to organise themselves on a daily basis. This is all taking place against a backdrop of cuts to public services and changes to the welfare benefits system.

The 2015 Roadshow programme offers local women the opportunity to discuss these topics in more detail. It is important that they are given an opportunity to express how political decisions impact on them, their families and communities.

Ullapool

Ullapool is a town of around 1,500 inhabitants in Ross-shire. It is covered by the Caithness, Sutherland and Ross constituency of the Scottish Parliament and is covered by the Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh ward of the Highland Council.

Despite its small size it is the largest settlement for many miles around and is also a major tourist destination. The North Atlantic Drift passes Ullapool, bringing moderate temperatures. New Zealand cabbage trees are grown in the town and are often mistaken for palm trees,

Ullapool has a strong reputation as a centre for music, the arts and performance. The town boasts the museum and art gallery 'An Talla Solais', as well as a swimming pool and fitness centre. There are several pubs, bed and breakfasts, restaurants and hotels. It is a centre for walkers and wildlife enthusiasts.

In May every year there is a three day Book Festival which attracts a diverse range of writers and work in both Scottish Gaelic and English. The Macphail Centre has a theatre hosting a regular programme of musical, dance and theatrical performances, many by the Scottish national companies but some work from smaller reps and travelling Edinburgh Fringe performers. Often the number of performances in any week will mean there is overspill to the Village Hall and other venues.



QUESTION ONE

As of December 2014, women's employment in Scotland was at an all-time high; however women are still on zero hours contracts, in low-paid, part-time, precarious employment. Women also have to juggle commitments at home and at work.

What are your experiences of home and family life?

Employment

Employment in the area is mostly concentrated in the domestic and hospitality sectors, however the jobs are not secure.

"You work from April until October and rely on benefits from November to March."

Whether or not there are jobs available depends entirely on the season. Much of the work undertaken by women is also done on a part-time basis. Almost all employers in the area are small employers.

In Nigg, which is approximately 70 miles away from Ullapool, there is a Skills Academy. This was set up over to address the energy skills gaps in the oil and gas and emerging renewables energy industry. They deliver "work ready" Modern Apprenticeship trainees for local employers and recently held an application event. Hundreds of young people applied for 60 spaces.

"It is so difficult for young people, young women in particular, to get any kind of sustainable employment, especially when the competition is that great."

Many young women enter into what are seen as 'traditional' career paths, such as in the care sector. These women work in demanding jobs. Due to the rurality of the area, it can be very time consuming tending to each client.

"Carers here really do go above and beyond what they're supposed to do. They're only meant to spend about ten minutes with each client but to the women going in to help that's just not right. This means they end up staying longer with their clients, therefore working more, but not getting paid for it."

Similarly a lot of women, particularly those in the voluntary sector, are only contracted to work part time hours. In reality, they are doing much more "over and above". This extra commitment is often not recognised by employers.

Welfare Benefits

Due to the nature of the work which is available, many women in the area rely on the assistance of welfare benefits in order to make ends meet.

"Accessing benefits is ok if you know how the system works. Being IT literate means everything now and it's just not recognised that not everyone has access to the internet or is able to use a computer."

The requirements of looking for a job are considered unreasonable by many.

“You’re expected to spend 35 hours a week looking for a job. How are you supposed to fit that into family life, especially when there are no jobs in the area anyway?”

The lack of employment opportunities is particularly acute. Many of the jobs only pay minimum wage and there is a lot of travelling involved, especially to the main towns such as Inverness. This leads to a continued reliance on welfare benefits, such as working/child tax credits, as well as housing and council tax benefit, in order to ‘top up’ women’s income.

The actions of Jobcentre are not seen to be consistent, with rules being applied differently depending on their advisor and circumstances.

“I know women who have been aware they’re going to miss an appointment, who have phoned and explained their circumstances. Some have been told a time and date will be rearranged without consequence, whereas other times there are threats of sanctions. It’s not consistent.”

There’s no representation from the Jobcentre in Sutherland, which means that claimants who live in Ullapool have to travel to Inverness to attend appointments. This costs approximately £12 one way on the bus.

“If you don’t have any money how are you supposed to make that journey?”

Young people are being forced to hitch a lift to get to Inverness. The Jobcentre have been known to intimate that they should have made sure that they had enough money to pay for their transport.

The application system often crashes when claiming for benefits online. This is mostly due to the broadband connection, which can be very slow. It is therefore difficult to complete and application.

The Jobcentre itself was previously held in a local school. Although this was not ideal, neither for those attending or for the staff/pupils at school, it means that locally the person-based approach has been lost. Previously, an advisor could talk to a claimant face to face and explain things to them. Now, if people want this service, they have to get to Inverness.

“The new system is confusing and people need help with it. That shouldn’t mean a long journey or an unnecessary expense.”

There is a food bank in the area, which provides assistance locally. Changes to the welfare benefits system are considered one of the reasons as to why this is now in operation.

“So many people are struggling to be able to afford the most basic things such as food and energy. The DWP does not understand just how destitute people are.”

Employability services are not Highland-wide, but are instead concentrated in the main population centres. They do not work with other relevant departments, such as housing or social services.

“There needs to be a more transferrable approach, which links departments together. People need to be able to be listened to in a joined up way.”

Many women accessing the benefits system are doing so for the first time after being made redundant, having worked in, for example, the public sector for a number of years. They are now expected to write CVs, fill in job applications etc. Some do not need assistance with this and this is seen as a waste of their time. Others, however, do need help and struggle with this due to the nature of the work they have done in the past.

“It seems to be a case of find any job you can, rather than do something which you want to do, or develops your skills and abilities.”

Women have also raised concerns around the payment of Universal Credit. There are issues specifically around claimants being able to secure enough working hours to qualify for tax credits, as well as the potential detrimental impact of the benefit only being paid to one member of the household.

“What happens to women who are living in abusive relationships? It’s hard enough to leave that kind of situation without worrying you’re going to be left with no money.”

There are also issues if a man goes to prison and he is the one to whom the household benefits are paid. Money will stop until the woman can make a new claim for herself. In the meantime, her and her children could be left without anything, as a new claim cannot be processed until a previous one ceased.

“Things are going back to Victorian times. It’s frightening.”

Caring

A lot of women in the area are carers, looking after both elderly parents and young grandchildren.

“There are so many worries for carers at the moment. We still have to work, but also we want to be able to look after our parents and help our kids as well.”

There are significant cost implications attached to older people going into care. Depending on where the care home is, older people can be removed from family and other support networks. There are two care homes in Ullapool, one of which is more sheltered accommodation. Both are difficult to get into.

Childcare

Childcare can be *“hit or miss”*, depending on the age of the child and how much people are able to pay. There is very little available outwith school hours and no wraparound provision.

There are a number of childminders in the area, looking after babies right up to school age children. Their services are in high demand due to the lack of formal provision across the geographical area.

The lack of childcare puts pressure on women to either apply for jobs which pay a lot and therefore have much more responsibility and longer working hours just so they can pay for childcare, or to not return to work at all.

“It’s a catch 22. You either have to go back into work and try and balance that with a family life, or you don’t go back to work but feel as if you’ve wasted your education or are not fulfilling all of your potential. It’s so hard.”

In Work Poverty

Many families have more than one job and have grandparents looking after children just to make ends meet. In work poverty is prevalent in rural areas, but it can be harder to see. Families are continuously always having to play ‘catch up’ with their bills, rent, mortgage etc.

“The money made working in the summer is used to top up the money that women lose out on when they’re not working in the winter. Food, transport, energy costs - it never stops.”

Young Women

More needs to be done to support young women into work and develop the young workforce in the area. For further/higher education young people have to leave Ullapool and go to Inverness on a daily basis. There is a college bus which leaves at 6am and gets back at approximately 7pm.

“It’s such a long day for them - is it any wonder they would rather move away than have to do that every day?”

Young women tend to go into what are considered traditional roles, such as hairdressing, beauty and caring. There is too much emphasis on higher education and not enough on vocational roles and training. Young people get frustrated at the lack of opportunity so leave the area to move to bigger towns and cities and often don’t come back.

“There’s too much emphasis on attainment levels and positive destinations rather than what’s actually best for young women.”

Older Women

“I’ve been told I need to work another 7 years until I can retire. In my head I feel done with work. I’ve done my bit for society. Why is that not recognised?”

Older women are judged on their age. When they go for jobs, employers look at their age and think ‘they will be retiring soon’. They are then more likely to take on a younger person. More needs to be done to support older women to enter into, sustain and progress in employment.

QUESTION TWO

Scotland has its first woman First Minister with a 50/50 gender balanced Cabinet. However, in the Scottish Parliament, only one third of elected members are women.

What needs to be done to encourage and support women to become more active, both at a local and a national level?

Historically, it has been difficult for women to enter into political and public life. This is due, in part, to the perceived *“macho culture”* of the Highlands. Women often have to fight every step of the way in order to be taken seriously.

“You have to perform better as a woman just to be heard.”

Women taking time out to have children can be seen as detrimental to their future career and potential involvement at a local and national level. On the other hand, women can be judged for not having children.

“You’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you don’t. Women in the area are often still expected to raise their children, run the family home etc and that should be their first priority.”

The lack of available childcare and limited public transport can be significant barriers to participation. Meetings are often held in the evenings, for example the local Community Council. Most of the members are retired and have a lot of time on their hands. More needs to be done in order to change this, allowing both older and younger members of the community to work together.

“Women with families just don’t have time to go to meetings at night – they’re too busy looking after children, doing homework, making the dinner etc. They’re even less likely to go if they can’t drive, particularly in the winter, as it’s difficult to get into town.”

There is a lack of female Councillors in and around Ullapool. A lot of that is to do with confidence, as well as longstanding perceptions about women’s roles.

“You fear making enemies by putting your head above the parapet. You’ve really got to have a backbone and a thick skin to do it.”

Another reason why there are perhaps fewer women Councillors is that they would be unable to survive on the salary elected members receive.

“Highland Councillors cover such a large area. This means it’s very difficult to keep another job and income on the go.”

Politics continues to be a male dominated environment, both locally and nationally.

Women are fighting different battles and are still not considered equal, even in this day and age. Temporary special measures, such as women only shortlists, are important in ensuring a gender balance.

“It’s about giving women the confidence to recognise they have the skills to do the job, as well as recognising the skills and qualities they already have.”

More needs to be done on gender stereotyping from a young age. Young children are being shaped through the toys they play with and the stories they read. This impacts on what they go on to do.

“Little girls still get kitchens to play with and little boys still get trucks. There’s not enough done to show that any toy can be for any child.”

The way in which women are treated and perceived, particularly on social media, also has an impact.

“Nicola Sturgeon constantly gets comments about the way she looks, her hair, her weight etc. The previous First Minister never had to put up with that.”

QUESTION THREE

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

- Improved public transport links.
- Ways to bring young people back into the area.
- Job creation and business growth.
- Accessible, affordable, appropriate, wraparound childcare.
- Education for sustainable jobs.
- Access to training courses.
- Improved broadband.
- More opportunities for women to come together to assist with building confidence and self-esteem.

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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.

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