



CONFERENCE REPORT

Saturday 8th October 2022

Glasgow Grosvenor Hotel

The Scottish Women's Convention

The Impact of Brexit on Women in Scotland



Agnes Tolmie

SWC Chair

When the UK Government proposed a Brexit referendum, the women of Scotland had to make a decision: do we stay, or do we leave? We had experts telling us what would happen, what would change, potential benefits, promises were made. Now years later we are still being told that we haven't reaped the benefits yet, but we will reap these benefits at some time in the future. We now know that we are in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis, had Brexit affected that, and how is this affecting women?

What we are hearing, is that they're struggling. As many of you know, we travel up and down Scotland to speak to women and we have already seen a difference in women's life as a result of Brexit: particularly in rural communities. And as such, we felt that a discussion was required to create an open debate surrounding these issues.

5 Key Points & Recommendations

- Brexit has negatively impacted the lives of working women in Scotland, with employment rights being revised, and put at risk, post-Brexit.
- Health and social care services have suffered tremendously over the past 5 years, due to a combination of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. This has worsened health and social care provision, as well as the work-life balance for women working in these sectors.
- Migrant women are experiencing continued complications because of Brexit, with application processes becoming more complex.
- Brexit has contributed to a political detachment felt by women across Scotland, with many feeling that the UK Government doesn't work to better their lives, and that the promises of Brexit have not been met.
- Instances of racism and xenophobia have been rising across the UK post-Brexit, with minority women experiencing increased hate and bigotry.

Kathleen Walker Shaw

Kathleen is a retired trade union official, having worked for GMB trade union since 1993 as head of the union's European Office in Brussels. During her career, Kathleen worked closely with the European and International trade union movement and with all the institutions of the EU across a wide range of policy areas. Kathleen was also a member of the Workers' Group of the European Economic and Social Committee from 2010 until the UK left the EU, leading on several Opinions of the Committee over a number of years.



Kathleen opened by placing Brexit within the context of 2016, considering the rhetoric surrounding it at the time, and how this ultimately resulted in the UK exiting the European Union (EU). She explained that a key element of pro-Brexit discussions was the removal of 'red tape', with Brexiteers suggesting that EU legislation and regulation caused the UK a loss in potential earnings and created a lack of agency.

“...the agreements made let dogma dominate over good sense and pragmatism, and the sad thing is that the interests of people across Britain became a very clear second to that.”

“The government of ‘no red tape’ has created a situation of more red tape than we have ever had”

She went on to explain that this 'dogma' had largely come about due to many key decision-makers clutching to concepts of Empire and imperialism which put the UK front and centre of the world stage. Kathleen pointed out however that the UK's current world standing was largely down to its position within the EU and as such, our negotiation abilities have been greatly lessened.

“Many people around the government at the moment don't want to accept that the days of the UK Empire are (happily) dead, and our recent global influence was actually because we were part of the EU club... whether we liked it or not.”

“We got a deal with Japan... It was described as brilliant at the time, and I am sure the Japanese would agree, it is a brilliant deal... for Japan... 83% of the export advantage was in Japan's favour. Australia? That'll make us better off by 0.07, and New Zealand is too miniscule to even put a figure on.”

This weakened negotiation position has also hindered the UK's ability to organise a good exit deal with the EU, with Kathleen explaining that the deals made were less than satisfactory. She explained that there have been severely damaging impacts on UK exporters, citing increased paperwork, lorry delays and wastage of products. This has ultimately increased costs across export and import chains, meaning that the average woman in Scotland has been indirectly, left worse off because of Brexit.

“It is safe to say that the EU very much wanted to keep close ties with the UK, but from the very outset it was clear that the UK government had a very different idea to that.”

Kathleen also spoke of the impact Brexit has had on employment rights, with it becoming clear through recent changes in legislation that workers in Britain are at risk. She believed that the UK Government was moving away from important pieces of EU-ratified law that protected employees and trade unions, chipping away at human rights

“The UK Government, with a slight of hand, managed to, with a parliamentary majority, to wipe out agency conduct regulations... which in my view is in contempt of the fundamental rights of workers.”

“ The long-term costs of coming out of the EU, combined with the cost of living, have been really damaging for the women of Scotland... Liz Truss said we have to reassess our relationships with the EU and frankly, the sooner, the better. ”





Irene Oldfather

As a Member of the Scottish Parliament (1999-2011), Irene set up and chaired the Cross-Party Group on Alzheimer's and Dementia which drafted and agreed the Charter of Rights for People with Dementia and their Carers. Irene's work also extends to Europe where she is currently chair of European Patients' Academy (EUPATI) Scotland National Liaison Team (NLT), as well as representing Scotland's third sector on the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). As an MSP Irene chaired the European and External Relations Committee for most of her 12-year term.

Our next speaker was Irene Oldfather, who unfortunately could not be with us on the day, however pre-recorded her speech. She focused on how Brexit has impacted the health and social care system in Scotland, firstly discussing the larger scale issues Brexit has caused – for example changes in legislation and withdrawals of funding across communities.

“...there has been huge uncertainty around human rights... they are revoking thousands and thousands or pieces of legislation which tie the UK to the EU, and which many of us would find could enhance our workers' rights, our maternity and paternity laws, and so on

“We know that many communities actually have benefitted from and had access to European funding.”

She went on to speak about staffing issues that have arisen since leaving the EU, which has been attributed to a reduction in EU migrants. Irene explained that this had had an inevitable impact on Scottish women, with women taking up the majority of health and social care roles. These women now have larger workloads, higher levels of anxiety and burnout rates have been increasing.

“There have been major issues across recruitment, with the labour pool shrinking since Brexit...and we know that women are disproportionately represented in the health workforce, with 77% being women and 80% of care workers being women.”

Irene also highlighted that Covid-19 only worsened this difficult situation, with staff across the sector being stretched thinly. She also points to Covid-19 being an effective 'smokescreen' for the Conservative Government, with the pandemic being regularly blamed for issues that have arisen as a result of Brexit.

“I think the thing that makes it difficult to untangle, is politicians blaming the pandemic for everything and really not allowing for the fact that much of these problems have been caused or exacerbated by Brexit and it's very difficult to untangle things there.”

Lastly, Irene chose to speak about how marginalised women have been affected by Brexit. She states that levels of xenophobia and racism have been rising across the UK, with health and social care staff suffering. She also explains that due to the UK's withdrawal from the EU, 'blue badges' are no longer accepted in some member-states, causing hardship for carers and the disabled community

“Racism and xenophobia have been exacerbated since Brexit...non-British staff have expressed concern about the levels of discrimination fuelled by xenophobia, and they felt that that had been politicised by Brexit.”

“Since Brexit the reciprocal agreement we had relating to 'blue badges' is no longer the case...this has had an impact on women who are carers...and disabled women.”

“ We would have been part of that single market, having discussions with our European counterparts. Now we're on the other side of the table. This will cause cuts to health services, putting a strain on public health systems. ”



Francesca Sella

Having graduated in 2018, she moved to Strasbourg where she worked as an intern at the office of the Special Representative on Migration and Refugees at the Council of Europe. Francesca completed her traineeship at an immigration and asylum firm in Glasgow, where she gained experience in both asylum and human rights law, and qualified in the summer of 2021. Her main interest lies in asylum law, focusing on gender-based violence and FGM cases but she is also experienced in refugee family reunion cases and complex applications under the Immigration Rules.



Francesca spoke to attendees about the major impacts Brexit has had upon migrants and human rights. She explained that changes to legislation have seriously complicated matters, with migrants having to complete complex documentation, and that the 'streamlined' process that was promised by the UK Government has not come to fruition.

“European citizens and family members that enter the UK for the first time after 1/1/21 are not entitled to apply for this scheme on the basis of their residence in the UK. Instead, they have to apply under a different route, and that is much more complicated.”

She also states that the changes made make it harder for migrants to access public funds. She explains that currently individuals who are awaiting a decision on their application under the EU settlement scheme often struggle to claim benefits and often turn to local administrations who are ill-equipped to help. This lack of support can then unfortunately lead to destitution and homelessness for women and families.

“...those who have pre-settled status cannot claim benefits or public funds solely on the basis of their pre-settled status... So, if you fall into this category you need to show that you have a 'qualifying right to reside'...But the bottom line is that at some point you worked in the UK...which for women is quite difficult at times.”

“...a lot of burden is falling on local authorities...And in my opinion it's also quite serious in the sense that local authorities very often are not trained in how to deal with these situations”

She goes on to describe how leaving the EU has affected marginalised groups, with women fleeing domestic violence being especially impacted. She states that current legislation makes it difficult for victims to escape violence, as they are likely to be reliant on their male partner for funding and/or visas. She also explains that onus is placed upon survivors and victims to report and escape violence which can further worsen potentially dangerous situations.

“...the most challenging part is that you need to provide evidence of domestic violence and the Home Office needs to be satisfied that the evidence you are providing is good enough. They also expect you to submit the application as soon as the relationship breaks down, which we know from our case work is very challenging.”

Francesca then concluded by highlighting that human rights are being publicly flouted, with migrants continuously struggling to live a good quality life. Those awaiting settlement decisions struggle to gain paid employment, with employers seeing this as a potential risk.

“...a lot of people are struggling to access their rights while they’re waiting. So, their right to work has been an issue, a lot of employers are very reluctant to employ someone who doesn’t have a decision yet. I touched on social security, but also health care and education are difficult to access.”

“ I think what we’ve learnt from Brexit and the ending of free movement was that they introduced a scheme that was meant to be very straightforward, turns out it’s not. As with every issue like this, vulnerable groups are the ones who are impacted the most and that includes women. ”



Discussion

After the contributions from our speakers, we opened the floor for a Q&A and, also, asked our in-person and online attendees to share their experience of Brexit, and how it has impacted their lives. During this discussion multiple topics came up: political disillusion, violence against women and girls, the loss of opportunity for young women and immigration.

Political Disillusion

Women who attended the conference stated that they were becoming increasingly frustrated by the UK Government, with Brexit just being one of many disappointments. They felt that recent administrations had misled the wider population prior to the Brexit referendum, and that since then there had been a lack of responsibility taken by key decision-makers. These factors have created a toxic political environment which women do not want to actively engage with.

“My contribution to this discussion is that Brexit itself was built on lies, lies, and more lies.”

“Well, this government act as if they are never wrong, they will never admit that... how are they going to dance around these issues? The politics of these issues...require a sensitivity that I don't see in great amounts in the UK Government.”

“I think that democracy and the state of politics in the UK today has become so degraded that there are no more cheeky questions... The question I want to ask is, is what difference is a general election going to make to our situation as a Brexited country?”

“They have created a sort of circus and people don't value it anymore, and for me if they've got any crime, that's the greatest one... to disenchant people from their whole political and policy process of their country, that's extremely dangerous.”

While focusing on these issues, some women believed that Scottish independence was a possible solution and questioned our speakers as to the legitimacy of this idea. They proposed that gaining independence would facilitate positive conversations with the EU, with re-entry being the end goal. Both Kathleen and Francesca stated that while a decision is being made surrounding the legitimacy of a Scottish independence referendum, focus should also be placed upon the devolved powers the Scottish Government currently hold.

“...in the short and medium term... Scotland must keep pushing on the devolved points, the public procurement thing, fighting back on it's devolved rights, not letting them be eroded and starting to seek more influence in trade negotiations.”

“I think in terms of what we do in the meantime, is to raise these issues and to focus on what the Scottish Government can do in terms of the devolved power, especially when you look at the situation and support that women receive.”

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

How migrant women experience violence was also highlighted by attendees, with discussion following on from Francesca's points surrounding this topic. Some women at the event argued that Brexit has made some women and girls more vulnerable and more at risk of experiencing violence. They explained that not enough is currently being done to tackle violence against women and girls in Scotland with the support services being financially crippled by the withdrawal of EU funding. This has had an impact on support for women and girls who have experienced female genital mutilation (FGM) in particular, with a speaker from Saheliya calling for increased help to tackle this dangerous practice.

"We were dependent on European funding, so we've got quadrupling demand for our services, and we're helping women who can't go anywhere else, women who have no recourse to public funds, and we're drowning... and just to say that of the 1300 women and girls we support, all are FGM survivors."

"Most of you are all shocked and surprised to hear about the FGM figures, but what she said was true... girls are at risk. Even though these girls are born here, their parents take them on holidays to different countries and practice it on them... they're not safe."

Loss of Opportunity for Young Women

Attendees also spoke of the major impact Brexit has had upon young women, with some younger members of the audience stating that they felt that they had not had a say in a significant element of their future. They explained that it had already begun to influence their lives, as well as their prospects – changing subject choices, and limiting their ability to travel across Europe. It was also highlighted that this would have a disproportionate impact on young women who came from deprived areas, with visas and application forms having financial implications.

"I do think it's quite unfair because we didn't get to vote on it because we were too young, but it's made it really difficult for us... my dad lives in Spain, it's much harder to see him now."

"...we're encouraging girls to try to seek a brighter future and go abroad, but there are going to be real difficulties for girls who come from backgrounds where finances are tight."

Immigration

A further point made by women was the influence immigration had had upon the Brexit referendum, with many chastising these arguments – believing them to be dangerous and bigoted. Women highlighted that these viewpoints had increased calls from ethnic minority women for better protections and that third sector organisations were struggling to cope with the increased demands. It was also suggested that these attitudes were creating an 'us vs them' mentality, which was further exacerbated by the UK Government's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in detention centres and the 'relocation' of these groups to Rwanda.

"I think that immigration was behind Brexit, I think it was a driver, and the whole campaign was already based on lies. It was about 'taking back control'."

"The levels of racism we've experienced is palpable, as you can hear I'm from England and down there it's a lot worse, it's terrifying. I'm from a mixed-race family and it's unpleasant."

"I am scared for asylum seekers because Suella Braverman has said that her greatest delight would be to see the plane land in Rwanda."

Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to thank all of those who attended our conference, as well as those who contributed online and via email. We would also like to thank our speakers for providing their wealth of knowledge and experience, as well as brilliantly contributing to our broader discussion. This conference was part of our broader project on Violence Against Women and Girls, and we will use all the voices gathered from this alongside those from our survey and roundtables to feed back to policy makers regarding this vitally important subject.

SWC CONTACT DETAILS

2nd Floor, The Albany Centre
44 Ashley Street, Glasgow
G3 6DS

Tel: 0141 339 4797

www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Facebook, Instagram & Twitter: @SWCWomen



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