



CONFERENCE REPORT
Wednesday 9th June 2021
Digitally Via Zoom

- The Scottish Women's Convention -

BULLYING & HARASSMENT



Agnes Tolmie

Chair, Scottish Women's Convention

The Scottish Women's Convention, along with other organisations, is aware that women going about their everyday business are interrupted time and time again by men whose behaviours are not acceptable. While travelling to and from work, earning a living, or trying to do their daily tasks, some men seem to think that it is okay to pass comment about them, to be rude to them, to make sexual remarks to them and, in many cases, make unwanted sexual behaviours towards them.

This conference we are calling today will bring speakers well known to many of you to share their personal experiences and explain how they have coped. But at the end of the day, we want to hear the voices of women's daily experiences so that we can take those voices, those concerns, and even some solutions, to the Government to try and help us do what we can to eradicate this unnecessary and unacceptable behaviour.

5 Key Points

- Harassment and bullying of women and girls have been normalised within our society, with many women unaware of the severity of the things they have experienced.
- Education for children of all genders is going to be crucial in changing attitudes and behaviours.
- Collective action needs to be taken to change workplace culture and ensure there are trained reps who women feel they can talk to.
- More must be done to change the media narrative around harassment and violence against women and girls.
- Women with additional protected characteristics, such as BME, LGBTQ+ or disabled women, are more likely to face additional barriers when reporting harassment.

Roz Foyer

Roz Foyer is the General Secretary of the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC): the first woman to hold this position. With more than twenty-five years' experience, she has held several roles including Assistant Secretary at the STUC, National Officer with the Transport and General Workers' Union, and a senior post in Unite's National Organising Department. Her current role involves representing over half a million trade unionists in Scotland, co-ordinating, developing and articulating the views and policies of the Trade Union Movement.



Roz began by expressing the strength of women, and emphasised the importance of women as role models who “get their elbows out” amid the “macho culture” of the trade union movement.

She then raised the example of the Alex Salmond trial and how the voices of the women affected were lost in the media narrative:

- “There was such a focus on whether something illegal had happened or not, that the real issue about someone in a very powerful position abusing their power in the workplace in a very inappropriate way was missed... the issue was turned into a political football.”

Having two teenage daughters, she shared her realisation at how little has changed for young women and girls, and recalled her own vulnerabilities as a young woman:

- “They’re just entering a time in their life where they are starting to feel intimidated walking up a street walking past a big group of boys.”
- “Isn’t it a sad indictment that I’m having to have conversations with them about why I don’t want them out at night and why they need to be careful about being on their own? We shouldn’t be having to have these conversations, but sadly we still do.”

It was a sexual harassment incident that led to her trade union activism, and she bravely recounted her experience of being sexually assaulted by a senior manager when she was 19:

- “I had a boss who took a particular interest in my work and was giving me opportunities. I thought it was because he recognised that I was bright and enthusiastic, and I had talent. It was fine for about six months until the Christmas party when he jumped on top of me in a taxi on the way home in front of my line manager.”

For her, it was the workplace power dynamic of this situation that made it all the more traumatic:

- “Needless to say, as a young woman at the time I didn’t raise a complaint... the way that I felt was that this was somehow my fault, that I had somehow encouraged this older man to treat me this way... and looking back it makes me very angry.”

In our workplaces, she highlighted how we really need to challenge attitudes around harassment, and encourage more support for one another:

- “It’s culture, not the written down policies and the nice things we have written in our HR procedure that really affect us... in that workplace there wasn’t a model that was going to empower me to believe that I was going to be believed or supported.”
- Recent TUC research which shows that 52% of women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, and that rises to two thirds in the 16-24 age bracket. Yet research by the Young Women’s Trust shows that only 6% of women have reported such incidents.
- She also explained that the most effective cases are when women collectively put in a complaint, however these are very rare in practice as predators will usually pick out the most vulnerable or isolated women.
- Trade unions can be more proactive by ensuring that workplace representatives are well-trained and approachable on issues of sexual harassment and bullying so that they can be a reliable point of contact for women to get the support they need.

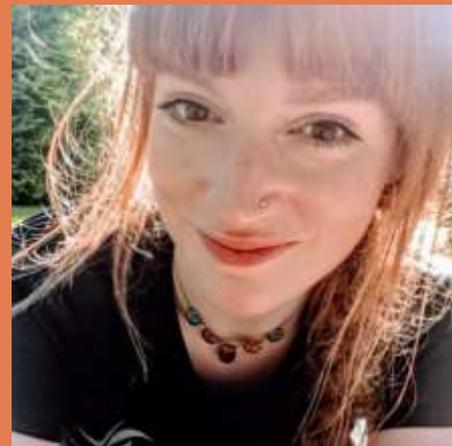
Finally, she discussed the pervasiveness of harassment against women and how we are conditioned to think of it as acceptable:

- “This is a universal thing. Show me a woman who hasn’t been through that in some shape or form at some point in their life. We’re not talking about, ‘Oh isn’t that terrible that happened to you!’ What I find terrible is that it has happened to all of us on many, many occasions.”

This is what motivates her to share her experiences as a woman in the workplace, and she encouraged all of us to play our part in the necessary “outbreaks of rage” and “cultural pushback” until we see change.

Lindsay Linning

Lindsay has worked for the Rape Crisis Scotland sexual violence prevention programme in the Scottish Highlands and conducted poverty-proofing work for the Child Poverty Action Group in schools in Moray. Her Sociology MSc dissertation focused on men's understandings and perceptions of gender-based street harassment. Currently, Lindsay works for Scottish Women's Aid as a Children and Young People's Policy Officer.



Lindsay highlighted how the harassment of women and girls has been normalised in all aspects of our society, including on the streets, in schools, in workplaces and on social media:

- “We have almost got to a point where we are switching off from it because it’s so normalised. It’s so very much part of the fabric of everyday life. It’s jokes about creepy but well-meaning older men patting their female colleagues on the bottom. It’s cheeky, it’s seen as banter, it’s just a bit of fun.”

Moreover, its severity is routinely belittled by trite phrases such as “you can’t say anything to women nowadays”, “you’re a generation of snowflakes”, or passing harassment off as “flirting” and “flattering”.

Leading on from this, she emphasised that we need to see harassment for the human rights violation that it is:

- “It’s really exhausting to debate, but it’s not something that should be up for debate, because ultimately, living free from harassment is a fundamental human right.”
- “Forms of harassment serve as a reminder that these public spaces are not ours to enjoy equally. We are told this is not our domain when these things happen. We are unable to exist as full, right-bearing citizens when we live under the threat of harassment.”

Discussing the role of the media, she demonstrated how harassment is so frequently “manipulated and marketed as innocent”. Using the example of the Keira Knightley storyline in *Love Actually*, she explained:

- “A young boy watching that film is being taught that taking videos of a woman without her consent and then proceeding to turn up at her door is not only acceptable, but actually something extremely romantic.”
- “It promotes the notion that harassment and stalking behaviours are actually encouraged, and what they do is enable other forms of violence against women to take place.”

She too shared her personal experiences of harassment:

- As a teenager, she recalls having been “grabbed at, masturbated at, followed down the street at night, and being threatened, among other forms of harassment.”

A particularly painful example was when she was leaving a training session she had been delivering on gender-based violence where she was immediately met by a car full of men harassing her and shouting obscenities.

- “I was so startled, I was really frightened, and this soon gave way to feeling really angry. It just felt really ironic because that energy and renewed optimism for change that I had felt from this day of training with fellow feminists just dissipated, and I felt really back at square one and really downtrodden again.”

However, she was keen to stress that her own experiences had been mitigated by her privilege as a straight, white, able-bodied woman, and we must not forget that many women face harassment on multiple levels:

- “We would do well to keep this at the forefront of our minds when discussing this, not to detract from the gravity of our own experiences, but in order to learn and really be mindful and true when we are talking about harassment.”

From her work with women and girls, she explained about the “hypervigilance” and numerous forms of “safety work” that women have to engage in daily to avoid harassment:

- “It can be taking the long way home, taking a taxi at extra cost, avoiding certain places, or even just mentally anticipating in fear when crossing the path of a group of guys.”

More than this, she lamented the injustice of women’s lost potential as a result of these measures:

- “What’s ultimately really sad about this is that, as women, our time and energy could be directed elsewhere. We could be spending that time and that brainpower thinking about more meaningful and fulfilling things, not calculating just how to exist out on the street.”

She concluded by reflecting on the societal shift that we are starting to see:

- “Men are starting to listen and learn from the women and girls around them and, above all, believing the stories we have to tell. There is much to be hopeful about.”

Yet there is still some way to go in our fight:

- “Maybe one day we will be part of a society where there is universal outrage about gender-based violence as an abuse of human rights. Where we don’t have to say ‘She’s someone’s daughter’, ‘She’s someone’s mother’, ‘She’s someone’s sister’, in order to justify and personalise these atrocities, in order to care. We can just say ‘She’s someone and that’s awful full stop’.”

Natasha Gerson

Natasha has spent her career in the creative industries as an actor, writer and dancer. She is an active trade unionist, sitting as the Chair of Equity's Scottish National Committee and a member of the STUC's General Council. She is also a law graduate and has used her positions to stand up for women's rights.



She opened by emphasising that all bullying and harassment is rooted in power:

- “Whatever forms bullying and harassment may take, whether it is personal, professional, or any other manifestation, it is always an exercise in power over others.”

In recent years, several high-profile cases of bullying and harassment in the TV and film industry have been exposed, leading to the Me Too campaign. She reflected on this:

- “There has been lots of coverage, and this has been positive for women. But in the industry women are judged on their looks, not their talent. That’s still the same, nothing has changed.”

Giving a personal anecdote, she recalled how she had been the victim of sexist bullying:

- “I was in my teens as a student member of a dance company, and someone decided I was too fat. I was consistently bullied for all the months I was there, being told that I had to lose weight, and it completely destroyed my confidence for a long time. This did not happen to any of the male members of the company.”

In light of the tragic death of Sarah Everard, she considered how there is still a long way to go in changing societal narratives that blame women for their harassment:

- “Women are still accused of not being ‘proper women’, we’re told we shouldn’t be wearing these clothes, we shouldn’t be going out at night.”
- “All of this stuff has been going on for years, and it’s societal. We have to change society.”

Finally, she touched on how important education is in changing attitudes to harassment:

- “We need to look for causes and remedies to this problem, and we need to start with education. We need to educate our children, both male and female.”

Discussion

EDUCATION

Agnes prompted the discussion by raising the issue of bullying and harassment in schools, especially that of young men perpetrating abuse against young women:

- “It seems to have developed into a problem in Scotland. There was a discipline when I was in school about what you couldn’t say, but I know that what we’re hearing back just now is not good in some areas. So, is that potentially where we should start? If these young people, once they leave education and go into wider society and that’s been the norm for them, that can’t be good.”

Discussing what she had seen as an invigilator in schools, Natasha explained:

- “The girls received a lot of unsettling teasing from the boys... society is dominated by men and so the bad behaviour and bullying mainly comes from the boys.”
- “We need to look at the education of both sexes, to have respect and to not think they have to dominate. It’s not just to do with physical strength, it’s to do with power.”
- Expanding on this, she considered that sometimes women bully other women who they see as vulnerable, recommending “we need to do research to understand why people feel they have to have the upper hand.”

With having two teenage daughters, Roz shared her observations of the school environment:

- She detailed an incident at a PTA fundraiser where a man had referred to a raffle prize as a “six-pack of wife-beater”. Explaining “I was up there like a shot, demanding that the comment was withdrawn”, she reiterated that we should not be embarrassed to stand up against these insidious forms of misogyny, even if it makes us look like “the difficult woman in the room”.
- She concluded, “There are a lot of young men who would describe themselves as feminists, good men who have been brought up right and value women. But sadly there is still that peer pressure on too many young men and kids that somehow abusing girls is okay.”

Lynsey reflected on her experience working with young women and girls:

- “From a domestic abuse perspective, schools are one of the only safe spaces that children have, but so often they are not the safe spaces they should be.”

- She emphasised the need for more support and education for parents because young people nowadays are a “generation of digital natives being raised by a generation of non-digital natives. There is certainly a lag between what young people are experiencing through the internet, such as the hypersexualised culture, and what their parents and teachers are aware of.”
- Her recent work has been investigating the radicalisation of young men through men’s rights activist forums online and how dangerous this toxic masculinity is for society as a whole.
- While praising the curriculum on this topic, she admitted “you can have the best resources in the world, but if the staff don’t have the capacity, or the means to be fully trained in that content, or they choose not to teach certain aspects of that curriculum, then problems arise.”
- Finally, she considered the limits faced by schools in providing the necessary support in this area while also meeting the other extra demands that have been put on them by the pandemic.

ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITIES

- BME women who spoke at the meeting illustrated many additional barriers that women in their communities face when reporting bullying and harassment. These included:
 - Fear of judgement within their community
 - Families may intervene and prevent reporting
 - Cultural difference around what is perceived as harassment and abuse
 - Fear of how sharing these experiences may affect their marriage
 - Language barriers or cultural differences can prevent them being able to effectively communicate their experiences or concerns
- One woman noted that, in the workplace, BME women face a lot of additional discrimination and bullying and fear they are greatly at risk of losing their jobs if they even acknowledge it, let alone challenge it.
- Several women shared that the issue of trust is crucial in getting BME women to come forward with their experiences. Organisations committed to tackling harassment need to focus on how they can only expect to gain the trust of these women by building up strong relationships over time.
- One woman specifically emphasised the need to be proactive about seeking out and supporting these women as many of them are hidden and we cannot just assume they will come forward.

STALKING

One woman, also from a BME community, revealed her experience of having been stalked:

- The effects on her life were devastating. She had to give up her college course because he had followed her there and she did not feel safe. Moreover, she lost her job as a result of the stress his behaviours had caused for her.
- Within her community, she then faced bullying for having reported her stalker. She received online abuse, and felt that she had been treated especially harshly as a single mother.
- Finally, she explained how this particular man had previously stalked another woman but had faced no repercussions. This led her to conclude that the law needs to be tightened up and better enforced as, in her experience, there are too many loopholes through which men can be excused.

Another woman, who additionally shared that she had multiple health conditions, bravely disclosed her ongoing issues with a neighbour stalking her.

- She explained how he corners her in the close and watches her through the window.
- Having been made to feel so unsafe in her own home, she has had to make drastic adjustments to her life, like installing a bell with a built-in camera and only leaving her own property when she knows he is out.
- When reporting it to the police, they did not believe her and were very dismissive, with one officer even suggesting that she should considering moving.

These examples show how serious an impact stalking can have on women's lives, but it is still not taken seriously enough as a means of violence against women.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

A female teacher gave an account of having been sexually assaulted by a male pupil:

- Despite the perceived dynamic between teacher and pupil, she shared that this experience left her feeling vulnerable, shaken and upset.
- However, one of her colleagues, who was also a woman, told her that she would have been glad of the attention if it had happened to her.

- This lack of solidarity and support was almost more upsetting than the incident itself and highlighted for her how we all have a role to play in changing the culture around bullying and harassment.

Following up on comments made by the speakers about how normalised harassment against women is, one woman mentioned a TV programme where a group of young people watched scenarios and were then asked to say whether or not they thought it was sexual harassment. This experiment demonstrated that the majority were unable to identify the signs of harassment and reminds us how ingrained this problem is.

Finally, Roz raised the question of “How do we stop the process of reporting being more traumatising than what you’ve been through?”

Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to thank all of those who attended our conference, as well as those who contributed 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. The SWC will use all the voices gathered to feed back to policy makers regarding this timely and vitally important subject.

SWC CONTACT DETAILS

2nd Floor, The Albany Centre
44 Ashley Street, Glasgow
G3 6DS
Tel: 0141 339 4797

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