

An electrifying celebration of International Women's Day at Holyrood

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ON a gloriously sunny Saturday in Edinburgh, Scotland's Parliament is bustling with noise and excitement. The MSPs may not be in attendance but there is palpable energy in the entrance area as groups of women attach their name badges and introduce themselves to one another.

Four hundred women have gathered at Holyrood to attend the Scottish Women's Convention annual International Women's Day celebration. They will have the chance to hear speeches from influential women in public life and network with other women. The day's speakers include Nicola Sturgeon, Elaine C Smith and Baroness Annabel Goldie.

As women fill the garden lobby and chat over cups of tea and sausage rolls, the atmosphere is one of eager anticipation for the day ahead. Conversation bubbles all around as the gathered attendees discuss everything from Brexit and Irish politics to the stifling heat in the room.

International Women's Day is an opportunity for activism and advocacy: to protest, celebrate and shine a light on gender inequality. In recent years, though, it has also been used as a marketing ploy by companies who show their commitment to equality through vague platitudes and photos of their female employees – but who are far less willing to take steps to address the pay gap, tackle harassment and introduce flexible working.

The theme for this year's event is Celebrating 20 Years of the Scottish Parliament and on her 20th birthday, she's looking bonny. One young woman jokes that the bright, airy chamber has great lighting for selfies. As I look around, I see many women taking photos: both of themselves at the MSPs desks, and the arresting sight of the familiar chamber filled with rows and rows of women.

It's one of the first things Sturgeon mentions as the rapturous applause dies down and she begins her speech.

"If more parliaments around the world looked like this, the world would be a better place."

Her speech echoes the conversations I've heard between women today. She speaks about the legislative successes of the Scottish Parliament and acknowledges the role that women and women's groups have had in instigating much of the progress we've made.

But there is more still to be done.

She points to the sobering statistic that three in four girls and young women report anxiety about experiencing sexual harassment. She reminds us that we won't come close to having an equal society "while women live with that fear".

To those who criticise the First Minister for her commitment and focus on gender inequality, she had a message: "I've got news for you, I'm not going to stop any time soon."

The chair of the Scottish Women's Convention, Agnes Tolmie, gives an honest and invigorating speech on the need for political courage. To loud applause she remarks upon the current political turmoil "not of our own making" and urges Holyrood to "be bold – and remember who you represent".

She speaks of hope and optimism and highlights some of Holyrood's recent achievements, such as the ground-breaking Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Bill and the cross-party work to eradicate period poverty.

"Sisters, how can we not feel proud of what we have achieved? Women have made the difference."

The importance of these conversations and events to discuss inequality cannot be underestimated. It is the joy – and necessity – of women-only spaces that they facilitate meaningful dialogue, free from the derailment and abuse that such discourse attracts on social media.

As inspiring as events like these are, there's not a woman in the room who doesn't wish they weren't necessary. Sturgeon put it bluntly during her speech when she said that if we are back in the chamber for the 30th, 40th or 50th birthday of the Scottish Parliament and still discussing these problems, society will have let down its girls.

The hundreds of women here are diverse. They are of all ages and backgrounds and properly representative of the cultural, religious and ethnic composition of modern Scotland. The speakers cover everything from child abuse, sexual violence, gender imbalance and menopause and the thread that unites them all is one of action and activism.

Sometimes, the most effective activism comes from the quiet conversations shared between women. Political commentator and comedian Ayesha Hazarika gives a hilarious speech where she takes precision aim at Donald Trump, Nigel Farage and other such architects of chaos. It is only when she begins to speak of "imposter syndrome" that the chamber goes quiet.

"It's that little voice in your head that says you're not good enough. I've heard it, Nicola Sturgeon has heard it."

As the First Minister and the rest of us nod along, Ayesha dispenses some advice. "Don't listen to it. You are good enough. Tell the voice you can't come to the phone right now and they need to call back later."

The thing about imposter syndrome – which is a largely gendered affliction – is that every woman who experiences it thinks that she's the only one. We look at confident, successful women and think they must have reached that mental peak of self-assurance.

Before the event began, I spoke to one of the attendees about imposter syndrome and how harmful it can be. Marie, an outreach worker from Glasgow, told me that since she has started participating in events with Scottish Women's Convention, she has found the confidence to speak up more. She shows me something that she has written on a piece of paper and brought with her to the event.

It says: "Empower women to move forward and bring change and freedom in the future."

She tells me that in the past she has felt reluctant to speak at events for fear of how people might react but now she doesn't let fear guide her – or make her doubt whether her contribution is valuable.

Therein lies the beauty of events run by organisations such as the Scottish Women's Convention. Women try to carve out places and spaces for themselves within the strict parameters and conditions that are set by an unequal society.

When we come together, free of those expectations, we can be honest and learn from one another about our shared experiences.

There is something electric about all-women events and spaces. The atmosphere feels relaxed and supportive and as women raise their hands to ask questions of the speakers, they do so knowing that their contribution will have a respectful audience.

When the event ends, women spill onto the streets. The sun is still shining, and I get the sense that we are all leaving with a lot more optimism than we went in with.