

THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION



Report

January 2021

Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) undertook evidence gathering with women to capture their views on the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. It is imperative that women's voices and real lived experiences feed into the policy making around this important area.

What are the main impacts or issues from EU exit affecting women?

Concerns over withdrawal from the EU coupled with the current pandemic make it extremely difficult to separate the two issues. Whilst many women noted that they had seen few changes at present, there is fear for the future and sadness over the cultural loss of being part of the European project. Other issues included:

- Worries over the repeal of many human rights laws and policies that have stemmed from the UK's membership of the EU. There was a common agreement that the EU provided a safeguard against potential changes to employment or equality regulations in domestic legislation which would have eroded rights.
- Embarrassment at the way the UK Government and politicians have behaved when negotiating a deal with the EU.
- The economic consequences of Brexit were a major setback in environmental protection rights, with money that should be spent on the climate emergency instead being used to offset the economic consequences of Brexit.
- Worries that Scotland will be viewed by the rest of the world as a place that is unwelcoming to those not born here.
- The loss of jobs and educational opportunities combined with the current pandemic will see a huge increase in poverty and a rise in living costs, particularly for low-income families.
- A number of women also raised the threat to devolution that withdrawal posed, with many standards relating to food, chemicals and the environment that rightly belong to Scotland being taken up by Westminster.

“How can you now work within that restricted environment where everything is reserved and keep the integrity of Scottish standards?”

“Fear. Just fear. That's what I feel at the moment.”

“If you add to Brexit the effect of poverty, mass uncertainty and lack of trust in the Government, it will have a major impact on mental health.”

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Despite a deal being finalised at the last minute, the vast majority of women were mistrustful over this, regarding politicians as ignorant about the real situations people are in and seeing this as leading to further mistrust in Government. Other topics raised included:

- Worries relating to the fishing industry and Scotland's economic reliance on this.
- Concerns regarding how last minute the official deal between the UK and EU really was, this is seen as having caused and continuing to cause a *"chaos of administrative issues."*
- Worries over how the loosening of regulatory standards will affect what ends up in our food supply chains, including the use of pesticides and other chemicals which are banned in the EU.
- The threat to public procurement that EU withdrawal could bring. Scotland was seen to have done much progressive work in this area, with the risk that this would now be undermined. This was seen to be a big issue in terms of equality and employment, with women tending to be those within low paid workplaces whose rights were at risk of being diluted further.

"What we will see is a bargain basement of social, labour and environmental rights."

"My fear is as women we are going to lose so many rights because of Brexit but they will just blame it on COVID. It will be women who will suffer when the economic clawback begins."

"I am very alarmed at the limited voice of the devolved administrations within the process."

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

Women's labour rights were seen to be one of the biggest concerns of EU Withdrawal. Many participants noted their worry that the positives of improved working regulations for women through EU law will be minimised and gradually eroded. Other issues raised were:

- Fears for young people and the loss of jobs and opportunities. Several women voiced their fear that it is younger women who will bear the brunt of both Brexit and the economic fall out of the current pandemic, particularly in sectors such as hospitality and retail.
- The undermining of the Working Time Regulations, particularly for women in lower-paid and unstable jobs.
- The loss of Freedom of Movement will lead to severe labour shortages within some sectors, particularly health and social care. Stricter entry requirements for EU citizens into the UK was seen to be putting further pressure on health workers, the majority of whom are women, who are already struggling due to the challenges of the past year. This was seen as extremely concerning given the significant backlog within the NHS at the moment.

- The actual financial fall out of Brexit will never be truly known given the focus on COVID-19. The full impact of EU Withdrawal cannot be measured in terms of economic damage and loss of jobs, instead being attributed to the pandemic.

“How are we going to fill these sectors when we have all the difficulties we have now plus further issues in terms of labour mobility?”

“There was so little time wasted in trying to undermine employment rights.”

“Politicians didn’t take into account when going right to the wire with the deal what it was doing to people who were severely anxious about losing their jobs and livelihoods.”

POLITICS

There was seen to be a heightened distrust in political institutions since the 2016 EU Referendum result. This appeared across the political spectrum, with many feeling exhausted by the whole process.

- A number of women decried the *“political point scoring”* of the UK Government using EU Withdrawal for its own agenda, rather than taking into account people’s actual wants and needs.
- Some women believed that the Scottish Government were simply using Brexit as a way of calling for another Independence Referendum, rather than trying to see the opportunities that EU Withdrawal could bring in futur.
- Many women, regardless of political allegiance, noted the *“exhaustive nature of politics now”* after continuous elections. There was mutual agreement that all of these issues should be put to the side with complete focus on eliminating the current pandemic and what it has done to society.

“Please let us settle down first and come out of COVID, then talk about another Referendum, don’t mix it up. They are not thinking about the women who are struggling so much at the moment, dealing with home schooling and housework as well as poverty and losing their jobs. How much crisis do we need to be in?”

“The Scottish Budget has just been announced and that does give me hope that there is intention to support women, there is investment in the NHS -the Scottish Government are trying.”

“We are only human beings in how much we can suffer, please take it step by step and think of those women going through a lot of issues.”

EDUCATION

The risk to educational opportunities is seen as one of the biggest fall outs of Brexit, particularly around the withdrawal of the Erasmus Scheme. It was noted that EU membership has given so many young people the chance to study and experience life in different countries that they may never have had:

- A number of women highlighted that the closure of educational opportunities may pose a threat to women's representation in particular industries such as STEM or teaching.
- Closure of the Erasmus Scheme is going to lead to further obstacles for young women from lower income backgrounds whose parents cannot afford educational opportunities abroad, placing more obstacles to future job prospects and widening the attainment gap.
- Many young women discussed opting to remain within Scotland when they had previously hoped to study in Europe due to now being unable to afford the additional expenses.
- Worries over the impact on scientific research if the accessibility and flexibility that was there before EU exit is taken away.

“This is just one example of something that gave young people an opportunity that is no longer there.”

“As a young person, taking away opportunities like Erasmus is definitely the biggest threat.

“For me, the impact of now not being able to apply for a research position in Europe means I am leaving my university experience to enter a much smaller world than if Brexit hadn't happened.”

EU CITIZENS IN SCOTLAND

The SWC also talked to a number of EU citizens who are resident in Scotland following EU Withdrawal. Freedom of Movement had been a major initiative for many when deciding to settle in Scotland and worries for the future were consistently voiced.

- A common theme discussed was mistrust, even where official papers and settlement status had been finalised, worrying that the Government could change the terms of the deal and withdraw EU citizen's right to live in the UK.
- Others noted the *“long, drawn out process”* that it took getting settled status, despite having lived in the UK for years.
- For those with pre-settled status, uncertainty was common with worries that the UK Government could simply *“change their mind in a while”* alongside a lack of communication as to what your status actually meant.
- Many did note, however, that being resident in Scotland seemed to be a much more positive experience than other parts of the UK, with support and information

accessible from the Scottish Government: *“I think that even when the situation is bad, living here I feel lucky, I have never felt like an outsider.”*

“I am an EU Citizen who has lived here for six years. I’m looking for a word to express how I feel at the moment, and fear is exactly that.”

“We don’t know what is going to happen in a few years’ time and if the situation will change. We don’t know what’s going to happen and don’t trust what’s being told.”

“I wouldn’t be in my current job now without Freedom of Movement which allowed me to come here and gain the experience required for my current role.”

Has there been any issues you have noticed since the UK officially left the EU?

The main short-term impact noted since EU exit has been disruption and delays to businesses which will most likely have a knock-on lasting effect on the economy. The late coming of the Withdrawal Deal was seen as leading to many administrative errors, whilst other women noted that they had already heard of global customers turning away from the UK.

A number of those taking part did state, however, that unless directly involved in exporting or you are an EU citizen, it is too early to discuss the effects just now. The full impact it was felt would instead be seen “bit by bit.” Other issues included:

- Food shortages and price hikes due to strong regulatory requirements causing delays. There was frustration that it was known that this was going to happen, yet little planning or mitigation took place, despite all the money spent on EU Exit.
- For many EU citizens, the short-term impact tended to be a lot of paperwork and trying to understand the changes in rules to leave the country when visiting family in Europe.
- Shortage of certain fruit in local shops, most particularly citrus fruit that is exported from the continent.
- Others pointed to issues within the fishing industry for Scotland since EU Withdrawal, particularly around exports and lowering prices. This is in turn putting more pressure on women whose partners work in these jobs.
- For those who run businesses, getting parts imported from the EU was causing trouble with goods being held up at customs. This was seen to be a particular issue in the long-term for female-owned businesses and may act as an impediment to women who want to start their own business in the near future.
- Many companies and couriers within the EU are refusing to send goods to the UK because they know it will get stopped at customs and create problems.

“The point is, we didn’t know about COVID, but we knew we were leaving Europe, there should have been plans and mitigations in place. People were asking questions of the Government and were just being directed to guidance and documents that was unclear.”

“I haven’t noticed anything to be honest except what is on TV – if it wasn’t for that then I wouldn’t even have realised we’d left the EU, it has been going on so long.”

“One of my best friends has just had a baby, she is married to a Scot, her child is British, but she is now worried about what will happen to her. She has exactly the same rights as me, anything can change for her.”

“Issues which are only going to be uncovered within the agreed deal in the longer term need to be addressed for people’s security.”

Do you see other potential impacts that are likely to happen over the course of this year because of EU Exit?

The major theme many felt would be seen over the course of this year and in the longer-term was the erosion of rights, particularly around food and environmental standards. There was common agreement that in a year’s time, many threats to devolution and other rights will have taken place, with nothing being done to stop this.

The upcoming Holyrood Election in May was seen as key for political parties to underline how they will protect the delivery of public services and look after jobs and employment rights post-Brexit. Other issues raised included:

- Worries over an undermining of the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament’s devolution rights, particularly where competencies coming back from the EU are placed under reserved laws.
- Fears for the NHS and staff shortages with the loss of Freedom of Movement. Many women noted that this may simply be put down to COVID-19, rather than addressing the actual issues around the new entry requirements.
- Prices will continue to rise due to customs problems, with those on lower incomes losing out.
- A perception that the devolved administrations are being shut out of trade talks and key decisions which will have a knock-on effect on Scotland’s jobs and economy.
- Concerns regarding how workers will come during the summer months to do jobs such as fruit picking which will end up costing small businesses who cannot afford to sponsor EU workers.
- Worries over what trade deals will mean for the privatisation of public services.

“At what point is the Scottish Government going to say ‘Enough is enough’?”

“I think many things will be pushed through quietly under the blanket of COVID-19. Some things will happen so gradually, most people won’t notice until it’s too late and that is a big concern of mine.”

“How are the Scottish Government keeping a tally of the negative impacts of Brexit? I think in these COVID times when we are all stuck at home, we almost feel we cannot get the chance to get the right information and share it.”

Have you got suggestions of mitigations that could be put in place to support women?

One of the biggest initiatives it was felt was needed was putting in place national messages by the Scottish Government which can communicate to EU citizens that they are welcome here. This was seen as being important on an ongoing long-term basis and not just directly after EU Withdrawal. Other suggestions for mitigation included:

- Information and advice that is accessible for EU citizens regarding their rights.
- Building links with European universities and establishing exchange programmes that can start to replace the Erasmus Scheme to open up careers and experiences for young people.
- Increased public awareness of the threat to devolution when issues such as contracting out public services are put on the table in trade talks.
- More information with regards to settled status and the points system for students and workers to come over.
- A redesign of the way funding is allocated to ensure it is being distributed evenly and to those groups that need it most – particularly those most impacted by Brexit.
- Ensure equal representation of women when making decisions regarding Brexit in order to consider the equality impacts.
- Further roundtable events and research regarding women's views around EU Withdrawal.
- More solutions for rural areas to fill job vacancies post-Brexit, including Government incentives such as bursaries.
- For the Scottish Government to publish detailed impact assessments regarding future trade deals and what these will specifically mean for the Scottish economy to help inform what is needed to mitigate the effects of Brexit.

“Scotland needs to get behind supporting, maintaining, developing and strengthening the labour and employment rights we do have.”

“How do we control public contracting that has integrity and looks after fair work, environmental protection and standards? I think people across the UK need to know how upset the devolved administrations are.”

“The closer the UK stays to the European Single Market, the less damage for individuals and the economy.”

“Ensuring job security has to be the top priority. There needs to be an appropriate and well thought out, comprehensive approach to poverty and mental health because everyone is terrified at the minute and we are in such uncertain times.”

Thank You

Thank you to the women who participated in our online discussions, as well as those who contributed to the discussion via our online survey and by email. The information contained in this report will be forwarded to local and national decision makers for their consideration.

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Please note our staff are working from home in current circumstances.

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