



Livingston Roadshow 17th September 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 roadshow event in Livingston in order to meet with women and to discuss important local issues.

The roadshow was held at the Howden Park Centre on Tuesday 17th September 2013 and was attended by women from throughout the area. 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 as well as 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.

Angela Moohan, Councillor for Livingston North

Angela is one of only seven women Councillors in West Lothian from a total of thirty three, which equates to 22% of the elected members. This figure is an improvement from the previous election term, when only 13% of Councillors were women.

Women make up the majority of staff in West Lothian Council and tend to be the main community activists throughout the area. They play a significant role in caring for children, work tirelessly to improve children's education, volunteer at playgroups and are active in tenants associations.

“Women are the backbone of our communities.”

Despite this level of involvement at community level, women continue to face a number of barriers in the workplace and education, as well as difficulty in entering public life.

Women who work in West Lothian Council have often been streamed into lower waged, low skill jobs. This has a direct impact on wider issues of poverty. Steps are, however, being taken to address this imbalance.

“We've used female role models in colleges, schools and Council Partnerships to try and encourage young women to widen their options.”

Another positive steps in addressing barriers for women is around the pay gap. Initial studies show that West Lothian Council currently has the lowest gender pay gap of all 32 Local Authorities in Scotland.

“Despite this we know there is still a lot of work to be done.”

Many women say that they are not interested in politics, however in reality this is not the case. Angela stressed the importance of women engaging with their Local Authority and becoming involved in decisions which impact on them at a community level.

“Women are at the sharp end of political decisions on a daily basis.”

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.

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

Cuts to education budgets have led to the reduction, and in some cases removal, of part-time, evening and leisure classes. This has had a negative impact on women in the area, who had been able to gain skills and qualifications through studying this way. The leisure classes which are still available can be expensive and *“out of reach”* for those on low incomes.

Funding is measured on attainment and on leavers moving onto ‘positive destinations’, such as further training or university. As a result, courses with high pass rates are more likely to be funded for more places.

Evening or leisure classes do not carry the same results as more formal, full time courses and are usually the first to be cut.

These were well attended, particularly by older people, who not only achieved qualifications but were also able to interact with others. Their removal has had a significant detrimental impact on individuals who enjoyed this method of study.

“It’s all about employability for young people, and not about ensuring that students of any age are able to take up courses which will benefit them for a number of different reasons. All that’s open to us these days is computer classes.”

Many students excel in more vocational subjects, however have been unable to pursue these at school due to a focus on academia and on getting young people into further and higher education. When exam results are announced, the media tend to focus more on those who have obtained high grades and do little to promote supporting those who have not.

There is little support available for young people with additional support needs, such as dyslexia. More encouragement is necessary throughout school to ensure they are able to go on to college or university.

If young people choose to pursue a non-academic career they often have to attend college one or two days a week. The lack of positive experiences throughout their earlier education means that many *“just don’t want to be there”*. This can result in many ‘dropping out’ with little or no assistance as to how they can return at a later date or take up another course.

This can also be the case with students who are afforded little support with regards to childcare or if they have physical or mental health issues.

“Is it a positive destination if continuing the course affects your health?”

Students often leave courses because they have decided at a young age on a career path, however the reality is different from that which they expected. West Lothian college is working with these young people in order to ascertain why they left their course and to explore other options available to them. This is seen as a positive step.

The focus on places in education, training and employment for young people has made it more difficult for older students to gain places in further and higher education. This has an impact on older women, many of whom are looking to up-skill and re-train as a result of job losses in the public sector, where they may have been employed for all of their working life. There is a risk of *“isolating”* older women from education and training as a result.

These women often do not have Standard Grades or Highers. In some cases this is a result of the qualifications being called something else and in others the women left school before they could finish their education.

“Accreditation of prior learning, as well as experience of working, should be taken into account. I’ve worked all my life - I may not have a Higher English but I have a wealth of experience and this should be considered when I’m applying for jobs.”

A number of positive examples of training and vocational courses were given, such as through the trade union UNISON for its members and the Living in Safe Accommodation (LISA) project. Community centres across West Lothian also offer some courses. Many of these are also, however, geared towards getting people into employment and have less of a focus on what are considered ‘soft skills’.

“Real informal learning opportunities for women through West Lothian Council have been hijacked by the employability agenda.”

There is also a lack of knowledge and communication between services and women. As a result many are unaware of the opportunities which are actually available to them. It can also be expensive to travel to attend courses and childcare is not often provided. These barriers can make attendance difficult, particularly for those on low incomes.

“It all depends on what’s available to support women into education. Transport is such a huge thing - if you want to go to an evening class and don’t have a car then you will really struggle.”

Women who have completed formal education and entered into jobs in the subjects they have studied can still face significant barriers. Those returning from maternity leave often find that their job has been changed, or that it is not suitable for part-time or job share working.

Two incomes in a family are considered necessary, more often than not in order to meet the high cost of childcare. If a woman works part-time, her full wage can be taken up paying for a private nursery.

“It’s always the woman who makes the sacrifice. It’s even more difficult for lone parents.”

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

Welfare Benefits

Changes brought about by the UK Coalition Government’s Welfare Reform measures are having an impact throughout West Lothian. In particular, the so called **bedroom tax** is hitting women and families hard.

There is simply not enough social housing in the area to meet demand for tenants.

“Social housing is not a viable option for people any more. All of the decent homes were bought during the ‘right to buy’ era and the council didn’t bother to build much more.”

There are very few one bedroom properties for people who are deemed to have a spare bedroom to move into. They are, therefore, forced to pay the bedroom tax through no fault of their own. Older people who have lived in their homes for a number of years and have a spare room for their families to stay in when they visit should not be penalised through this “unfair” tax. There are also concerns that moving people to one bedroom houses, away from the communities they have lived in, will lead to further social isolation.

“The bedroom tax and housing policy is contributing to the erosion of communities.”

One woman raised concerns about having to pay the bedroom tax and how this would leave her financial situation. She was told to get rid of her dog and use the money she saved from paying for food, vets bills etc to pay for her spare bedroom. She has no family and the dog is her only company.

“This is another example of how the welfare reform measures are an attack on the most vulnerable.”

Very little consideration is made for those with disabilities, who are often offered accommodation which is completely inappropriate.

“Despite a letter from a doctor confirming that I needed a house on the ground floor because of walking difficulties, the council still tried to give me one with stairs as it was all that they had.”

West Lothian Council do not have a non-eviction policy for tenants who are unable to pay the bedroom tax. They are, however, open and willing to support them as much as they can if they engage with housing staff.

Changes to the way that housing benefit will be administered are also causing concern for women. Previously, payments for housing and council tax benefit were given directly to the landlord. Under the new regime, the claimants themselves will receive this money directly in one monthly payment. There is the real possibility that this will lead to rent arrears for many women, who currently manage tight budgets and rely on small pockets of money throughout the month.

“If we have another bad winter then I won’t be paying my rent. The money will go towards my gas and electricity instead. I can’t cope with my kids being cold again.”

Services which offer advice and support to those affected by welfare reform measures, such as the Advice Shop run by West Lothian Council, are “stretched to breaking point”.

Other such services are in a similar position, with staff members struggling to meet demand. Many are off sick with work related stress.

Food Banks

The rise of foodbanks is attributed in part to the changes brought about under new welfare reform measures. There are many families, both working and non-working, who are having to rely on these facilities to be able to eat.

“It’s 2013 and we are seeing more and more foodbanks opening up. It’s heartbreaking. Why, in this day and age, are children still going hungry?”

Caring

The majority of those who undertake caring roles, both paid and unpaid, are women. They face increased burdens as services are cut and welfare benefit payments are changed.

Home carers are expected to work to strict timescales due to cuts to public sector budgets. Jobs have been outsourced to private companies and women are expected to do the same job but under completely different terms and conditions.

“It’s like everything else - the cheaper it is the likelihood the council will sign up to that contract.”

They can spend as little as fifteen minutes in a day with an older person and often have to wash and dress them, as well as assist in any other way they need.

“Women who are home carers are finding it increasingly difficult to do their work. They didn’t get into the profession to rush into an old person’s house and rush out again without being able to take the time to speak to them and build a relationship.”

There are very few nursing homes in the area and many older women live in sheltered accommodation. These are no longer staffed by on-site wardens, but by managers who only work certain hours during the day. This leaves residents in a vulnerable position in the evenings and at weekends.

“It’s important that when cut backs are made in health services that the people making the decisions think about services which are needed most in communities. Especially in the health service as right now there is a lack of resources, funding and staff.”

Staff in care homes, where they do exist, are also expected to work to ‘targets’ with regards the level of care they provide to residents. Much of the money they receive, despite being privately owned, rests on what are described as outcomes. A lot of these facilities were previously council owned.

“My mother is in a care home and we were asked to fill out a survey regarding the levels of care she receives. The questions began with ‘does the service user ...’ - my mother is a person, not a service user. They should use better language.”

Local Services

Cuts to public sector budgets have had an impact on local services. Facilities such as community centres and youth groups have had funding reduced and in some cases removed.

“There were really good youth groups which were well attended but they just can’t afford to do everything they used to because of reduced funding. It’s such a shame because with these groups young people were able to experience new things.”

Services which women relied on in the past, such as after school and holiday clubs, have also become more expensive to attend as subsidies have been taken away. Women are having to put one child into a holiday club for a morning and the other child in for the afternoon as they cannot afford to send both all day.

“People don’t realise nowadays that when women say I’m skint, they genuinely mean it.”

Transport

The opening of the Bathgate train line was cited as a positive step. Concerns were raised, however, about Uphall station. There is no footbridge to cross platforms, meaning a long walk either along the road and under a bridge or through a wooded area to get to the other platform. Bathgate station is much more accessible and some people will travel there instead of using the more local train station.

Travelling around West Lothian on a bus can be difficult, particularly routes from north to south of the area. Going further afield, for example to Glasgow and Edinburgh, would require travelling by train, which can be very expensive and as a result prohibitive for families on low incomes.

“It’s very difficult to go anywhere here on the bus. Where they are available, they are often not accessible for disabled people in wheelchairs or mothers with prams.”

The Scottish Pensioners Forum have been trying to introduce a Thistle card, which would mean that bus drivers would have to give older people using public transport time to get on the bus and to their seat before they drive away. This would be a positive add-on to the Concessionary Travel Scheme (free bus pass) which already exists.

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?

There has been much discussion about the referendum on Scotland's future in the media. Women have a huge role to play in ensuring they use their vote and are able to do so through relevant information about each option.

Services should be integrated in Scotland. Women's employment must not be thought of as a singular issue but should be linked with childcare, transport and education. Childcare should also encompass care before and after school - while it is important to place focus on early years, older children must not be forgotten.

More focus on the importance of communities and what they mean should be an important aspect of Scotland after the vote.

"I want to live in a country where neighbours know each other, can have a chat, and most of all know when others need help. It used to be like that. There's no reason why it can't be again."

Everyone who works should be paid at least a living wage. This would hopefully mean less reliance on welfare benefits, which are increasingly more difficult to claim and qualify for. Payment of a living wage would give more people the incentive to enter employment and has the potential to lift people out of poverty.

"I don't want to see children in this day and age going hungry. It's just not right."

At present, many women are only able to work certain hours and earn a certain amount of money in their job, as if they were to earn any more they could lose benefits. These are often relied upon, especially for childcare. A living wage, coupled with accessible, affordable and appropriate childcare, would open up more employment - and education - opportunities for women.

The decline in manufacturing industries in Scotland over the last few decades has seen unemployment across a number of sectors. Communities throughout the country have *"had their hearts torn out"* and women have borne the brunt of this. More job opportunities would be of real benefit.

"We need jobs which will grow local economies, so that communities can thrive again."

As well as more jobs, there should also be better access to training and Modern Apprenticeships, particularly for young women who wish to undertake what are considered 'non-traditional' roles, such as construction or plumbing.

Wider access to employment is also very important. Disabled people, and in particular disabled women, are disproportionately represented in workplaces. Those who are able to work find it “*very difficult*” to get into employment. More needs to be done to ensure there is equal access to jobs.

Issues such as more social housing and improved public transport should also be considered after the vote.

What one thing could improve your local area?

- A living wage.
- Accessible, affordable, good quality housing.
- More quality jobs that are permanent and have real long term prospects.
- Free wifi in all libraries.
- More tolerant and compassionate communities.
- More funding available for youth facilities and activities.
- Improved transport with better links to other areas.
- More transport in the evenings, so that people can travel safely between communities, particularly those who have no access to private transport.
- Accessible, affordable childcare.
- Improved local hospital services. *“Everything gets so centralised and services which were available in local communities are continuing to diminish.”*
- More assistance for young people with additional support needs, both in schools and going into further and higher education and employment.
- *“Zero hours contracts are awful. You have to wait day by day sometimes to see if you’re going to get a shift. They should be made illegal.”*
- More integration between the Local Authority and communities so that policies are reflective of local needs and requirements.
- *“There are so many empty shops in the high street in Bathgate and Livingston. Why don’t we turn these shops into community hubs and get more people onto our high streets?”*
- More support is needed for young people to get into employment which is sustainable and beneficial to them.

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.