



Everywoman Safe Everywhere

Labour's Consultation on Women's Personal Safety and Security

February 2012

Introduction

The purpose of the Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is to communicate and consult with women in Scotland to influence public policy. Through the Convention's policy work, roundtable and celebratory events the SWC strives to have contact with women and relevant organisations. The SWC aims to provide an effective way of consulting with a diverse range of women in Scotland.

The Scottish Women's Convention has a network of over 300,000 women throughout Scotland.

SWC Evidence Source

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events throughout Scotland, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. During these events concerns have been raised regarding a number of issues relevant to Violence Against Women and women's safety in general. This submission paper provides the views of women throughout Scotland and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to this consultation document.

Q2) Have you been, or known anyone (directly or indirectly) who has been a victim of stalking, domestic or sexual violence/abuse, and what was their/your experience of the support that was available for them? Do you feel the support was adequate?

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 2007, the SWC has undertaken a series of 'roadshows' throughout Scotland. These events are unique, giving women who might not otherwise have the opportunity to express their opinions or concerns in their local areas on issues directly affecting them. The object is to ensure that women's voices are heard at the heart of the decision making process.

Many of the women the SWC have consulted with have accessed a range of Violence Against Women support services.

"I wouldn't be where I am today without it."

The value of Women's Aid services are undeniable with users *"terrified"* at the thought of provision being discontinued. The services not only empower women to recognise, survive or exit abusive partnerships but also allow them to move forward and positively restructure their lives.

Violence Against Women (VAW) services are particularly important in rural areas. The patriarchal culture of much of rural Scotland can make it difficult for women to *"speak out"* and report incidents of domestic abuse for fear of community repercussions. VAW is seen as a *"hidden evil"* in many remote communities and a *"behind closed doors mentality"* is often displayed, especially on the islands. This, coupled with the geography of rural Scotland, results in a lack of outreach facilities available to women.

Q3) In light of current spending decisions, which cuts concern you most and do you feel that any of them are affecting women's safety?

Scottish women are feeling the effects of deep cuts to public services by the UK Coalition Government. Women depend on the care, support and recognition they receive from staff and volunteers affected by funding reductions at local or national level.

Local authority funding constraints are resulting streetlights being turned off, particularly in rural areas. This poses a clear threat to women's safety and security.

The introduction of the Universal Credit and its related changes to Housing and Council Tax Benefits could seriously impact on women's safety. Lengthy applications and potential processing times could deter women from exiting abusive relationships if they have no guarantee of a home for them and their children.

The recent economic downturn and current financial climate could mean more women are in danger of becoming victims of violence and abuse due to increased household financial hardship and other related stresses. Service provision, funding and support must be made available to all women who require it.

Q4) What do you think has been the impact of local commissioning and local spending decisions, along with other measures, on women's support services, like refuges?

The Scottish Government has been praised for the commitment to funding Violence Against Women (VAW) services such as Scottish Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland. There is widespread agreement that such funding should continue and under no circumstances should support for these vital initiatives be cut.

"Violence Against Women support agencies must be focused on helping victims, not constantly diverted by the insecurities of funding and maintaining what precarious resources are available."

The recent announcement of almost £6.5m from the Big Lottery Fund to assist projects working with women and children who have experienced domestic abuse is welcomed. It is hoped that this money will be spread evenly throughout the country.

Despite the increased pressure for refuge accommodation, service providers face funding cuts and pressure on financial resources. Many women are forced to remain in abusive relationships due to the fear that appropriate accommodation may not be found.

"Refuge accommodation should be free to those who require immediate help and thus should be centrally funded"

"A refuge is a place of safety and women have to jump through hoops to access it"

Refuge accommodation is often difficult to access in rural areas; women often have to travel many miles away from family and support networks in order to be safely housed.

Q5) How do you think recent legislative proposals will impact on women's safety, such as how domestic violence is dealt with in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill?

Much of the recent legislation outlined in the consultation document does not apply in Scotland, for example the Legal Aid Bill (any changes made in Scotland are done under the Legal Aid (Scotland) Act 1986) and Labour's Personal Safety and Security Bill. The proposals contained in this document are devolved to Scotland and have, in some cases, already been legislated for.

The Scottish Parliament recently passed the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2011. While the provisions of this legislation were welcomed, there is still a limited confidence in the criminal justice system in taking cases of domestic abuse to court. Access to civil legal aid, although covered by different legislation than that outlined in the consultation, is still viewed as a barrier for women seeking access to justice.

Scotland has one established specialist Domestic Abuse Court in Glasgow and another is currently being piloted in Edinburgh. The support and advocacy available through these should be accessible to women throughout Scotland. There is widespread support for the establishment of further specialist courts in other areas of the country.