

THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION

SPRING
2020
DIGITAL
ROADSHOWS

REPORT

Edinburgh
& Lothians

Tuesday 5th May





Introduction

The current circumstances during the Coronavirus pandemic have turned our lives upside down. The SWC recognises that each woman will have a unique experience of this time, due to where you live, your job, your health, the relationships you have, your family circumstances, and so much more. It is important that we continue to engage with women across Scotland - listening to your issues and concerns, and working with decision makers to ensure you are heard.

With all of this in mind, the SWC has undertaken a series of digital roadshows across Scotland – engaging with women and trying to understand the unique issues faced by different communities. Women who have been unable to attend these meetings have contributed to the discussions via email and online survey. Their views are also reflected in this report.

6 Key Points

- Women’s voices are missing from decision making.
- Support is needed for women who are homeworking and providing care.
- Moving forward, flexible working for all employees needs to be considered.
- Universal Basic Income (UBI) could provide financial security.
- Digital communications need to be accessible to all.
- Older women must not be forgotten when considering economic and social policies.

Local Support

A number of Coronavirus related Facebook groups, dedicated to helping people in local areas have been established. There has been an increased feeling of community spirit, with people offering to help in a wide variety of ways. In smaller, more rural communities and villages new systems have been put in place by members of the community, to ensure that help is there for anyone struggling.

Concerns were raised regarding those who may be struggling simply to get by on a daily basis, who do not have the opportunity to reach out for help, or who cannot access these offers due to lack of internet, skills or simply the confidence to ask.

“There must be a lot of people who are slipping through the net. It’s hard to know what we can do to help them.”

The West Lothian Food Train is a Scottish social enterprise which provides vital food services to those who find difficulties in independent living, through age, ill health or disability. In late April, SP Energy Networks’ Green Economy Fund provided £450,000 to the organisation for the purchase of a new fleet of electric vehicles. These allow increased access and further extension of support to other local authorities, including West Lothian.

Food Banks

Food bank use in Edinburgh and Lothians had been growing before the crisis and has escalated during this time.

“In parts of Edinburgh they’ve found an endless amount of people who need help with food. That’s an endless amount of people who are actually hungry.”

Universal Credit and Statutory Sick Pay do not provide enough money for people to live on. They are turning more and more to food banks and other charitable support.

“It’s exposing the myth that people could live well on benefits.”

BAME Communities

BAME women have their own unique experiences at this time, and the Coronavirus is having a disproportionate effect on this community. This is, in part, due to the lack of representation in public life, policy and decision making, leading to a widespread lack of understanding and sincere consideration.

Moving forward, women in BAME communities need more representation in public places, parliament and policy making. Awareness raising needs to highlight the experiences of these communities. Moreover, active engagement with communities in their own spaces, such as charities, food banks and religious centres must be achieved.

“When we’re coming out of this and looking back on what happened, we need to consider the ways we could have reacted better. These voices need to be there and they need to be listened to.”

Communications

Women with caring responsibilities have found a benefit in using digital communication. It is more flexible, allows them to stay in the home or close to where they are needed for caring responsibilities, and is less time consuming as travel is no longer necessary.

“Friends in a carer support group have been able to join us through digital modes, in a way they haven’t been able to do for a number of years.”

However, online contact, primarily taking place within a home setting, should not become the new standard mode for women’s conversations. Many are struggling with the added responsibilities brought on by the restrictions – particularly caring for and teaching children while schools are closed, while also trying to work from home. There is a loss of safe, relaxed spaces, such as during coffee breaks in the workplace, or with fellow parents at school gates to talk about any personal issues.

“If things are difficult at home, you’ve got a space to talk about things going on when you’re outside. For a lot of women, we’ve lost that. We’ve lost the reference point of feeling OK.”

“There’s a lot of women who are incredibly isolated and who we can’t reach.”

It was concluded that lessons should be learned from this universal switchover to digital communications. Flexible approaches need to be considered. Taking away the capacity for physical contact and informal conversation space could lead to potentially vulnerable groups becoming increasingly isolated.

Women and The ‘New Normal’

Women’s voices need to be heard and acted upon.

“Where are the sensible women feeding into the thinking of the coronavirus strategy?”

There needs to be a vision for Scotland. What would make life better for women and families? What kind of Scotland do we want to see?

Working From Home

Employers could be encouraged to recognise the opportunities revealed through the increased workplace flexibility. Some industries require individuals to be present and have people 'on the ground'. A wide range of employers, however, are operating extremely well with staff working from home.

“Could we get more employers to recognise that flexible working is a possibility, if that’s what women would choose? Then we could see more family friendly employment and a better work/life balance.”

On the other hand, working from home could become a way for companies to cut costs. It could also bring women back to being tied to the family home, due to perceived inequalities with caring responsibilities.

“If you have two people working from home, it will be the woman rather than the man who’s work gets interrupted. We have already seen reports of the difference in production between men and women because of this.”

“We need to change the narrative! We need to have a gender equality approach to parenting duties and responsibilities.”

Childcare

This current imbalance in childcare responsibilities leads to difficulty when planning a return to work. This is particularly concerning for women with precarious contracts, who risk losing out on further income and support if they cannot return to work when their employer requests.

“If there are phased returns back to work, how will this impact on women? You might have those who have to go back when schools are still closed. How will that be sorted?”

“Flexible working will need to be combined with flexible childcare.”

While this is a deeply concerning logistical and financial issue for women and their children, issues were also raised regarding the impact on the wider childcare sector. The current funding model may no longer work for many organisations. Children will attend in reduced numbers, with no less staff due to dispersion of activities, and many parents may not be able to afford the costs going forward.

“How do essential organisations, who rely on fees and funding, deal with social distancing?”

Further, nursery places in some areas were reported to be under resourced, considering the volume of new housing and the number of young families relocating.

Economy

There should be urgent, short-term economic changes made to assist with the impacts of this time.

“We know that austerity always hits women hardest. If we end up collectively in this together and tightening our belts, we know it’ll be women that are impacted worst.”

Universal Basic Income was suggested as a way of ensuring women have more security and more choices.

“A lot of women are going to be self-employed and struggling, so we need to make sure that everyone has support.”

Further contributions to help offset the current costs included options to pay council tax early and put savings into Local Credit Unions rather than a bank. These actions could be encouraged for those who are in financially stable situations, or saving from typical costs such as transport.

“We should be seeing more people with money taking responsibility and helping others through.”

Taxation could be reviewed, and put towards public services that have experienced low funding and cuts. Child care and social care were mentioned as critical areas in need of investment.

“Neither of these groups are getting the value or the attention they deserve.”

Older communities

Concerns were raised regarding older people feeling isolated, and the way their experiences are being communicated by the government and media. They are being spoken about as if they are helpless and frail, when so many have “*blazed a trail*”. Many older women were very active prior to lockdown and are now frustrated that they cannot leave home. They enjoyed using the concessionary bus ticket to travel around the country.

Those in care homes relied on seeing family and friends as a lifeline to the outside world.

“The care home PPE scandal reflects the way older women are viewed and valued. We need to think about quality of life along every stage.”

“I’m worried they are losing confidence and losing their place in society. And we will all be at a massive loss as a result.”

Community Development

Community development could improve experiences and mental health during these times. Working on green spaces, helping people living in condensed flats and busy households to have an area in their community to enjoy and spend more time using should be considered by local authorities. It could also make the appearance of the local area nicer, and improve wellbeing. Community gardening is also a way of encouraging this, while also leading to potential assistance with access to healthy fruit and vegetables.

Thank You

Thank you to the women who joined 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.

Website - www.scottishwomensconvention.org

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