

Kilmarnock Roadshow Report

**Mental
Health**

Childcare

**Low
Paid**

Disability

Work

**Social
Security**

**Public
Services**

Caring

Pensions

Schools

**Welfare
Reform**

Wednesday 21st November 2018

www.scottishwomensconvention.org

**email: info@scottishwomensconvention.org
or call 0141 339 4797**



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Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention held roundtable discussions at the Portmann Hotel in Kilmarnock on Wednesday 21st November in order to gauge what issues were the most important for local women. A number of points were raised throughout the day which affected Kilmarnock and the surrounding areas at both a local and national level. The work and community spirit of women to their communities cannot be underestimated. Policy makers should be aware of both the structural and societal issues that impact on women's inequality by incorporating their views and experiences.

Legislation and policy have a profound effect on women in their everyday lives as well as those of their families. This goes far beyond what is written at a policy level. In conducting the roadshow programme in local areas throughout Scotland, the SWC seeks to allow women to provide cohesive and adaptable solutions to the issues raised in order to transform the policy making agenda. The likes of housing, mental health issues and ongoing welfare reform should be seen as priority problems in the landscape of women's issues.

Failure to include the voices of women in the policy making process denigrates not only their experiences, but also links back to a systematic disassociation to fully work on equality for women of all ages and backgrounds. This report is intended to showcase the real situations faced by women everyday in a unique setting for both local and national policymakers and encourage women at a primary level to become more involved. It seeks to extoll the advantages of qualitative evidence from people who are most acutely affected by policy decisions but are often not part of the process.

The SWC would like to extend a warm thanks to all the women who attended on the day.



6 Key Points from Kilmarnock:

- **Employment opportunities continue to be limited in what were traditional mining towns in the area.**
- **Young women have to deal with increased pressure around body image, which is exacerbated through social media.**
- **More education around women's health, from a young age is essential.**
- **Women who have been away from work for a number of years struggle to enter, or re-enter, education or employment.**
- **Childcare provision does not fit with many of the jobs available to women. Prohibitively high costs often do not make work pay.**
- **Assessments for Universal Credit are un-necessarily complicated and stressful. The imposition of sanctions is extremely harmful for women and their families.**

Question One

Due to gendered inequality, women continue to face increasing financial pressure due to a number of issues, including: welfare reform, gender segregation in the workplace, lack of female representation publicly. Cuts to services have seen many positions reduced from full to part time or removed completely. Reforms such as the Tax Credit Two Child Limit – “rape clause” – and pension inequality are specifically targeted at women, often with little or no notice. Women often undertake low paid, low skilled jobs on a part-time basis, with little opportunity for training and development. Not only does this contribute to the gender pay gap, but more often than not pays poorly and is looked on as of very little value.

Have these issues impacted at a local level on access to health and social care services, availability of education and employment opportunities? How have the changes affected local women and communities?

Poverty and Social Security

Women who have been in receipt of state support via welfare benefits for a number of years are struggling with changes which have been made to the system, particularly with the introduction of Universal Credit (UC), which was rolled out through East Ayrshire from last year.

So many claimants who are now under the umbrella of UC, and as a result strict conditions and application requirements, are struggling to complete complex forms.

Key Issues

- Women face difficulties and barriers completing applications.
- Women have noted mixed experiences with Jobcentre workers, which should not be the case. All claimants should expect the same level of support.
- Face to face contact is preferable to telephone contact with the DWP.
- Poverty continues to be prevalent.

“They don’t even know how to switch a computer on, never mind have an email address, remember passwords or fill in lengthy, difficult applications.”

Claiming UC has left people *“constantly on edge”*. There is a continuous need to fill out forms, declaring extremely personal details, with little to no assurance of exactly what you will get on a month to month basis. Individuals feel that they have to justify every aspect of their lives in order to be paid money they are entitled to receive.

There are some excellent, highly committed work coaches within the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), who are there to assist individuals to move from benefits in to employment. These workers strive to do all that they can to ensure that women are given information about jobs that will actually be suitable for them and their circumstances, taking into account issues like childcare, other caring responsibilities, skills and confidence. While some claimants have had a positive experience like this, unfortunately not all are afforded the same level of support.

Women have reported bad experiences with DWP staff, particularly in situations where they are late for appointments or are unable to attend at short notice. There is often little sympathy or empathy displayed by officials. They seem less interested in finding out why the claimant could not attend and more focused on punishing them, via sanctions, whereby they lose the money they depend on.

“The staff aren’t interested to hear that you were late because the buses are unreliable so you’re at their mercy, or that you couldn’t get childcare. They don’t care if your mental health was so bad that there was no way you could get out of bed, let alone put clothes on and leave the house. It’s not that we don’t understand that we need to go to these appointments, it’s just that sometimes life gets in the way.”

Women expressed some understanding and sympathy for the stress and pressure that DWP/Jobcentre workers are placed under with regards to the administration of benefits. They have, however, made clear that this did not excuse the way in which claimants can be treated. Women have been left feeling humiliated, degraded and de-humanised following meetings with officials.

Difficulties also come when claimants are directed towards call centres, rather than face-to-face contact with staff. Women often do not have enough credit on their mobile phones to make lengthy calls, and often do not have access to a landline or any other phone to get in contact. It was seen to be easier to explain circumstances to a person directly, as opposed to over the phone.

“I can get quite flustered over the phone and I can’t always hear what the person is saying on the other line. I would rather have these discussions with a real person, but that’s not always possible. I’ve given up on trying to fight for what I’m entitled to because it’s just too stressful.”

The impact of UC on women’s mental health has been described as *“devastating”*. Many struggle to make ends meet, and the little money they are left with once bills and debts have been paid is not enough for them to be able to go out and do anything. Social isolation is common amongst these women. Some have admitted to resorting to criminal behaviour, such as shoplifting, in order to be able to feed their children or put clothes on their back.

“It leaves people with nothing, and when you’ve got nothing, you’ve literally got nothing to lose.”

Too many women and their families, many of whom are in work, are living in poverty. A complicated benefits system and the increased use of precarious work means that there is no guarantee of a fixed income each month. The levels of poverty seen in some parts of each area are described as *“Victorian”*, and the lasting impact will be seen for generations still to come.

Key Requirements:

- Ensure dignity and respect is at the heart of all interactions between claimants and DWP/Jobcentre workers.
- More help should be available to those completing benefit applications, with an awareness and understanding of individual IT skills and abilities.
- Roll out examples of best practice where Work Coaches have been proven to make a positive impact on peoples lives.
- More training for DWP staff around treatment of individuals, as well as an understanding of the complex issues faced by many.
- Recognise the prevalence of real poverty and the devastation this causes for families and communities overall. More needs to be done to tackle root causes, with the implementation of proactive rather than reactive strategies to do this.

Employment

Key Issues Raised

- Women in more rural parts of the area struggle to be able to access decent employment.
- Little information available for women looking to change their career or get back into work after raising a family.
- Prohibitively high childcare costs make it difficult for women to work.

East Ayrshire has a large rural population, made up of former mining communities, which were “*decimated and depleted*” with the loss of traditional industry.

“Local economies have never fully recovered from the pit closures.”

As a result, employment opportunities remain scarce. It can be difficult for women in particular to get into work. Jobs are available in larger towns, but poor public transport and a lack of childcare can seriously restrict women’s access.

Women who have worked in the same job for a number of years can find it difficult to move into other, better employment.

“I wouldn’t know where to go to find any information about confidence building, training, creating a CV, interview skills etc.”

In these circumstances, women are unlikely to go to the Jobcentre, as there is a perception the assistance available there is just for people who are looking for work or are on benefits. This type of situation also arises when women have taken extended time away from the labour market to raise their families. They may have had successful jobs prior to falling pregnant, but have been away from formal employment for so long that they would find it extremely difficult to take even the initial steps to get back into any type of job.

“You can go to the likes of Skills Development Scotland and they have loads of information about different jobs, the skills and qualifications you need, but nothing about how to actually go about getting them when you’ve not stepped foot in a workplace for years.”

Little value is placed on the hard work that goes into raising children and running a home and there is often a presumption that if a woman does not work then she has an easy life. Similarly, the skills gained within the home are not always recognised by prospective employers. They can attract criticism for not being in the labour market.

“In other countries, women are expected to stay at home and they’re respected for it. That’s not the case here though - so often we don’t have the choice to stay at home and when we do, we’re looked down on. It’s the worst of both worlds.”

The high cost of childcare means that many of the jobs which are available do not pay enough to make it worthwhile to take them. So often women have to take a job that fits their circumstances rather than being able to do something that they actually want to.

“Why should that still be the case in this day and age? The workplace was built by men, for men, to suit men. It was never designed to incorporate women - we’ve never been more than an afterthought.”

“You could go back to work say two days a week from when your baby is young, for example between 3 and 6 months old. That would be much more beneficial than being off for up to a year and then having to leave your child when you haven’t really done so before.”

This type of idea would require a significant increase in workplace flexibility, as well as much better, cheaper childcare provision for children under the age of 3. The result would be a much better work/life balance overall.

The lack of accessible, affordable, appropriate childcare, particularly for children under the age of 3, is a significant barrier to women getting into and progressing in decent employment. There are also issues around the availability of after school care for children, particularly for those families who do not have a support network close by.

Where aftercare is available, it tends to be provided within the school itself, which means that children are within the same building and environment for most of the day. An alternative way of providing after school care would be to tie it closely with sports and other hobbies, which would still ensure that children are looked after until their parents can collect them, would break up their day and would allow them to try new activities.

“This would require more joined-up working between Council departments but would be so beneficial for both children and their parents.”

Key Recommendations:

- More support and guidance should be readily available to women who want to build their CVs, learn interview techniques and build confidence so that they can change career or get back into work after having children.
- Value must be placed on the unpaid work that women carry out, recognising the skills needed to raise a family and run a house.
- More accessible, affordable, appropriate childcare, designed to fit flexibly around the needs of parents, is vital in order to allow women to participate actively in the labour market.
- Increased flexibility within workplaces to allow women to balance work and family life.

Health

“We are the hormones we’re made of - we’re held hostage to them and they define every aspect and stage of our lives.”

There is not enough information and education around the specific health issues that women face throughout their lives - from periods, to gynaecological conditions such as endometriosis and polycystic ovaries (PCOS), to pregnancy and onto the menopause.

Key Issues Raised

- Lack of full and comprehensive knowledge and understanding of women’s bodies and health issues.
- Poor mental health is an *“epidemic”* but there is not enough support available aimed at prevention and alternative therapies.

While basic education is provided within schools, it does not go into enough detail about the range of conditions and the way that these can impact women's lives. Girls are taught about a regular menstrual cycle and the female reproductive system, but are not told about what happens if, for example, they have irregular, painful periods. Women also struggle to take concerns about their reproductive systems due to fears that they may not be believed about the levels of pain they are in.

"We're told that it's just our bodies and so we have to 'suck it up' and get on with things. It's extremely difficult to get a PCOS or endometriosis diagnosis and when you eventually have either of those conditions confirmed, the doctor won't do anything unless you're trying for a baby. Male doctors are the worst. They just can't comprehend how painful it actually is."

More and more women are seeking help for mental health issues. Some have reported positive experiences with their GP, having been treated with understanding and compassion. Others, however, have found that their doctor does not fully understand the complex nature of poor mental health and so have not been as empathetic. Either way, all of the women who have sought medical help have always been prescribed some form of medication in the first instance.

Many would have preferred more holistic therapies, or access to a counsellor or other forms of talking therapy. The waiting lists for these, however, are extremely long, which is not helpful when people are struggling. There are other ways to assist with poor mental health, such as through support groups within the community and third sector organisations.

"These groups are brilliant - they're a lifeline for people. But if you don't know that they exist, or don't have the capacity to take the first steps to go along, you're never going to be able to benefit."

It is also important to note that many of these vital services depend on women being able to access public transport to get to them, especially in more rural and outlying areas. Individuals progress and mental wellbeing can be seriously impacted if a bus is late, does not turn up at all, or people do not have the money to pay the ever-increasing fare. Loneliness and isolation is a huge issue, affecting all ages and older women in particular, as men tend to die younger and so the women are "*left behind*" with little to no networks. Not being able to talk to or interact with others on a regular basis is extremely damaging to an individual's mental health.

Key Recommendations:

- Better education, from a young age, about women's bodies and the complex and diverse issues faced at all stages of life.
- GPs and other healthcare professionals should have a better understanding of women's bodies, recognising the often debilitating pain that many face as a result of undiagnosed conditions and lack of treatment once they are confirmed.
- More holistic approaches to mental health issues are essential - medication is not always the most appropriate treatment and should not always be relied on in the first instance.
- Support groups and organisations should be more widely publicised.
- A joined-up approach to services is of paramount importance, with an emphasis on ensuring that public transport allows people to participate within their communities.

Question Two

The Scottish Government has made a commitment to invest in housing over the lifetime of this Parliament. Lack of quality, affordable homes whether for rent or to buy is a major issue. 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. Rising living and rent costs have led many women into rent arrears or eviction. The SWC is undertaking work around homelessness and housing for women throughout Scotland.

What are the key priorities in your area around housing and living costs? What should the Scottish Government be doing to help women and their families?

One of the key issues around housing in the area is affordability. Former council houses have been refurbished and made available for rent, but women have noted that these are expensive. A need for more diverse housing is also essential, taking into account the changing nature of the population and family sizes, as well as issues such as accessible homes for disabled people.

Social housing lists are extremely long and as a result many live in unsuitable accommodation for a long time.

"Women can be on the list for years, but never quite reach the top. They're living in overcrowded conditions, or in homes which are damp or in a state of disrepair, because under allocation processes they don't quite qualify for the type of housing they really should be living in."

Women commended the Scottish Government for stopping the 'Right to Buy' scheme, which saw high numbers of council housing being sold. This has depleted council housing stock, with many women commenting on the fact that the "good houses" were sold during this time, leaving what is considered "undesirable accommodation" for rent. There has been little housing built to replace that which was sold on.

There are a lot of properties available for rent privately in the area. There are, however, issues with regards to the cost of these homes, which are high, as well as few alternatives available which mean that families are forced to pay for this type of accommodation. Landlords are not held accountable for the state of the property and they often do not undertake mandatory inspections to ensure the safety of buildings, fixtures and fittings.

"The flats aren't great by any stretch, but if you've got no alternative, then you put up with the things that are wrong."

Women who have left their family homes, with their children, due to domestic abuse, can find it difficult to access alternative accommodation. While services are provided via local Women's Aid groups, they only have limited resources and, as such, are simply unable to help everyone.

When women present at the Council to request a house in these circumstances, they often do so without any third party assistance or support. They are made to keep telling housing officers about what has happened to them, which can re-traumatise survivors. Those who have lived within their family homes for a number of years are unfamiliar with the process of seeking accommodation via their Local Authority, which can put them at a disadvantage.

“It’s not easy for women who have never had any dealings with the likes of housing officers before. They don’t know what information they need, or what will be expected of them. They have left abusive, controlling relationships and feel extremely vulnerable, but little consideration is given to their circumstances. They should never be made to feel like they’re only saying they are leaving domestic abuse so they can get a house from the Council, but that’s the reality.”

Key Recommendations:

- A focus on the creation of affordable, appropriate houses is essential, in order to replace the housing stock lost by Right to Buy.
- Consideration of allocation processes, ensuring that women and their families are not left living in unsuitable accommodation.
- A cap on rent in the private sector, coupled with stricter controls and requirements on landlords, to ensure that tenants are not being exploited or living in unsafe, dangerous accommodation.
- More support for women seeking Council accommodation after leaving an abusive relationship.
- Training for housing officers around domestic abuse and the impact this has on women.



Question 3: What are the key priorities for women in your local area?

- More housing built in the town centre, close to amenities, education and employment opportunities.
- More encouragement for people to shop locally and support local businesses.
- There are currently very few activities available for teenagers and young adults. Work needs to be done to find out what they want, so that services are provided which meet their needs.
- Classes should be available locally which offer basic skills for people such as cooking and budgeting.
- Be more inventive about Modern Apprenticeships, especially for encouraging more young women into careers in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths).

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.

2018 Roadshow Programme:

Stornoway

Dundee

Paisley

Kilmarnock

SWC 2018 Conferences:

Sexual Harassment

Health

Homelessness and
Housing

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