

## ***Women's Day is a vital reminder that our voices must be heard***

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On Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> March, over 400 women from throughout Scotland will descend on the Scottish Parliament to celebrate International Women's Day. It is a day for women to celebrate our achievements, but also to recognise the challenges we still face in advancing equality.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) has organised this event since 2007, bringing women of all ages and backgrounds together from across the country, in order to mark this important day. The SWC is funded by the Scottish Government to ensure that women's voices are heard at all levels of decision making. The significant work programme which the organisation undertakes each year is designed to make sure that we are reaching out to women, within their own communities, to hear what's important to them. The SWC gives them the confidence to speak out, whether that's about issues like health, housing, employment, transport or menopause.

Each piece of legislation, policy and practice which is created and implemented will have an impact on women, their families and their communities as a whole. The SWC hold a very privileged position – we are able to ensure that the stories, lived experiences and ideas for change of real women, at a grassroots level, are input into the processes which make the policies. at the earliest possible stage. We have brought so many women together to have their voices heard at so many different levels and we will continue to do so over the next year.

The theme of this year's event is 'celebrating 20 years of the Scottish Parliament'. Women made great efforts for many years to ensure that the Parliament became a reality, with representation standing at 40% after the first election. The continued commitment of inspirational, motivational women ensures that our Scottish Parliament is at the forefront of developing policies which impact positively on communities.

The 50:50 campaign was an essential part of the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. The women in that campaign came from all walks of life across Scotland. It was not championed by every political party at the time, but as the years have gone by we have noticed that more women are coming through in all of Scotland's political parties, including to leadership roles. When we reflect on the policies that women have put forward in the Parliament, they have made an important difference to our lives.

Much of the legislation created and developed at Holyrood since the Parliament's inception has, broadly speaking, impacted positively on women and their communities.

Free higher education, breastfeeding legislation, the abolition of prescription charges, free personal care for the elderly and the introduction of free school meals for children in P1-P3 are just some of the Scottish Parliament's key achievements which have been

beneficial for women and their families. The raft of policies and practices aimed at eradicating Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG), including that which tackles Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, domestic abuse, stalking, revenge porn and rape and sexual assault, are some of the most progressive in the world. These achievements must be recognised and applauded, taking into account the positive impact they have had on women's lives.

The speakers at this year's IWD event – Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP, First Minister of Scotland; Ayesha Hazarika, Journalist and Broadcaster; Harriette Campbell, Chair of the African Caribbean Women's Association (ACWA); Yvonne Strachan, Former Deputy Director Scottish Government – Equality, Human Rights and Third Sector; Paula Brennan, Northern Irish Trade Unionist; Hannah Blythyn AM, Member of the Welsh Assembly; Baroness Annabel Goldie and Elaine C. Smith, Actor – will talk about the importance of devolution and how this has benefitted women, both in Scotland and in the other parts of the UK.

It is important, however, on this – and every – International Women's Day that we recognise the challenges and issues women face, on a daily basis, in the fight for equality. We are living in uncertain times.

Brexit continues to loom large, with little to no information available as to what's going to happen. Women are concerned that the rights and protections afforded by Europe – particularly around sex discrimination, the working time directive, paid annual leave, equal pay, maternity pay, parental leave, protection for agency workers and health and safety provisions – will be removed as and when the UK leaves the EU. Issues have also been raised around passports, imports and exports, the loss of European funding (particularly in rural areas) and how the economy overall will be affected.

Changes to the Welfare Benefits system continue to hit women hardest. The SWC has welcomed the devolution of a range of benefits to the competency of the Scottish Parliament. The introduction of the Best Start Grant, and a transfer of powers over Carers Allowance and Ill Health and Disability benefits, has the potential to support women and their families. Despite this progress, however, the majority of benefits remain in Westminster's power. Precarious employment is becoming more and more prevalent, with many big companies using zero hours contracts to exploit the lowest paid workers, the majority of whom are women. Unpaid work, particularly care work, continues to be undervalued, both in monetary terms and by society overall.

It is, therefore, essential that the SWC continue to talk to women about how these issues are really impacting on them, their families and communities as a whole. The SWC will ensure that these voices are heard at all levels of policy and decision making. Our voices need to be heard to ensure that changes are made.

International Women's Day gives women the opportunity to talk about that which matters most to them, however this should not simply be confined to one day in the calendar. We need to be empowered to discuss exactly how the menopause impacts on us, or what it really means to be a homeless woman. Woman who have experienced unwanted attention, who have been touched when they have not wanted to, who have been whistled at or catcalled or been subject to derogatory, sexist, offensive comments because of the way they look, or what they're wearing, or how they behave, need to have their voices heard. We need to be believed.

Because as long as any woman anywhere is paid less than a man for the same job; as long as she is catcalled and harassed; as long as she is discriminated against in the workplace and in positions of power; and as long as she does not feel safe in her own home or on the streets or on a bus or a train, we still have much to do. We stand on the shoulders of our sisters before us and all women owe it not only to them, but to our future generations, to keep fighting the good fight.

On Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> March women from across Scotland will again come together, from all backgrounds, ethnicities, of all ages. There will be a melting pot of women in the Parliament, celebrating and looking forward to what the next 20 years of our Parliament will deliver for us.

Agnes Tolmie, Chair, Scottish Women's Convention.