



Greenock Conference 9th July 2013

The SWC (Scottish Women's Convention) recognises that women are having to re-train and up-skill in order to enter into, sustain or progress in employment. Barriers also exist in accessing advice, assistance and resources to support women.

The current financial climate, with cuts to public services and changes to welfare benefits, is severely impacting on the ability of women to fully integrate in employment, education and society in general.

Women also need to become more involved in discussions around the referendum on the future of Scotland. What do women want or need from decision makers after September 2014?

The 2013 Roadshow programme gives women the opportunity to discuss these topics in more detail. It is important that women are given an opportunity to express how political decisions impact on them, their families and communities.

Agnes Tolmie
Chair, SWC

The SWC arranged a conference in Greenock. The purpose of the event was to meet with women, listen to a range of speakers and to discuss important local issues.

The conference was held at the Tontine Hotel on Tuesday 9th July 2013 and was attended by women from throughout Inverclyde. The event was promoted through direct communication with organisations and individuals in the area. Discussions around the questions were facilitated by SWC staff and volunteers. Notes taken throughout the process and direct quotes from the women attending form the basis of this report.

Copies will be sent to the women who participated as well as key decision makers at local and national level.

Evelyn Fraser, SWC Development Manager

Evelyn welcomed women to the event and provided an overview of the work of the SWC. The importance of roadshow events, where women come together in their local communities to discuss issues important to them, was outlined. Following each roadshow a report is produced which the SWC uses to respond to UK and Scottish Government consultation responses and Scottish Parliament Committee Inquiries and calls for evidence.

The SWC also holds thematic conferences on issues which impact on women. Events have been held on human trafficking, older women and employment and women and the media. These events have attracted high profile speakers and received positive feedback on the information gathered.

The voices of women in Scotland are taken to an international level, through participation in the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a United Nations (UN) Commission which meets annually in New York to discuss priority themes for women. Over the past few years the SWC has produced reports which have been taken to CSW and disseminated to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) from all over the world, as well as being given to the UK Government representatives at the event.

As well as CSW, the SWC has been involved in the preparation of a CEDAW Shadow Report. CEDAW - the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women - is a UN Convention which the UK Government ratified in 1986. Every four years the UK Government faces scrutiny from an expert international committee who examine efforts made to improve the situation for women across a number of key policy areas. Eight Scottish women's organisations came together to produce a report which contains information from and about diverse groups of women from different geographical locations in Scotland. This reports on the reserved matters for which the UK Government has responsibility, as well as Scottish Government legislation and policies which have an impact on women.

Ann Henderson, Assistant Secretary, Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC)

Ann is an Assistant Secretary at the STUC. The STUC represents over 620,000 trade union members, from 39 affiliated trade unions and 20 Trades Union Councils. They speak for trade union members in and out of work, in the community and in the workplace, in all occupational sectors and across Scotland. Representative structures ensure that the STUC can speak with authority for the interests of women workers, black workers, young workers and other groups of trade unionists that suffer discrimination in the workplace and in society.

There are a number of changes happening with regards to employment legislation at a UK level which will impact on women, such as the introduction of charges to take a case to an employment tribunal.

“These are issues which really affect women.”

The STUC has a ‘memorandum of understanding’ with the Scottish Government, which allows and encourages engagement between the two organisations. Approximately eighteen months ago the rate of women’s unemployment rose rapidly, causing the STUC and Scottish Government to organise a Women’s Employment Summit. This brought together a mix of representatives from industries, the Scottish Government and women’s organisations to discuss key issues around women in the labour market and establish a way forward.

A number of themes emerged from discussions at the summit. Many women aged 50+ are trying to keep working while at the same time providing care for grandchildren and older relatives. There is a perception that part-time work is somehow less important than full-time work, although it is the only option available to a lot of women.

“When women are paid better and are valued more, then that creates jobs.”

Women also continue to be *“systematically underpaid”*. This can be highlighted by the number of equal pay cases currently within the tribunal and court systems.

Ann outlined her role at the STUC, which includes direct dialogue with the Scottish Government, giving evidence at Scottish Parliament committees and organising and attending events in the Parliament. Ann also works with the STUC Women’s Committee, including organising an annual women’s conference which considers issues specific to women in the workplace, such as health and safety, menopause and domestic abuse.

Erin Donnelly, CVS Inverclyde

Erin is a community development worker with CVS Inverclyde and works on the EAGER - Empowering Active Greenock East Residents - project. Developed in partnership between CVS Inverclyde and Inverclyde Council, the project is funded through the Big Lottery Fund in Scotland as part of ‘Our Place’ funding stream. By taking a strategic approach to limited funded and by working with a range of partners, Big Lottery aims to develop ways in which local partners can match investment to community need.

'Our Place' consulted with the local community and identified issues such as drug and alcohol misuse as well as a lack of activities and opportunities as key priorities for discussion. Necessary improvements included activities for young people, employment and training opportunities and community learning opportunities.

EAGER aims to strengthen communities in Greenock Central and East through increasing their ability to influence and direct change in their local areas. The programme works with both individuals and community groups to help them identify what they want to achieve and develop the skills necessary to accomplish it effectively. EAGER will support and develop community groups to ensure that the views of those who require the services have an input into their design.



Following the speakers contributions, those attending split into discussion groups and were consulted on the SWC's 2013 Roadshow questions.

What opportunities are there for formal and informal learning, training and education in your area?

Some community centres offer short 'taster' courses, which allow people to get involved with learning in the hope that they will go on to undertake more formal education. These do not always, however, carry accreditation, which can be off-putting.

"You're not going to invest time and energy into going along to a course if you're going to have nothing to show at the end of it."

Many of the qualifications available are not considered to be particularly useful for accessing employment, for example a food hygiene certificate. However, attending these classes has been beneficial for women on an informal level, as women can learn through involvement in the community. Skills such as confidence and team work can be passed on just by spending time with each other. More needs to be done, however, to encourage women to learn at a higher level, so that the confidence gained is also backed up by qualifications.

"If you train women, not only can they work but more jobs will be created as well. It's about taking a more coordinated approach to things to get the best out of everyone."

Despite the availability of education at a local level, there is a certain amount of apathy towards attending classes. Funding for training is there, however it can be very difficult to *"get people through the door"*. There are, for example, IT courses available, which not only teach people skills but also promote social interaction. There is a feeling that publicity for these may not reach groups who would benefit the most. Many who have not had positive experiences of education at an early age are disillusioned and are unwilling to attend as a result. Many of the opportunities for adults are 'leisure courses', which offer little in the way of the qualifications that employers look for.

There can be quite high drop-off rates for both formal and informal courses. The lack of part-time courses, the cost, limited childcare and public transport issues are off-putting for many. Some of the options available are marketed well, however *“when you actually get into it, you realise there’s really nothing to the course.”*

Women who take up traditionally ‘male’ courses often face barriers. For example, the only woman studying basic car mechanics felt she had no option but to leave, as the men would get frustrated with her progress and make sexist remarks. If more women taught these courses, perhaps more women would choose to pursue them.

James Watt college covers Inverclyde and is the main formal learning centre in the area, offering a range of opportunities for education. Most of the courses are, however, based centrally in Greenock, which can make them difficult for people from smaller, more outlying towns and villages to access.

There is not enough information available about accessing education. Those applying are provided with very little assistance with regards to completing forms, which can be discouraging. Similarly, once courses are completed, the ‘next steps’ into employment are not always explained. For example, women who have gained qualifications in construction are not necessarily told about applying for a ‘CSCS’ card, which is issued to workers for the improvement of their level of work, to ensure safety and also as identification.

Colleges often focus on the number of students applying for particular courses as these are the most cost effective. This can, however, limit options for those looking to access or progress in education. Many young women in the area are obtaining hair and beauty qualifications because *“that’s all that’s available to them”*. Qualifications in certain areas can also become ‘out of date’, which is detrimental to women who may take time out after studying or while they are in employment to have a family.

The current economic climate also has an impact. There are very few jobs available and for many committing to a course is *“just not worth it”* if it is unlikely they will be able to secure employment at the end. Jobs which are available in the public and voluntary sectors are subject to cuts and funding reductions.

“People want long-term employment. The problem is that jobs these days have no security.”

The Community Jobs Fund was highlighted. This is a scheme where 16-25 year olds are placed in jobs which they are paid for through Scottish Government funding. Young people receive training either ‘on site’ or at the local college one day per week, as well as being given help to look for jobs so that they gain employment once the placement ends. This is seen as a *“positive opportunity”* and is welcomed.

Childcare is one of the most significant barriers for women who wish to access education, learning or training.

“Women can’t just drop everything and get a job or start a course. They really have to consider the financial aspects of sending their kids to nursery.”

There are a significant number of people in Inverclyde who undertake unpaid caring roles, the majority of whom are women. They must be given the opportunity to personally progress and to take up training and development and the importance of this must be recognised.

Have any changes to services, facilities and welfare benefits affected you, your family and your community as a whole?

Changes to welfare benefits brought about by the UK Coalition Government are having a significant impact on families throughout the area.

“I know there are a lot of people who are really worried about what’s going to happen to them.”

Certain sections of the media can portray benefit claimants in a negative light, using words such as *“scroungers”*, without fully understanding the stress and anxiety within families and communities who rely on the money they receive. Clarity is required both for those who receive benefits but also those who do not, in order to make them understand that those who rely on state support do not all have *“an easy ride”*.

There is concern that the physical and mental health of benefit claimants will suffer as a result of the new measures. Stories about people attempting suicide are already coming to light.

“The worst thing is that the changes will definitely affect women more. They’re having the money they rely on to bring up their kids cut without any say or control. Families may have to start moving in together in overcrowded conditions so that they can pool their finances. It’s like Victorian times.”

Lone parents will be forced to seek work once their youngest child reaches the age of five. The high cost and limited availability of childcare will not be taken into consideration, therefore women who are unable to find nursery provision to suit working hours or vice versa could face sanctions and removal of benefits.

Applications will be completed and managed by individuals online. Not everyone has access to the internet or the skills to use a computer. There is no indication that those in this situation will be given any additional help and support to fill in forms. Overall, there is not enough information available to fully understand how the system works. Claimants are finding out on a *“bit by bit basis”* and are unwilling to ask further questions in case they face cuts or removal of support.

The way in which benefits will be administered is also causing concern. Previously, each person in a household made an individual claim, however under the new system the benefit will go to the household overall. The likelihood is that the man will receive the money. This has the potential to put women at risk of having little or no financial independence, particularly if their partner is abusive or controlling.

Universal Credit, which will replace several other benefits, such as Jobseekers Allowance and Tax Credits, will be paid monthly in arrears. Previously, individual payments were made on a weekly basis to claimants. Under the old system, housing and council tax benefits were paid directly to the landlord. These will now go directly to the claimant. Families may end up in debt as a result of these changes.

“Women are used to managing their money in a certain way, getting small payments throughout the month which spreads their finances. There will be so many who fall into rent arrears or have to rely on pay day loans because they don't know how to handle a lump sum once a month.”

Parents of disabled children who previously qualified for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) will not necessarily be entitled to support under Personal Independence Payment (PIP), which replaces the previous benefit. Under the new system, interviews which determine whether payments will be awarded tend to focus on physical mobility.

Children with conditions which have little or no physical impediments, such as Autism and Asperger's syndrome, are therefore not deemed to satisfy the criteria set out to determine the 'level of disability' necessary to qualify for PIP. The complex needs of these children, and those with other such conditions, are not being taken into consideration and their parents are losing out as a result.

The rise in foodbanks in the area is considered to be one of the consequences of the Welfare Reform measures. More families are forced to turn to these than ever before. Local communities are *“pulling together”* to try and help them. For example in one area a hot food van was funded and was able to provide a hot meal once a week.

“So many women were just grateful that, in the run up to Christmas, they could guarantee that they and their kids would eat well at least once a week.”

The introduction of the 'bedroom tax', whereby those in receipt of housing benefit will have a certain amount of it deducted if they are deemed to have a 'spare' bedroom, is considered to be an *“absolute disgrace”*. It is affecting a lot of people across Inverclyde and arrears are building up as a result. The tax is having a particular impact on disabled people, who are subject to significant cuts in the money they receive, as well as 'fit for work' interviews. They often need an extra room to accommodate a carer and are extremely worried that they may lose part of their housing benefit.

“It's just another poll tax, made by people who will never be affected by it.”

There are a lot of empty properties in the area which could be used to accommodate more social housing tenants. Homes are supposed to have a 120 day turnaround from vacation to re-letting, however many lie empty for much longer. Most of the accommodation which is empty has two or three bedrooms. There are very few single occupancy homes available.

“How can the Council evict people who can't pay the bedroom tax if there are no one bedroom houses to put them into?”

There needs to be a better link between education and benefits. Students in receipt of a bursary to help them through their studies do not qualify for any assistance with housing, council tax etc. In many cases they would be 'better off' relying on benefits than pursuing any kind of study.

"It makes you question the point of trying to better yourself through qualifications if you're going to be financially worse off. That's no incentive to get into education or work."

People are encouraged to volunteer to up-skill and become involved with in the community. There is, however, a lack of affordable, accessible childcare to allow people to take up these opportunities. Local Authority funded nursery places for three and four year olds are not always available locally, which means parents have to travel to access provision. If this is not possible, for example because of poor public transport, then the parents are unable to volunteer or go back into work.

Cuts to public services are impacting on people and their lifestyles overall. Attendance at classes and community activities are dwindling, because people *"either can't afford to go or just don't have the time"*. The importance of keeping physically and mentally well cannot be underestimated and participation in, for example, exercise classes, are a good way of promoting social inclusion.

"It's very easy for people to fall into, or back into, depression if they don't have anything to look forward to."

Jobs in the public sector, in which women predominate, are subject to cuts and redundancies. Those who remain in the workforce are under additional stress as they now have to do the job of more than one person, sometimes in fewer hours and more often than not with no wage rise.

There are concerns that services will *"simply disappear"* because of cuts. Many of these important community facilities are run through voluntary organisations, which rely on precarious funding. Services which offer advice and assistance are vital, particularly in the current financial climate. For example the local carers centre used to have a waiting list of two weeks to see a financial advisor. Waiting times have now increased to two and a half months. Welfare Reform measures will mean an increased reliance on these services and that should be recognised.

"There are so many organisations going after the same pots of money. It's only natural that some will go as a result. The impact of their removal is never fully considered."

Health services in Inverclyde come under the umbrella of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. Some specialist services are located centrally and those who require further consultation and treatment through these have to travel to Paisley or Glasgow. This can be stressful for those who rely on public transport, or who are provided with patient transport, which must pick up people from various different areas.

"If you're one of the first on the bus you can be waiting for two hours before you even get to the hospital."

Care for the Elderly has also been subject to cuts. Care workers, the majority of whom are women, are given strict timescales which they must adhere to. This can cause further isolation for older people, who may not see anyone other than the carer for ten minutes a day. These timescales also put pressure on the workers, who feel they are unable to do their job fully in the short time periods allocated.

Both the Better Together and Yes Scotland campaigns are setting out their vision for Scotland's future. What kind of Scotland do you want to see after the vote?

"We need to see a more positive, fairer and more equal Scotland where communities look out for one another."

More information about what would be done in areas such as education, social housing and employment opportunities, all of which are important issues in Inverclyde, is necessary. A shift from reliance on benefits into well-paid employment with accessible, affordable and appropriate childcare as well as strong public transport links is vital.

"Stop spending money to make us look better and start spending it on things that matter to people."

Pensions and taxes are two key areas which would require further exploration if Scotland were to become independent. Women are concerned about the increasing retirement age and payment of state pension. More clarity round this is necessary.

Gender equality must rank highly on the list of priorities for both campaigns. Women, young women in particular, need more positive role models. One of the best ways to achieve this would be to have more women in positions of power, who would ensure that the rights and needs of women are considered in policy and decision making processes. The need for 50/50 representation at this level cannot be underestimated.

Changes to the justice system should also be considered, ensuring fairer sentencing, particularly for women offenders who are seen to *"be given much harsher sentences than men"*. The focus should be on rehabilitating offenders and providing support and assistance for repeat offenders to *"break the cycle"*.

Refugees and asylum seekers should be welcomed. Ignorance and misinformation, often perpetuated by the media, can cause ill feeling towards those who seek safety in Scotland. They are unfairly targeted and subject to abuse. More needs to be done to make people aware of the positive aspects of immigration.

What one thing could improve your local area?

- Job creation - *“this creates more than just jobs - it means the economy in the area will grow, as the more people earn the more they spend”*.
- Tighter controls for traffic in the town.
- Funding for initiatives like community gardens, which improve community spirit and keep younger generations involved.
- Cheaper, more affordable and flexible public transport systems.
- Traffic lights at the A78 road which comes out of Inverkip, which at present is *“extremely dangerous”*.
- Improve children’s health through promotion of healthy eating and cooking lessons.
- Improved safety and security for women, who often have to *“think twice”* about going out in the evenings because of antisocial behaviour in their neighbourhood.
- Safe, affordable housing.
- More affordable activities for young people.
- Encouragement to attend training courses which have proper accreditation and improve employment chances.
- Provision of proper health facilities so that people who are unwell do not have to travel long distances to access services.

Conclusions

Following on from the discussions, women asked the SWC to submit recommendations to the Scottish Government, relevant Ministers and Representatives at all Government levels. Copies will also be distributed to Non-Governmental Organisations.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy.

This is achieved in a number of different ways - through roadshow, round table, conference and celebratory events. Following each event a report is compiled and issued to women who attend and relevant policy and decision makers.

The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.

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