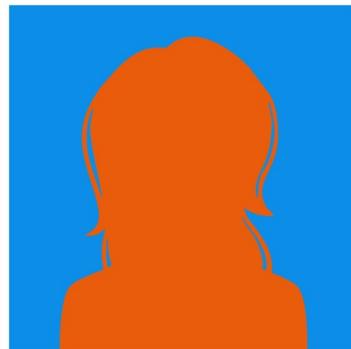
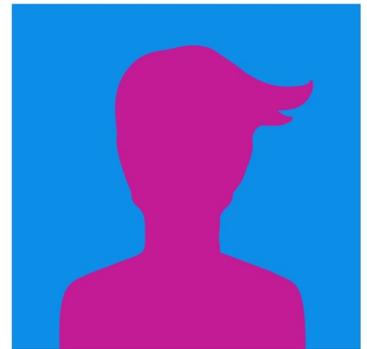


A Scottish Women's Convention report examining Rural Women in Scotland

The report is prepared in response to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) Priority Theme for 2018:

“Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality & the Empowerment of Rural Women & Girls”



Scotland

Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, occupying the northern third of the island of Great Britain. It shares a border with England to the south and is bounded by the North Sea to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the north and west. In addition to the mainland, Scotland is also made up of over 790 islands including the Northern Isles and the Hebrides. The land area of Scotland is 78,772 km (30,414 sq miles), roughly 30% of the area of the United Kingdom (UK). The mainland has 9,911 km (6,158 miles) of coastline. Scotland has a population of around 5.2 million people. The majority of which reside in urban areas which also see the biggest increases in migration.

Scotland has partial self-government within the United Kingdom as well as representation in the UK Parliament consisting of 59 MP's. Executive and legislative powers have been devolved to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh which has a membership of 129 MSP's.

In September 2014 a referendum was held. The people of Scotland were asked to vote as to whether Scotland should become an independent country. 55% of the population voted for Scotland to remain a part of the UK. As a result of this historic decision and subsequent discussions, more powers are being devolved to the Scottish Parliament. These include the ability to legislate on certain taxes, including Income Tax and Value Added Tax; the ability to change the voting age for Scottish Parliament and Local Government elections; powers over onshore oil and gas licensing; employment programmes and certain aspects of social security.

Two years on, Scotland took part in a UK-wide referendum on whether Britain should remain a part of the European Union (EU). While the UK as a whole voted to leave the EU, Scotland overwhelmingly voted to remain.

Women continue to face inequality throughout Scotland for a number of reasons. Due to the unique geographical makeup of the country, taking a one size fits all approach does not address the challenges women face from both a geographic and historical perspective. Women make up 51% of the population. Every piece of legislation that goes through parliament, both reserved and devolved, has a direct impact on them all in a fundamentally different way to men due to persisting gender inequality. Whilst inequality exists throughout Scotland in both rural and urban areas, these issues exist for a wide range of reasons that can differ depending on location. The SWC stresses the need for regional analysis when facing the challenge of eradicating both gender and income inequality.

The Scottish Women's Convention

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 its inception the SWC has engaged with a wide range of women throughout the country.

The SWC undertakes an annual series of 'roadshows' throughout Scotland. These events are unique, giving women the opportunity to express opinions or concerns, in their local area, on issues which directly affect them. Locations from the Shetland Islands to Dumfries have been visited. All information gathered from the women informs SWC responses to Scottish and UK Government consultations. The object is to ensure that women's voices are heard at the heart of the decision making process.

Online surveys and email consultation also provide processes for collating large responses to key discussion areas.

Thematic conferences offer women an opportunity to inform the policy areas under discussion. Listening to inspirational speakers and the prospect of networking with peers motivates individuals attending these events.

Geographical Information Groups (GIGs) throughout Scotland meet on a regular basis to discuss gender specific issues. These groups are facilitated by the organisation and provide vital input into the consultation process.

The SWC has used information and quotes gathered at 'roadshows' and conferences for this report. Further research regarding the legislation and current statistics has also been carried out. The views expressed represent the voices of women of various ages and locations throughout Scotland.

Further information regarding the organisation's activities can be found at www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Legislation, Policy and Practice

Following the 1998 Devolution Settlement, Scotland has its own Government and Parliament with limited powers over certain aspects of legislation including: health and social services; local Government and education. Other matters are still reserved to the UK government at Westminster in London including employment, equal opportunities and the majority of social security.

Across the UK

[The National Minimum Wage](#)

Every worker in the UK is guaranteed to receive at a minimum hourly rate for that work that they do. This is protected under the terms of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/39/contents>). There are five varying levels of minimum wage, which range from £7.50 per hour for adult worker over the age of 25 to £3.50 per hour for apprentices who are either under 19 years old or who are in their first year of an apprenticeship.

Equalities, Protected Characteristics and the Law

The Equality Act 2010 (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>) brings together over 116 separate pieces of legislation into one single Act, the purpose of which is to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all.

The Act merges a number of individual laws, such as the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The other pieces of legislation are: Race Relations Act 1976, Disability Discrimination Act 1995, Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003, Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003, Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006, Equality Act 2006, Part 2, and Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007.

A number of policy measures are also included and designed to ensure equal treatment for all workers. Part-time, agency workers and those on fixed term contracts are, for example, treated generally equally to full time or permanent staff.

Scotland

Rural Scotland

The geography of Scotland is extremely varied. The highest population density is around the 'Central Belt'. As a result a number of services are 'centralised' to this area, with rural residents often expected to travel to access e.g. hospital appointments, colleges and universities, airports etc.

The Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification provides a standard definition of rural areas in Scotland. A 'rural' area is classed a settlement with a population of less than 3,000. Rural areas are further broken down as shown below:

Accessible - Settlements of less than 3,000 but within drive time of 30 mins to settlement over 10,000

Remote - Settlements of less than 3,000 but a drive time of over 30 mins to settlement over 10,000

Very Remote- Settlements of less than 3,000 with drive time of over 60 mins to settlement over 10,000

To recognise the diverse nature of the rural foundations of Scottish society, the Scottish Rural Parliament takes place every two years with people from across differing geographical communities in attendance. The event is held in a different rural locality within Scotland and seeks to address issues specific to these areas within the country.

Scotland is often seen as a beacon for the tackling of gender inequality throughout the world. In this session alone, new legislation has been enacted to combat some of the most serious discriminatory prejudices related to women. The country boasts the creation of the National Advisory Council on Women and Girls to target and combat gender inequality, as well as putting forth a new strategy, "Equally Safe", which offers cross-cutting approaches and strategies in an attempt to tackle and eradicate violence against women and girls.

In terms of the more rural areas of Scotland, there are still a vast range of particular barriers affecting women and blocking their fundamental human right to be equal. The SWC holds a number of events throughout rural areas within the country each year in order to hear from grassroots women first hand how Scotland can strive for equal opportunities and allow them to feel empowered. The nature of this is championed by emphasising the differences in both geographical and historical terms of rural Scotland, including assessing how best to specifically target strategies to breakdown traditional gender stereotypes.

[The Domestic Abuse \(Scotland\) Act](#)

Having just received unanimous support in the Scottish Parliament, the new legislation to tackle domestic abuse has been hailed as a historic milestone for tackling VAWG. The Act redefines the offence of abusive behaviour to cover both physical and non-physical, coercive and controlling abuse. Implementing a definition that illustrates the many forms abuse can take is crucial in order to recognise the vast array of abuse that many women suffer at the hands of perpetrators is not always merely physical.

In addition, the implementation of the Disclosure Scheme for Domestic Abuse within Scotland over the past 2 years, has led to a surge in the number of women using this in order to protect themselves and their families from potentially abusive partners by empowering women with the right to ask about the background of their partner.

[Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm \(Scotland\) Act](#)

Coming into force just under two years ago, the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016 lays out definitions of abuse and legal penalties for perpetrators.

In the same vein as the Domestic Abuse Act, it sets mental abuse on the same legislative footing as physical harm, including aggravation of offences with intent or recklessness to cause harm. The Act also covers so-called “revenge porn” and the sharing of explicit images, including threatening to disclose an image with the intent of causing fear, alarm or distress. A judge can make directions to a jury in cases where evidence is given which suggests a victim delayed in reporting an offence to take away preconceived ideas that juries may have towards sexual offence victims.

[Social Security \(Scotland\) Bill](#)

The Social Security (Scotland) Bill was introduced in June, 2017. This landmark piece of legislation focuses on a number of powers over social security which will be transferred from the UK Parliament to the Scottish Parliament. Eleven benefits will be devolved including Disability Living Allowance, Winter Fuel Payment and Carer’s Allowance. The Bill not only includes proposals for how these forms of assistance will work under the new system, but also lays out plans for principles at the heart of the new Scottish Social Security agenda.

The proportion of the social security budget that will be devolved to Scotland amounts to £2.7 billion, or 15%, of the total £17.5 billion allocated to the country annually. The Scottish Government has set forth their legislative framework in the form of the new Bill, with a universal emphasis on respect and dignity as well as principles outlining a basic human right to social security in accordance with Article 22 of the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights.

[Gender Representation on Public Boards \(Scotland\) Act](#)

Recently passing with a majority vote in the Scottish Parliament, this landmark piece of legislation requires positive action to be taken to redress gender imbalances on public sector boards by introducing gender quotas. Setting an objective for at least 50% of non-executive members to be women, it also requires authorities to take steps to encourage women to apply to become board members and take into consideration barriers women face.

Equal representation on public boards will be more representative of society overall. It is hoped that women’s voices will reflect the issues, concerns and ideas of those upon whom decisions will impact. This, in turn, has the potential to significantly improve matters for gender representation.

The Voices of Real Women in Rural Scotland

Defining the interlinking between gendered poverty and rural barriers is extremely important in identifying and supporting women in communities across Scotland. Obstacles are often doubly hard in areas where structural gender inequality is pervasive and reforms do not necessarily take into account the unique struggles of rural localities.

Whilst ambitious strides have been made in combatting women's inequality, there is still work to be done. Socialisation, lack of legislation around key areas and a host of other factors continue to ensure that women miss out on many of the same opportunities faced by men at all stages of life. Oftentimes, this can be as simple as defining between the classification of urban and rural, with little analysis of the defining factors that are unique to some areas.

A main feature of this is the restriction of women's access to certain opportunities that could lift them out of poverty. The continuous rise in the cost of living coupled with welfare cuts has meant that many are struggling to make ends meet.

"This didn't happen ten years ago. It's shameful that those with the power to change this do absolutely nothing."

[Rural Women and Employment](#)

When discussing inequality in economic terms, women have noted that this can often be relayed back to a number of root causes. This includes: lack of flexible working; inadequate return to work programmes and the absence of opportunities for older and disabled women.

Scotland's geographical lay out is extremely important in terms of employment for people in all walks of life. However, this problem is particularly acute for rural women for a number of reasons stemming from structural gendered inequality. Many rural areas have lower wages on average due to the nature of the work undertaken. Island and highland areas often include more seasonal work than in the central belt and south.

Seasonal work leads to precarious contracts, undertaken in significantly higher numbers than men, often clustered within summer months when children are on extended holiday periods meaning higher costs of childcare. As well as a lack of childcare services, public transport in these areas is *"expensive and unreliable"*.

"For too many women, going to work is more of a financial strain than staying away from the labour market and relying solely on social security. This is down to a combination of low pay, high rents, council tax and expensive private childcare."

In-work poverty is a very real issue faced by far too many women. This is especially pertinent in rural and single parent households where the number of children living in relative poverty continues to rise. Other government reforms continue to underestimate the scale of poverty across the country. In some areas, women are forced to undertake additional part-time jobs to accommodate family and caring responsibilities, as well as being forced to because of poor public transport links. Women are expected to live on wages that have not increased with inflation in a number of years, seeing the cost of living rise intermittently with no help to offset it. Low wages paid in part-time roles mean it is common for women to undertake two or three part-time jobs in order to make ends meet.

"Buses in this area are extortionate. If you're on minimum wage then you're working two or three hours a day just to be able to get to work."

Young Women in Rural Communities

Gender streaming begins from an early age and continues exponentially throughout a woman's life. Young women who choose to not follow an academic route are more often than not steered towards typically "female" roles such as hairdressing, especially in areas with less opportunities. This leads to a situation where many young girls can either choose these limited roles or move further afield to more urban areas to access increased employment.

On the contrary, young men who wish to undertake training-based jobs will be given information on, for example, Modern Apprenticeships in what are traditionally seen as 'male roles' such as plumbing and mechanics. The wages which each of these gender stereotypical roles attract are subject to disparities. Whilst this problem is not relegated to rural localities, apprenticeships in the likes of land management and production are still typically seen as masculine, often leading to young women who do undertake these feeling uncomfortable at being the only female due to outdated gender stereotypes.

"Why does a plumber get paid more than an early years worker? Being able to fix pipes is an important job but it's nowhere near as valuable as the young women who look after our kids on a daily basis."

This is a pernicious problem and can often lead to situations whereby young women are forced to undertake more than one part time job in order to make ends meet. The difference in rates of pay dependent on age can make it extremely difficult for young women to enter into and sustain employment. Transport issues to reach employment as well as the high expenses incurred from car ownership mean many young women in rural areas struggle to access work with much of their wages being spent on this issue.

The National Living Wage does not apply to those under the age of 25. This, coupled with welfare reform measures, pushes many young women and their families further into poverty. It also allows for further exploitation of young workers in areas of Scotland where employment is scarce and focussed around the likes of the hospitality industry, as many companies may be likely to employ under 25's on temporary, zero hours contracts because they are cheaper than those who qualify for further wage increases.

Older Women and Rural Issues

At present, throughout the average woman's lifetime, the gender pay gap continues to rise with age, becoming more significant as one gets older due to barriers to promotion and being significantly undervalued within the workplace. Many employers will, unfortunately, see little point in investing in older women for a number of reasons, including, being close to retirement and many working part-time (either through informed choice or circumstance) because of caring responsibilities or health-related issues.

Industries such as those reliant on tourism in rural areas often avoid hiring older women as they are seen as counter-productive, ignoring the range of skills and experiences these women have. Given the very real problem that many older women faced no opportunity for further education when leaving school, employers tend to disregard other skills and abilities for those "on paper". Not only is this a major factor in under-employment within communities, it contributes heavily to the stigma attached to older female workers.

"Older women are seen as a bit of a disposable commodity in the workplace. Being close to retirement age means many employers would rather performance manage them out of the business than invest time and money in ensuring the work they undertake is valued and recognised."

Transport

Within Scotland, women have the advantage of concessionary bus passes for those over the age of 60, these are seen as valuable and “*fully utilized*”, especially by those lower down the income scale given the economic burden of public transport, which only continues to rise. However, there are still a range of problems attested to transport issues in rural localities which play into a severe strain and impact on many women’s lives in aspects such as employment, healthcare and education, contributing to continued gender inequality.

Much of the transport in rural locations is centred on serving tourists, rather than people who live and work in the area. Journey times can also be a major issue. A bus journey may take a number of hours, whereas by car it is less than half the time. This leads to a reliance on private transport, especially in more remote areas, where a car is seen as a necessity and not a luxury.

“I couldn’t hold down a job where I live if I didn’t drive”

A pivotal issue severely impacting on all manners of life for rural women within Scotland is the inadequate nature of much of the transport system in comparison to cities and large towns. Where there is limited access, for instance, this may only take women in isolated rural locations to a certain point before other transport is needed. This lack of joined up conditions is a major barrier for many women in rural Scotland. Many who come off a train will have to walk to a bus stop to continue their journey, which can compromise their personal safety and may lead to them having to wait for a certain time for services.

This has a real knock on effect within a number of issues significant to many women. For instance, in many rural localities, there are few buses after 6pm or on Sundays, meaning those who work unsociable hours such as the hospitality industry are at a severe disadvantage. Many of the jobs available to women are part-time shift work, which can be difficult to get to and from when there is little to no transport provision.

Perceiving rural problems in a vacuum with a “one size fits all” approach is a major issue affecting transport with a heavy impact on a variety of other concerns. For instance, the negative impacts of social isolation and the centralisation of hospital services in certain areas results in a number of gendered problems, given that women tend to need access to services more than men. Lack of public transport for these journeys impact detrimentally on those further down the income scale, resulting in disadvantaged living and health. This centralisation is often exacerbated for the likes of treatment for issues such as cancer which may require even further travel to urban localities.

“Buses are so unreliable. They either don’t turn up on time or don’t turn up at all. How is anyone supposed to rely on that kind of system to get anywhere?”

The Rural Impact of Brexit on Women

In June, 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union (EU). However, Scotland’s result as a whole voted overwhelmingly to remain, with every local council area returning a pro-EU result. This has led to many constitutional, political and social questions being thrown up by politicians both at Westminster and Holyrood.

At a grassroots level, however, it is almost two years into the Referendum result and there is still no clear gender focus within the current Brexit negotiations or in the analysis of the potential impact. Much of the discussions concerning negotiations have occurred only at a higher ministerial level. There has been much talk of a ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ Brexit, whether we should stay in the Single Market and what it will mean for international trade. However, there has been very little engagement with women in rural communities as to how Withdrawal will affect them.

A huge issue for many women in rural communities is how legislation will be implemented after withdrawal from the EU and the potentially negative impact this will have on gender discrimination. Fear of the potential repeal of European laws post-withdrawal is common. Issues such as sex discrimination laws and the protections guaranteed around Working Time and Agency Workers Directives have all been raised as essential legislative frameworks that stem directly from Europe.

A main contention is the fact that a one-nation approach does not duly justify the impact that Brexit will have on more rural communities' specific to Scotland and the women that live there. The unique structural imbalances felt by these localities at a gendered level goes further than just enacting legislation in an attempt to correct these wrongs. In built attitudes and outdated concepts must change. Gendered inequality, already so pervasive, will fail to be rectified if this goes unchallenged. Failure to understand this from a Brexit point of view and the potential of economic turmoil is not just a political and financial issue, it is a gendered one.

"I feel frustrated, fearful and helpless. We're already seeing a rise in hate crime and the normalisation of racism. The decision will have an impact on the opportunities and decisions of young people in the future."

Further clarification is needed around the Brexit process, as well as specific issues about particular areas of policy and legislation and how this will be adapted to geographical areas within Scotland. Failure to take into account the diverse nature of rural Scotland means that the decisions that affect women in these areas in unique ways cannot be foreseen. The likes of the specific impact on the rural economy of Scotland and what the loss of European funding will mean for many in these areas is barely raised at a parliamentary level.

"I am devastated at the prospect of people across the world looking to our country and seeing it as closed and unwelcoming, not a good place to visit or work in or make a new life in. I fear that there will be a reduction in educational links, cross-learning and expertise being shared. All this will become difficult or impossible."

Historic underfunding within rural communities, although beginning to be rectified, is still at an early stage for a range of different issues as opposed to city funding. Loss of EU funding exacerbates this problem and it is unclear how this will be replenished post-Withdrawal.

"There are big concerns around human rights and equalities. We have struggled to get to where we are now. It would be terrible if this was lost because we are being forced to leave the EU."

For instance, specialist services in place to aid victims of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) will have limited provisions due to a loss of such funding. The value of these services is undeniable. The provision of refuge accommodation, as well as assistance with applications for housing, welfare benefits and other support mechanisms allow women to recognise, survive and exit abusive relationships.

"I wouldn't be where I am today without the support and assistance I've had from these services. They saved my life."

Additionally, current negotiations have failed to take into account not just the potential security threat that exiting the EU has on criminal activity and extradition within Scotland, but what this means for gendered abuse and crime. A major point that continually is being ignored is the impact this will have on issues such as human trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation and slavery which may be dealt with less effectively across European borders post-Brexit due to the loss of EU law and expulsion from European Security Agency, Europol. Elimination of these vital approaches derails from a coordinated strategy and may lead to an increase in VAWG within the country if no negotiations are in place to effectively offset this.

Social Security

The UK Government currently spends around £18 billion per year on benefits. Approximately 15% of this will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament under the Scotland Act 2016. However, continuing austerity and welfare reforms which significantly target women over the past number of years have already caused severe stress and illness throughout Scotland. Women make up the majority of those entitled to social security assistance for a number of reasons, not least stemming from structural inequality at the foundations of employment, childcare provision and discrimination routed in ongoing gendered perceptions within the societal narrative.

Poverty is not just about how much money people can “claim” through welfare access. It is about shame, stigma and a denial of rights. Individuals in such conditions are judged, looked down on and made to feel degraded due to situations which they more often than not have no control over. These are the consequences of the current benefits system within the UK. Of the cuts over the last seven years, 85% have directly affected women. These continued austerity measures are forcing more and more women within Scotland into financial hardship with devastating consequences.

Rurally, cost of living is often higher than urban settings. The likes of Islands, for example, often have a much higher proportion of living costs in comparison to the mainland. This is primarily due to higher delivery costs and exclusivity. This, coupled with lower than average wages and precarious employment often leads to a reliance on social security for many women. The likes of fuel poverty is particularly acute in rural areas due to colder weather, this is especially harrowing as these localities tend to have older communities, resulting in risks to many women within these areas health.

“If you’re not working and not in town center, you run the risk of being sanctioned”

Many women are sanctioned when they are unable to attend appointments and interviews because they have caring responsibilities or lack of transport means they cannot make the times of appointments. Women throughout Scotland have spoken about the current imposed agenda and the struggle it has put them under when having their benefits halted with little or no notice. This has forced many down routes that they would not usually take, such as high interest pay-day loans or commercial sexual exploitation, in order to make ends meet.

“I know so many women who are scared to go to the Jobcentre because they’ve had such a bad experience. It’s not uncommon to hear of people having sleepless nights and panic attacks in the run up to an appointment.”

There are currently a significant number of job centres due to close across Scotland, including many in rural areas. This is defended by the move to online applications for social security becoming more and more common for many throughout the UK. However, this fails to take into account the number of significant closures and what this entails for rural areas including inaccessibility to broadband due to financial and technological restraints for a large number of women. It also results in a momentous amount of job losses, where even relocation may not be an option for staff due to geography and further distances needing to be travelled for many women already experiencing severe accessibility issues.

The implementation of the two-child tax credit limit, i.e. the so-called ‘rape clause’ has left women throughout Scotland feeling outraged at the immorality of such a scheme. This will impact on women when they are at their most vulnerable, forcing them to re-live one of the most traumatic, life-altering experiences anyone could go through. This policy is not only degrading but reinforces the horrible stereotypes about women from socioeconomic backgrounds who have children for government benefit.

A woman can claim for a third or subsequent child if it was conceived as a result of a sexual act they did not or could not consent to, or at a time when they were in an abusive relationship, under ongoing control or coercion, by the other parent of the child. However, a woman can also not claim this exemption if she lives with the other parent.

“There is no dignity or respect in the system at the moment. It needs to be completely overhauled.”

Rural Healthcare

The budgetary scope of NHS funding and the way it is allocated is crucial to rural localities throughout Scotland. The geographical lay out of the country can cause significant inconsistencies in health and social care provision. Hospitals, and other services, including mental health care as well as GP and dental provision have all been reduced at a local level. Services are often centralised to main towns and too many community services have been withdrawn. This is of particular concern to women, who are often the main users of healthcare amenities, be it for themselves or for those that they care for.

Whilst health funding is at a record high thanks to the continued focus on NHS Scotland and the continuing integration of health and social care, the problems and inconsistencies between rural and urban Scotland must be addressed in order to ensure fairness in the quality of care. Resources across the public sector have been shrunk and are putting too much pressure on staff.

Currently, integration of health and social care is an ongoing process. This is a momentous step that seeks to put the needs of individual people at the forefront. However, the physical impact of such a large process can often be cause for concern. Thought to be done in a goodwill way, it local people on the ground did not have an input into this, with some health problems often taking a back seat in rural localities where an aging workforce can throw up additional problems. With many NHS employees due to retire within the next few years, recruitment will become a major issue.

Recruitment can often be a huge problem in relation to healthcare, this can be compounded by a doctor crisis due to a lack of training programmes specific to communities. In addition, NHS employment such as nurses, the majority of whom are female, are often seen as being overwhelmingly undervalued and overworked. A large majority of whom have noted that they fear that they will not be fully equipped with sufficient resources to effectively deal with the crisis of rising mental health problems.

“Healthcare means we also have to contend with so many rural issues.”

This is a particular problem in terms of the mental health issues that women may experience at various stages in their lives and for varied and diverse reasons. The more deprived an area, the more likely that mental health issues will transpire. This is a real concern given the unequal gendered distribution of poverty geared towards women. More recognition must be brought forth for the various levels of support available for those women suffering from mental health issues.

“Preventative measures are needed that are adequately resourced.”

A common theme is the idea that a large proportion of spending is often funneled into areas of quick fix solutions rather than investing in the long term, which then leads to the creation of other issues such as mental health inequalities. This was seen as having *“a clear ripple effect.”* with a number of short term savings being much more expensive in the long run .

“For health and social care to work, we need to take risks.”

Local GP's do not have a lot of information about certain health issues with some areas only having a single service GP surgery. As a result, patients and their families have to fight for access to services and when it is available, care can be disjointed.

“Mental health isn't spoken about within communities, so it's even harder for people who need a bit of support and assistance to access any. There's still a horrible stigma attached. We need to work to break that down. Mental and physical health should be given the same level of attention.”

Unpaid Caring

Unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, save the Scottish economy billions every year, going unrewarded for much of the hard work that they do. The provision of Carers Allowance is extremely important for many women. The Scottish Government has made a commitment to topping up this benefit by £10 weekly, however, this still does not take into account the problems many face around the likes of wage caps. It must be ensured that this payment is made to the right people and is a true monetary reflection of the work that those who undertake caring responsibilities do.

There needs to be more flexibility, in the criteria for receiving Carers Allowance. The current expectation that those who provide care must spend at least 35 hours per week caring, not earn more than £110 per week and not be in full time education is completely unrealistic.

“So many women work 35 hours per week and then go home and provide 35 hours of care. It's as if unless they reach these almost impossible standards, they're not really caring. This is unfair – carers need to be treated with more respect.”

Furthermore, rules around sanctioning can be extremely inflexible in respect of carers. Many women are sanctioned when they are unable to attend appointments and interviews because they have caring responsibilities. There is not enough recognition of the unpaid work that women do. Women need to be valued both financially and socially for this much-needed work.

“Respite is a necessity, not a luxury. If I can't get a break then there's a danger I can't properly look after the person I care for. It's hard to find cover for simple things like my own doctor's appointments and jury duty. You feel guilty asking anyone else to help because it's like admitting you can't cope.”

There is an expectation that women within families should take on the role of carer, be that for older relatives, younger children, their spouse, family members and neighbours. As a result, many feel that they are unable to reach their full potential because they have the responsibility of looking after others. It can be difficult to access respite, which has an impact on carer's mental and physical health.

“Many don't know much about the illnesses they're caring for. These women have had to give up their careers, lifestyles and social lives. They have little to no respite, their physical and mental health suffers and they often feel very guilty about the situation they are in.”

There has been a noticeable difference in services which assist and support carers and the people they look after over the last few years. Lack of nursing homes in rural areas mean that those who require a certain level of care must leave the home and community in which they may have lived all of their lives. There is an expectation that women within families should take on the role of carer, be that for older relatives, younger children, their spouse, family members and neighbours. As a result, many feel that they are unable to reach their full potential because they have the responsibility of looking after others. It can be difficult to access respite, which has an impact on carer's mental and physical health.

“The last thing that these folk need is to move far away from the place they’ve always lived. It’s very sad, both for them and for the people they are leaving behind.”

It is extremely difficult to get people to take up formal home caring jobs in rural areas. While these positions are advertised, they are low paid and offer little in the way of flexibility of hours. The majority of those who do work in this field are women, who are not adequately valued for the important role they carry out. Those who work as carers are often expected to travel significant distances in order to look after the people who rely on their support and assistance. Much of their work requires travel to areas which are not as accessible, which often means driving down dark farm roads in difficult weather.

“It’s really dangerous, especially in winter when the snow comes. There’s not always a phone signal so we could be left completely stranded. We’re also expected to use our own cars. I don’t particularly like having to drive on roads full of holes and stones in my own vehicle.”

Rural Connectivity

High speed broadband connections are not always available in many rural areas. Small, remote enterprises with poor transport links need to rely on internet services to promote and conduct their business. Some areas of rural Scotland have no access to broadband, resulting in restricted opportunities for trading. In areas where there is internet provision, there is often little competition between providers, meaning those in rural parts of the country pay more than those in more urban settlements.

The Scottish Government has committed to delivering superfast broadband to all homes and premises by 2021, with the first phase focused on rural and island communities. Giving such a high priority is greatly welcomed for a number of reasons within these places.

“Lack of high speed broadband limits so many social and business opportunities. Slow internet connection stops people working from home and being able to shop online.”

Online forms are the most common way of applying for jobs. It is, therefore, extremely difficult for those with poor or non-existent broadband to carry out what are taken for granted as simple tasks by many employers. Oftentimes, the most accessible way of completing the likes of social security is through online processes.

Childcare Provision in Rural Areas

The Scottish Government is currently expanding free provision of childcare to 30 hours per week by 2020 whilst the 2018-19 Draft Budget has allocated almost a quarter of a billion of new investment in the workforce and infrastructure for such an expansion to take place. This has been greatly welcomed by women as a significant push for gender equality. However, in terms of best practices, sufficient investment is sorely needed around a number of issues rather than just increasing provision. Failure to take rural specific issues into consideration runs the risk of being extremely detrimental to children and their families in these areas.

In a number of remote, rural and super sparse areas, it is extremely difficult for women to access formal childcare. Where there is a nursery or a childminder available, they often do not offer flexibility. Wrap-around childcare - which often means before 8.30am and after 3.30pm - is limited. Similarly, provision is not always near to a place of work or study. As a result, women can be forced to undertake long journeys by public transport in order to get drop their children off, then to get to work or college, before doing the same again in the evening. Many of the women who have to juggle these responsibilities are in low paid employment.

Many women in rural areas rely on childminders to provide their childcare. They are likely to be able to offer more flexible hours than the likes of nurseries. As a result they are in high demand due to the lack of formal provision across the geographical area. Difficulty in accessing services means there is a significant reliance on informal provision from friends and family. In some circumstances older women in local communities have offered to look after other people's children as they have recognised the need for the assistance.

“These women have enough difficulties already trying to get childcare arranged. Is it any wonder they'd rather be unemployed? Working is leaving them out of pocket!”

“By the time you pay for the bus and pay for the childcare, what's the point in working when wages are so low?”

Representation in Public Life

Of the 129 MSP's elected to the Scottish Parliament in the 2016 election, 45 were women, amounting to 35% female representation. Within the UK House of Commons, 208 MP's are women, equating to 32%. Men continue to be appointed to public positions in far greater numbers due to a range of factors not limited to the gendered aspect of political networks and less time commitments. This discrimination means they are even less likely to be able to progress to public official level.

Whilst this number has rose over the past decade, progress is beginning to stagnate. This is a particular pernicious problem in rural Scotland where access to political and public events can be an issue for many women. Crucially for rural areas in Scotland, women are needed to voice their views at a political and public level in order for these to be successfully addressed.

Specific consideration to women in rural areas is crucial in addressing these problems. Issues such as childcare and public transport are exacerbated due to the geography of their local area. Women who currently are, or who wish to become politically and socially active should be afforded flexibility in order to do so. Whilst a number of political issues affecting women are applicable to those living both urban and rurally, many are specific to or are more acutely felt in more remote parts of the country. There is a feeling amongst some women who live out with main towns and centres that the specific issues and barriers faced are not fully understood across the Parliament overall.

In addition to this, increasing female participation across the political sphere does not necessarily translate into increased representation in all aspects. There is currently no mechanism available to enforce gender balance, which means that women are underrepresented in many of the parliamentary committees. This not only does not bring a sufficient gendered perspective to Committee decisions, it also ebbs into the way in which evidence is gathered and reviewed, making it much less likely for females to be called in order to give sufficient gendered evidence.

Rural Policing

Policing in Scotland has a long record of adapting to the changing demands and needs of people and communities. However, there are still many issues affecting rural areas that need further consideration. Policing has undergone major change in recent years with the transition to a single service, the Scottish Police Authority (SPA).

There is a strong patriarchal culture in Scotland which is especially apparent in rural areas. This can make it extremely difficult for women to 'speak out' and report incidents, often due to fear of repercussions within the community. VAWG is seen as a *"hidden evil"* in many rural areas and a *"behind closed doors"* mentality is often displayed. A lack of female police officers, particularly in more remote areas, can create barriers for women in reporting domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault etc. Officers tend to be known in smaller communities, which can make it even more difficult to disclose incidents of violence.

The physical reporting of incidents to the police and how emotionally draining this can be on top of being victims of crime is a pernicious issue and one that needs addressed in terms of rural localities. Oftentimes, this can even amount to feeling it is almost not worth the effort. More emphasis needs to be placed on recruitment, training and retention of specifically female police officers in order for women to feel safe in reporting of crimes, particularly gender based ones. The likes of language barriers and cultural sensitivities must be included within training for all new and current police recruits, with an emphasis on employing more women with these skills.

"Going to the police, telling your story over and over again, then having to go to court takes its toll."

Housing

Funding to further increase social housing builds, alongside increased budgetary commitment to alleviate the problem of homelessness for women is crucial for rural Scotland. Lack of quality, affordable homes whether for rent or to buy is a major issue.

The Scottish Government has committed to delivering 50,000 affordable homes by the end of the current Parliamentary session, including continued investment in the Rural and Island Housing Funds. Social housing for family's needs to be considered. Decent accommodation has a positive impact on women and children's health and wellbeing, training and employment opportunities, as well as the benefit of social integration within rural communities.

Problems are not limited to availability, however. Rising living and rent costs have led many women into rent arrears or eviction. The number of households, overwhelmingly women, applying for Discretionary Housing Payments has increased exponentially to make up shortfalls in rent. This is due to a variety of reasons, including the roll out of Universal Credit and other welfare reforms. Given that a large proportion of those in insecurely rented accommodation tend to be young women or single mothers whose incomes can be low and unstable, exacerbated by rural issues.

Violence Against Women and Girls

The vast majority of victims of all sexual crimes are female and perpetrators male. This has been further exasperated by the rise in digitalisation and social media providing a platform for much of this behaviour. Fear of having to face the accused is a common reason for women not reporting this behaviour and allowing perpetrators to escape justice.

A major societal issue surrounding VAWG that continues to be perpetuated even in the modern day is the continuing blaming and shaming of women for being sexually assaulted. The idea of victim blaming is prevalent still and can have a serious effect on women already experiencing serious trauma and prevents reporting fearing it was not a "real" assault.

Rape culture is consistently perpetuated through ongoing misogyny and passed down from generation to generation. This can be a major issue in rural communities. These problems raise other factors out with victim's own perceptions, for instance, it can be a major barrier for education within local areas where these myths dominate. Rural localities face extra issues such as perceived lack of anonymity and difficulty in accessing sexual health services. In addition, tightknit communities may feel an inappropriate space for women if discouraged from speaking out.

"The burden is always on women not to be sexually assaulted."

Ongoing changes in the way people connect and communicate is throwing up further issues, leading to a further rise in not just abuse, but also in the hostile nature of this, with threats being highly targeted towards women.

This is a particular problem in terms of the sexual abuse received by many females merely because of their gender. Social media has the added effect that many people find others who not just perpetrate, but also intensify, intimidation and abuse. This has conspired to normalise abuse against women and see things such as rape threats as commonplace.

"If you wouldn't threaten rape in real life, then why can you do it online?"

Failure to advocate the high level of responsibility that the media plays can lead to promulgation of VAWG at a wider level in society. Online intimidation and abuse are serious issues which can cause severe problems for many women and can often lead to their lives being put in significant danger. This can lead to disfigured perceptions in rural communities where smaller male-dominated networks may overpower sensitivities both in person and online surrounding VAWG, seeing issues such as online abuse as not a pressing issue.

The Offences (Aggravation by Prejudice) (Scotland) Bill, 2009 currently enacts a statutory aggravator for what it defines as hate crime misdemeanours committed against those with a disability, sexual orientation or transgender identity. However, the personification of women as a specific group which can experience discrimination is lacking. Women should be recognised as a protected characteristic within hate crime legislation. This would enable females to challenge intimidation in respect of their gender.



Conclusion

Women in Scotland undoubtedly benefit from legislation, policy and practices which enhance women's empowerment in rural communities. Despite these advances, however, it is clear that a number of barriers must be overcome in order to create equality. Gendered inequality and women's disempowerment will continue to flourish if the following fail to be addressed and tackled:

- Recognition of the geographical, historical and cultural diversity that rural Scotland possesses.
- Understanding of the barriers in front of rural women in gaining access to employment as well as the nature of much rural work including precarious, seasonal offerings.
- Implementation of strategies with joined up approaches to recognise issues are not solitary. The likes of healthcare, transport and employment act as a catalyst for issues that interlink. Solutions at both a legislative and practical level must recognise a coordinated and adaptable approach.
- Work to recognise and educate that reporting of gender based violence may be lower in rural localities due to a perceived lack of anonymity and tighter community structures.
- Strong recognition of cultural sensitivities when implementing legislation in communities where traditions and values are often felt more strongly than urban settlements.
- Resources for staff and volunteers and help to adapt to the inaccessibility of outreach programmes in rural areas.
- Emphasis on the necessity of gender balance in all areas of managerial and representative life.
- Stronger education for children from an early age to tackle misconceptions surrounding gender based violence including victim shaming and rape myths
- Best practices when coordinating with those in positions of power in rural localities to communicate the seriousness of gender issues around a host of other topics. For instance, the likes of bringing an economic perspective when dealing with local businesses and extolling the motivational benefits of the likes of flexible working for employees.
- Recognition of the risks that come from rural poverty which are not as explicit and discussed, such as fuel poverty.
- Implementation of local transport strategies that takes in the need of women in rural areas, including affordability and access.
- Ensure greater freedom of education in relation to girls in rural schools to allow access to more traditionally male-dominated subjects, including incentives for females going into the teaching field in this criteria.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission paper provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to employment in Scotland.

The SWC would like to thank all of the women who have contributed to discussions around the issues outlined in this report.

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