

Young Women's Conference

Saturday, 19th August, 2017
Hilton Grosvenor Hotel, Glasgow.

What is it like to be a young woman in Scotland today? What are the pressures, hopes and fears of growing up with low pay, poor employment practices, social media and changing political priorities?

Zero hours contracts and a minimum wage based on age rather than skills contribute to young women being steered towards traditionally female roles of caring, cleaning and catering. Lack of support and cuts to college funding are stifling over 50% of Scotland's young people.

Social media and the pressures to conform to unrealistic media images are putting unnecessary stress on young women.

Empowerment is crucial to improving the lives of young women in Scotland. By working together, they can support each other, enhance their skills and realise their full potential.

**Suzanne Conlin,
Board Member**



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Scottish Women's Convention

Introduction

In today's society, the expectations and pressures piled on young women is insurmountable. Young women in this country need to be seen, heard and empowered. It is only through empowerment that women will feel free and able to achieve equality. Gender based violence is pervasive and continues to rise with the blurring of boundaries over what constitutes consent dominating headlines.

But, this is also a refreshing time for young women, equality continues to make strides, with greater political representation than ever before, a lowering of the gender pay gap and more and more women going into STEM subjects. However, this is not to say that the fight for equality is far from over. These achievements merely testify to the work that is still on going and the women who continue to fight for change.

This event was organised by the SWC in order to bring young women together to highlight and focus on empowerment and what they need to succeed in education, employment and society. It is important that young women are given a safe, friendly and supportive place to share their experiences and thoughts. This event was chaired by Suzanne Conlin, SWC Board Member with guest speakers including Elaine C. Smith, entertainer and activist; Roza Salih, activist; Paula Dunn from Rape Crisis' "Rosey Project" and Gemma Lumsdaine, Scottish National Basketball Player.

Roza Salih

Roza arrived in Scotland as a refugee in 2002 from the Kurdistan region of Iraq. When Roza was 15 years old she was one of a group of students who became known as 'The Glasgow Girls', campaigning across the UK to stop deportations of vulnerable asylum seekers. A musical theatre, documentary and a film have since been made about their story. Roza is active in Unite the Union. She is Vice Chair of Unite Scotland Regional Young Members Committee and a member of the STUC Youth Committee.

Roza spoke about starting to campaign at such a young age. The "Glasgow Girls" main focus was on the deportation of children – something that was routinely overlooked at the time. This concluded with not only a rise in the profile of child detainees but a huge accomplishment when it succeeded in putting an end to this throughout Britain.

"Campaigning could be anything your passionate about, you should take away that you can actually make a difference."

Roza spoke about the empowerment that came with the campaign, how it started off as a simple petition in their classroom before being taken into the community and snowballed after being picked up by the media until it became a huge public story. Highlighting that actively campaigning may not mean that everything you set out to do is achieved, she noted that even the smallest change can be of significance to someone. A major feature of this was focused on how just simply raising the profile of a cause can publicise it to those that have the power to make a change and show there can be different forms of systems in place.

Today, Roza is actively involved in other campaigns such as "Better than Zero" to end zero-hour contracts – something young women are routinely exploited with. "

"Young women can make a difference if they raise their voices."

Gemma Lumsdaine

Gemma Lumsdaine is an athlete specialising in wheelchair basketball and rugby, she is a member of the U23 Scotland squad for which she won gold at the Celtic Cup last year. As well as this, she also sits on the Scottish Disability Sport and Basketball Scotland Young Peoples' Panels and has spoken at the House of Lords about the benefits of disability sport.

Gemma discussed a number of factors relating to young female empowerment including her own struggles with youth depression. Highlighting the struggles that girls face as they grow up, Gemma discussed her own journey to empowerment through sport and how this gave her a lifeline. She stressed the need for more encouragement of activities to boost mental health and the need to change perspectives on disability to empowerment, ability and independence.

"Mental health is just as important as physical health, this needs to be recognised."

"Perceptions become more defined as you get older; you start to question yourself as you become a teenage girl."

Gemma discussed her adolescence, as a child she saw herself like any other little girl until around the age of ten when she began to notice there were certain things that marked her as "different". This led to feelings of isolation and she began to withdraw from everyday life, until she became ill and was unable to attend school or do activities.

She noted the women in her life who changed her perspective by pushing her to her mental limits. Despite having never played sport, she started at a club and became inspired to be more independent. Gemma mapped out how for the first time, in a long time, this pushed her to want to get better and achieve something, as she saw other wheelchair users going to university and so on, it inspired her to become more independent.

Paula Dunn

Paula Dunn is one of the Prevention & Education Workers for the Rosey Project at Glasgow & Clyde Rape Crisis. Paula was instrumental in the development and implementation of the Rosey Project almost ten years ago. The Project offers sexual violence and gender socialisation awareness raising workshops to young people aged 10 – 25 in schools, colleges, universities and community youth groups across Glasgow.

Paula outlined how the birth of the Rosey Project came about almost a decade ago when she was the first worker on it. Due to the increase in the number of young women accessing services for sexual violence, Rape Crisis set itself the task of trying to understand just why this problem was so pervasive within society, and why was there such an increase.

Prevention work was highlighted as a key mechanism in aiming to reduce sexual violence and the Rosey Project have created partnerships with a huge number of high schools, youth groups and colleges within Glasgow. Education and early intervention are key for survivors of such and both girls and boys need to be taught from a young age about these important issues. Paula outlined the focus of the Rosey Project's prevention work by approaching it as fundamental to engage with both sexes from the ages of 11-25 in order to communicate the same messages about equality and appropriateness within relationships.

"You need to engage both girls and boys if you want to see a change."

“Sexual violence is still taboo”

She emphasised that people still in this day and age don't want to acknowledge it as a problem within their own community. She urged the need to get the conversation started concerning such an issue and the difficulties we have as a society in discussing sex with young people. The likes of consent and what is appropriate can prevent sexual violence if we take the initiative and discuss these issues openly.

“We're conditioned to not talk about it, but this is why victims can be scared to speak up.”

“Abuse thrives on secrecy, the only way we can challenge it, is if we talk about it”

Paula highlighted the role that the media plays. Highlighting advertising as a real problem, she noted the use of sexual violence in order to sell products for many brands. This can lead to a normalisation of this and may even encourage both men and women to see it as acceptable.

She also noted that a number of males can get defensive when discussing sexual violence as a gendered crime.

“This is not about saying that every man is a potential sex offender, it is about saying we can only challenge this if we all work together and are communicating the same message.”

Elaine C Smith

Elaine C Smith is one of Scotland's best known entertainers, working widely in radio, television and theatre. However, Elaine's other side is as a tireless political campaigner mainly championing woman's issues and Scottish Independence. She is currently joint convener of the Scottish Independence Convention. She has been awarded two Honorary Doctorates from the Universities of Dundee and Glasgow and is a passionate worker for a large number of charities.

Elaine began by discussing her political history of being a feminist and socialist campaigner before she got into acting. She discussed her belief in quota systems in order to force female representation within the likes of politics. Due to the make up of many systems putting men forward at present, she noted that such enforcements are necessary in order to change attitudes towards representation.

The entertainer also spoke about the Scottish comedy circuit and its domination by white males. Elaine spoke about the fight she herself has had as a woman in comedy to get to where she is. She highlighted the example of not being able to even play a doctor in a comedy sketch, that women had to be the nurse, the mother or the wife, but very rarely got the punch line. It was only when Elaine spoke up and the writers started hearing her voice, that she began to get the main comedic role.

“I spent a long time trying not to be outrageous, but in doing so I realised I was colluding with people.”

Elaine mapped out how far we as women have come. Emphasising the difference in trajectory when discussing domestic violence and how untouchable it used to be as a subject compared to now, for instance. Like Paula, she highlighted the need to not ignore men, that they are part of the solution.

Elaine continued by giving a rousing speech on the impact of shame and rejection for young women and how this can make them too scared to speak up about their issues. She noted the likes of female magazines as having a huge impact on women's self-esteem and how they teach us to judge other women on the way we look.

"We've made mistakes, and well make more mistakes because this is new. Were all the first few generations of women who've experienced some form of real progress."

"We have come a long way, but we cannot forget we still have a long road to travel."

"We stand on the shoulders of those women who did the campaigning back then."

There is still this idea circulating within society about females, that you can be successful in areas such as work so long as you also get the stereotypically "female" bits right. Elaine noted that this idea of perfectionism that women feel the need to live up to is often the voice in your own head, doing the most damage and telling you that you are not good enough.

"You will never make everybody like you, but if what you're saying matters, it will land."

"Women who set a low value on themselves make life hard for all women."

Elaine concluded by emphasising the need for solidarity as a key feature in the empowerment of women. She noted how vital the likes of empathy can be to another female just to show support and being able to listen. She noted that twenty years ago, to have political party leaders and a First Minister that are female would have been unthinkable. We need to support this, rather than constant fighting amongst ourselves.

"Politics should come from a place of saying 'we can go forward'- empathy and solidarity and women together take us forward."



Question & Answer Session

Can you give examples of moments where you have encountered discrimination and the strategies you used for dealing with this?

PAULA DUNN (PD): As a sexual prevention worker, I face challenges, usually people questioning what my credentials are to start a conversation around the likes of sexual violence, I usually reply “Apart from the fact I’ve been born, raised and socialised a female?” As women, we always face this type of criticism, the likes of walking down the street and men tell you to smile, it’s just banter but you won’t hear this type of comment being directed at men. That’s a clear imbalance of power thrown out in a casual way.

Elaine C. Smith (ES): I remember one comic telling me “women just aren’t funny”! This was a major perception for a long time in comedy. Writing teams, especially back in the day, didn’t really know how to write for women, this is a real factor in why you may not see yourself as a young woman portrayed on television in a realistic way. I now appear on the Scottish sitcom, “Two Doors Down”, and did a comedic scene with another three women where we were all allowed to be funny, it was so refreshing. Part of this is that society has changed, so we do have more men coming in now with a more generous view of women.

Roza Salih (RS): Being a woman and coming from a different background, I’ve faced a lot of challenges around the idea of double discrimination. I’ve had a number of issues with men talking over me or trying to stop me from speaking or even taking my own idea and using it as theirs. A big problem as a woman is that we have so many responsibilities and commitments such as caring, this is a huge factor in many women not getting involved in the likes of politics and is something that needs to be addressed.

GEMMA LUMSDAINE (GL): Coming from my own perspective, there’s still a gender imbalance in sports so I’m playing with a lot of males. This requires a lot of strength and you do tend to always be fighting to show that you aren’t physically inferior. It’s taken a lot of time to gain respect. What you have to do is not let any man tell you that you can’t do certain things, you have to go out there and show what you can do. Even if you aren’t as physically strong, it’s about understanding that it’s not all about that and that you have other values and skills that you can contribute.

If you could go back to when you were 16 what would you tell yourself then?

PD: Many young girls don’t have confidence at 16, you’re brought up being told “that’s not what you should do” and silenced. We should be telling all girls at that age to open their mouth and raise their voice, regardless of background. Every woman has something important to say. Young women especially should always be trying to lift each other up. It’s infuriating to have that word “bitchy” associated with women – we’re not born bitchy! It’s a condition of being socialised to compete with each other and is actively encouraged. We need to turn this on its head and support and empower one another.

ES: I’d tell myself not to be frightened, you have as much right to make a fool of yourself and make mistakes as everybody else. You should always remember that the prettiest girl in the room, the thinnest, the smartest, is just as insecure as everybody else. If all of us realise that we’re feeling the same, we can let ourselves off the hook a little bit.

GL: When I was 16, I wanted to be like everyone else. Everyone is unique, it’s what makes you different that makes you who you are. If you want to be like someone else then that’s not you. It doesn’t matter what you look like, be yourself and if people don’t support you then that’s their loss, not yours. We as a community of women should help to support one another and build confidence in each other.

When you're facing burn out from the likes of activism, how do you overcome that?

ES: What I've learned from many different campaigns such as feminism, politics and so on is that you will eventually get fatigued. When you begin to feel like that, it's important to retreat and gather your energy. Taking a break doesn't mean you've given up or don't believe in the cause anymore. I'd also say to choose your battles, choose what you fight. There's so many causes out there, it's important to choose the ones that you ardently believe in.

RS: You have to focus on your own and other people's strengths collectively and use this. That, and asking questions and asking for help when you do need it is crucial.

PD: It can get tiring when you're constantly fighting for the same cause and coming up against the same challenges, it's really frustrating. You have to remember what inspired you to begin with, so many women in the world don't have a voice so we have to be a voice for them.

What advice would you give other young women pursuing acting?

ES: A big problem for women pursuing acting is the writing, the vast majority of writers are men. You can't blame them – writers write what they know. I do see a difference in the generation of men now that actually see women differently, not just as two-dimensional characters, and that can only be for the good. Particularly in Scotland, a big disadvantage is the commissioning editors are male so will commission what they are interested in. This tends to end up meaning a lot of dramas about nice middle class white families in suburban households. What young women have to do is write your own stuff, don't sit around waiting to be cast. Write the characters that you want to play. Make things and upload them online, get as much experience through amateur productions. Don't sit about waiting to give all the power away to someone to say you're talented.

How do you deal with it when you are treated with hate? A lot of people have judgements about immigrants, despite us seeing Scotland as our home too.

RS: It's very hard when faced with prejudices, it can leave you feeling isolated. It's about changing people's attitudes. We have to do this for the next generation. Education is very important for all within society. The likes of the "Show Racism the Red Card" charity go into schools and educate young people on racism and discrimination. If you are facing these barriers, speak to others who understand. Bear in mind, that not everybody feels like that.

ES: Brexit unleashed a huge amount of awfulness with the campaign. But there's been a campaign for decades of "the other". Most of the things people were complaining about when it came to Brexit didn't come from Europe – it was laws being passed at Westminster, but the two main parties were happy for the EU to take the blame, then throw their hands up in horror when people believe this! The element of racism that was deployed is terrible. When you have a time of austerity, this becomes intensified and becomes questions of poverty and class. When people are frightened, they want to blame "the other", someone different. But, we also have to look at why people feel left behind and why these feelings have been allowed to fester. The anger is misdirected, it should be aimed at the political class that caused these people to be left behind, not those who came here to better themselves.

RS: The media plays a huge role. This allows these views to spread like a cancer. There is no understanding at all that we are all human beings. Finding solutions to how we address that is the problem.

How do you start conversations about issues? Not just with other women, how do you start conversations with men and not have them run away before you've even opened your mouth?

ES: Humour is one of the best weapons to break down a situation where you need to speak up. There's a level in Scotland of using humour and engaging in that way with men, we need to understand that men do communicate with each other differently. Thinking about the way in which you approach the subject is key, it will give you an in-road. If you go in aggressive and angry, then anybody will immediately retreat and become defensive.

PD: Some people can be defensive, there's this notion about female equality and talking about sexual violence in gender terms that you are accusing all men of being rapists – which is complete rubbish. But at the same time, 95% of sexual offenders in Scotland are male, so we can't ignore the gender basis of this. What we're trying to get across is that the majority of men are respectful and as appalled as us at the levels of sexual violence and domestic abuse. Boys will listen to men because they see a woman and think "you're a woman, you're a feminist, you don't get it." We try to encourage young men to stand up and challenge gender based violence. Young men are often very afraid to speak up in their social circles, for fear of losing face, especially teenagers.

PD: A lot of men get special praise for standing up and combating rape, why is this great? This is what they should be doing! Without excusing this behaviour, a major fault lies with the media. Its important to remember that some have ingrained attitudes that you'll never change and not worth your time, that's not a failure on your part, it's a failure on theirs.

What's the most difficult part of campaigning?

RS: It can be very emotional. A major refugee issue is feeling unappreciated and unwanted in this country, you can feel extremely angry and powerless. Many Scottish men and women made us stronger, they came and said "you have a right to be here", that's how we felt empowered and continued the campaign. There are so many other people in that position now and feel so unwelcome. The anger drives you. We think of anger very negatively but it can be a tool that drives you.

Workshops

POLITICS, ENGAGEMENT AND BREXIT, Led by Roza Salih.

This session focused on politics, particularly issues surrounding Brexit and how this related to young women. A major part entailed looking at the media focus on the likes of this and the negative campaigning surrounding these events. A clear consistency throughout the group seemed to be the perceived silence around the “Remain” campaign and to what extent this contributed to the result of the Referendum.

“Voting leave was a political protest statement in a way, it was challenging the status quo.”

Many young women present felt that those who voted “Leave” did so due to a fear of immigration which was heightened by much negative campaigning.

“There’s a slant now in politics between left and right at opposite fundamentalist ends.”

Other aspects of the workshop focused on employment and education in relation to political matters. For example, a number of issues raised included the employment and education status of immigrants who had lived here for a long time and were now in fear for not just their citizenship, but their jobs and education. This included fears over the decline in the numbers of foreign students plus a rising cost of tuition fees post-Brexit which will act as a deterrent. Alongside this, As well as what this meant for U.K. citizens who would lose many benefits of being able to travel and study such as the Erasmus programme.

One of the main issues taking centre stage within this group was the supposed enactment of a “British Bill of Rights” to replace equality legislation emanating from Europe and what this could mean for human rights laws within the United Kingdom and the difficulty in translating these laws.

“I feel we had a sense of community being in the EU, meeting people from other cultures was something we should have been proud of.”

“It is vital that the rights we have are at least protected.”

“How do we maintain trade deals successfully if not in the EU anymore, especially when we’ve just came out?”

Talk also abounded over Scotland’s own future and the prospect of another referendum on independence due to Brexit. This was voiced in terms of the difficulties of actually getting back into the EU if independence was to be obtained. There was the feeling that Scotland was in a “Catch-22” – taken out of the EU despite not voting for it and facing the prospect of another referendum for the third time in three years.

“Where is the accountability of those who are making these important decisions for our future?”

WOMEN IN SPORT, Led by Gemma Lumsdaine.

The focus primarily within this workshop was an emphasis on the lack of female representation not only within a range of sporting activities but also within the media. Gemma began by encouraging participants to name as many male sports stars versus female ones as they could think of with the resounding consensus being that it was much more of a task to name females. Discussions abounded as to this, with many young women giving reasons such as the lack of media coverage which tends to mean that names are remembered and not faces or vice versa when it came to female starts.

Much of this workshop also focused on the challenges faced by disabled athletes, particularly to women, which could act as a double barrier. The likes of access to sports and sporting opportunities overall, equality and discrimination rights and schooling were all discussed within this context.

“Sport should be about equality in coverage. Failure to do so means achievement being overlooked.”

“It’s really hard to access sports and activities in the first place.”

There was also talk about ways in which potential barriers to those with impairments can be overcome in order to play sport. Solutions such as needing someone to “sports guide” can often be isolating in the likes of mainstream schools and prevent children from participating further. This can be confounded by a lack of services and access to environments with the appropriate provisions.

“We need confidence, support, community, strong voice, thick skin, and empowerment.”

The likes of visibility within sports of disabled participants needs to be more widely acknowledged. There was consensus amongst the groups within the workshop that such limited recognition fundamentally hinders motivation for women within sport in general. This feeds into wider social and cultural issues around discrimination, attitudes and funding.

“Are you reflected and respected?”

“It’s about knowing where to go to be supported.”

Potential obstacles which can arise to hinder progress include the likes of financial restrictions for many women looking to participate in sport, not only through club membership but other expenses such as travelling.

However, it was also recognised that progress has been made. Equipment that can be adapted and tailored to one’s needs were cited as a prime example of encouraging more disabled women into sport. The likes of games beginning and ending with distinct sounds to aid those with hearing impairments or lights and sign language for those suffering from vision impairments. This was also thought to further improve communications between athletes and extolling the benefits that sports can have.

There was overarching consensus that whilst many challenges existed that still need to be overcome for women in sport, particularly those with the likes of disabilities, more opportunities were sorely needed with inclusion and information being key priorities. A major part of this was thought to be combatting inequality and heightening public understanding.

WORK & EDUCATION. Led by Anthea Koon, STUC LGBT+ Committee.

Anthea focused her workshop on discussions over how society affects your mind and perception of your own identity, particularly as a teenager and young woman. She discussed her own experience of being both a woman and a pipefitter and how many are constantly surprised by her doing such a “man” job. As well as this, it focused on the fact that she fits into many “groups”: young, Asian, LGBT and female, for example.

Work such as Anthea’s is extremely masculine-dominated. The year above her was the first to include a woman within an apprenticeship role. She is the only person of forty who is a woman as well as an ethnic minority. The workshop focused on discussion of this societal perception of women, that a woman is perceived based on gender, race, sexuality, etc. Instead of seeing this as a negative, we should try to use this instead as a positive.

“If you embrace who you are and surround yourself with supportive people, those things are a benefit and a part of you, not a hindrance.”

Talk then considered education and the role this played in young women’s lives today, including the constant pressures brought on by the likes of schooling and further education.

“There is this constant pressure in the system that you have to go to university as the be all and end all.”

Anthea is a prime example. She discussed the pressure she herself felt to get into university when, halfway through sitting 5 Highers, she decided she didn’t want to go down this route and wanted a more hands-on job in engineering.

“If it’s what you’re good at and what you enjoy, it shouldn’t matter about degrees.”

“Just because you go one way, doesn’t mean it’s where you’ll end up.”

She urged that if something engages and motivates you, then do it and never to undermine even small successes. She discussed her plan to open an LGBT-centred cafe that provides a safe alcohol-free environment for the community.

“Women have to fight and work twice as hard to be seen as half as good.”

“We need good role models, to be confident, positivity and encouragement, proper support and equality in the workplace, getting rid of stereotypes”



Healthy Relationships, Led by Paula Dunn.

Paula opened her workshop by displaying a number of different boards displaying a collage of gendered magazines for young children, teens and adults to illustrate how we are exposed to these messages on a constant basis. A consistent theme running through these is the absence of strong, positive role models. She also stressed that sexism, homophobia and racism are all learned behaviours, they are not inherent and what we are exposed to has a huge effect on this.

“Rape and sexual assault happen so someone can have power and control.”

“It’s worse now because of the likes of Instagram and other social media platforms.”

Young girls magazines portray an airbrushed image of children. There is a distinct lack of diversity and they are covered in make up. The message generated from these is that looks define you. The message should be positivity – things such as don’t wear make up for a boy but for yourself. In comparison, the young boys magazine were much more graphic, aggressive and violent. Whilst there was still an absence of role models within these there was also less pressure to conform to societal roles.

“It’s all so focused on appearance”

“In the media its more about appearance than achievement.”

Paula discussed the likes of gendering children from a young age, citing everyday situations of young girls in a playground game like “Kiss Kiss Chase” where they are taught to stand there and take it.

“You’re taught to learn how to do a certain thing or portray yourself in a certain way to attract someone.”

The teen magazines were more capitalist and screamed sex, Paula emphasised that these were marketed towards girls who were under the legal age of consent. Many seemed to be about ten years ahead of their target audience and constructed a male-centric idea of what men think women should look like.

Male magazines, on the other hand, included articles such as one encouraging men to target drunk women for sex. The central theme running through them seemed to show the idea that women are cheap, worthless and there to be demeaned. Boys as young as eleven can access these messages.

“I feel it makes young women seem really easily influenced.”

“It’s going back to that same stereotype that women have to look a certain way and men don’t.”

Feedback from the Event

I think today was very beneficial to my understanding

Brilliant day, great speeches and well organised.

Thanks for making the space to come all together to talk about these issues. Great job!

Great event and speakers. Good networking and great to see so many people working with young women.

Fantastic event, could do with more like this.



The SWC is funded by the Scottish Government to communicate and consult with women in Scotland in order to influence public policy.

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