

The Scottish Women's Convention's
report on a Roundtable event:

Single Sex Spaces



July 2022

Premise

The Scottish Women's Convention held an in person conference regarding Violence against Women and Girls and the topic of Single Sex Spaces came up when questions were asked to the panel of speakers. It became evident that this topic created strong feelings for women in the room. A few of the women were upset that their specific questions were not answered and expressed those feelings at the conference. It became clear that women wanted to discuss this topic further and get their views heard on why Single Sex Spaces are important for Women. We agreed at the conference to hold a roundtable event regarding this issue and invited the women to attend. We held the meeting on the 27th of May 2022 on Zoom.



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

Agnes Tolmie

Agnes opened the roundtable event by thanking the 14 women for attending and for sharing with us their experiences and their views. Agnes then opened up the roundtable for the women to discuss the issues they had concerning Single Sex Spaces and Male Violence Against Women and Girls.

Women who attended the roundtable - Discussion

Women raised the concern that they did not have accessible spaces to talk about their concerns concerning Single Sex Spaces and that talking about it brought about strong feelings, which often resulted in challenging situations where they felt they were being shut down and frozen out of the discussion on the matter.

“The opportunity to sit down and have discussions regarding the GRA have been limited. Engender were supposed to have an event on this which was cancelled and never rearranged a lot of women felt let down by this.”

“The reason this matters is that the GRA has affected every level of policy thereafter that the Scottish Government has been looking at.”

The woman felt that this had affected discussions on hate crime and even the forensic medical services bill. They felt there were issues that were not being addressed, or carried through in a way many women were hoping, purely because of considerations that were being looked at in gender rather than in sex.

“I think that if some of these things were teased out earlier it wouldn't be going to committee. There is so much information and competing ideas going around organisations, which are in the mind of politicians. It is still very poorly understood in terms of the ongoing and overall implications for women and girls going forward. We would just like more opportunities for discussions like this for it to be talked about in a calmer way and some of the individual elements teased out.”

One woman who has been working with an organisation and in the field of VAW stated

“This field has become very toxic with regards to this issue recently and many organisations are adopting policies because they feel these were the approved policies to adopt, without really following through to see what the end result of these were going to be”.

“There has been so much confusion which I believe has been deliberately created, but that at a fundamental level what they are looking at is what creates discrimination. What are the drivers of violence and what are the drivers of disadvantage? For many women that is their sex and there is so many things around sex that it is impossible to take out of consideration. From domestic violence and rape to things like pregnancy, motherhood, menopause, to medical trials and crash test dummies which have not been built on the female body. All these things are to do with our sex and not to do

with our gender. Many feminists believe ideas about gender is an ambition of social norms on women which are often used to keep us in our place so I resist as a point of principle that believing in these ideas is something which should be enshrined in law. The implications for what has been happening in advance of the GRA reform is that sex is being moved off the statue books”

A woman working in women's sector since 1981 specifically in the field of VAWG as a volunteer with different rape crisis centres stated.

“I have worked with women in poverty, women with addictions, women in prostitution and gypsy traveller women, right across the board. I retired last year. I was involved in writing and training on trauma informed investigation practices. I have lots of background in the field of VAWG. What women really want, and need is single sex spaces. I have come into contact with thousands and thousands of women over my time and without exception, that safe space is absolutely crucial to them. Because if we are looking at women who have been traumatised by male violence, we have to recognise that trauma does not recognise legislation. Trauma is there it is in our bodies and it does not recognise the fact that you are legislating that male-bodied persons can come into your service. I think the problem we face is that women will accommodate this, and they will accommodate men coming into spaces, but they will not come back to them. They will vote with their feet they will walk away and leave, and they will be silenced because we are all conditioned to accommodate and you will bend our wants and needs to males. We know that even though we might understand why someone wants to live as a woman. Rational thinking happens in the frontal lobe, but trauma doesn't it works in your limbic system and that's a survival strategy and that's where the recognition that you have a male-bodied person in a supposed safe space will be problematic. So women will leave the services they will walk away, they will go back to abusive partners, they will take their depression medication, they will self-medicate through drink or both and they will just shut up. You won't get statistics on this as they will just avoid services, they won't take up services they will just leave. This is because women are conditioned to be quiet that's really really important and why women need single sex spaces.”

Agnes asked if there was any evidence that males were using single sex spaces and if women were self-excluding because of this.

“We probably don't have clear reviewed research but the people who work in the service will have that evidence, we are able to provide that anecdotal evidence. It's really important to highlight that although organisations such as SWA and RCS have made statements about Trans gender access to these services no local RCS or local SWA groups were consulted on this, and I am able to speak as being on a board of one of these organisations. I have heard statements like across Scotland women agree but that may be at a national level but it is certainly not the case for local groups.”

Funding was talked about with regards to policy

“What they have had to do is capitulate, they have had to sign up to a trans inclusion policy in order to get their funding from the Scottish Government. When they were asked by some of the women’s organisations if an equality policy which took in every one of the protected characteristics was good enough they were told no, they had to have this equality policy and a trans inclusion policy. When asked why? Scottish Government said that this was their priority.”

“At local level we know what the priorities are, and we know what’s happening, but we will not find local organisations speaking out as they try to protect their services.”

Agnes asked if what the women were saying was that a number of organisations will comply with the type of requests that are being made to sign on the line for fear that they will lose their funding?

The women said Yes, “they will comply there is no doubt about that.”

A few women spoke up at this point about why they were now self-excluding from these services although they needed counselling and support and they said this was because of the GRA. They now have an intrinsic fear of males and they explained how this is negatively impacting every aspect of their lives from their home and family life to their work and daily living.

“I’m speaking in capacity as a survivor, and I really shouldn’t be having to raise this issue as a survivor nobody is listening, I’ve been to my MSP and the civil service to raise this issue and it takes a lot of guts to speak at these things especially when you’re affected by trauma. I have pretty much lived in fear my whole life due to male violence and that’s the impact of male violence it is not just something that happens when your 20 I’ve been impacted by male violence since then. It’s not in the past and gone. It is something that does not go away. Trauma stays with you.”

“My experience has led me to be traumatised and hyper vigilant to this day and this heightened sense of danger has impacted in all areas of my life. An example is my home I had to buy a home with a carpark space right outside the door, so I didn’t have to walk along a dark street on my own with my two young girls. I never have workmen in my house regardless of what’s broken I just can’t have them in the house. Until recently, I have also slept at night with my shoes on at night in my bed in case I was attacked. That’s what trauma actually is. I have been frightened and even the good men in my life such as my dad and my brothers who are good people, I have felt frightened even being in the car with them in the past. There is a real fear of men when you have experienced extreme violence. It is these kind of trauma responses which are acknowledged within the equality act 2010 that allow us to have single sex spaces that’s what these are for. They are for privacy, dignity, and safety and also to prevent women from being retraumatised. For survivors of male violence we desperately need single sex services this is a non-negotiable this is why I will not set foot in a rape crisis centre or a woman’s refugee anymore as they have not made it clear that there will be no Trans women in these single sex spaces.”

"I was working with women who had been abused and traumatised I was doing routine enquiries and signposting them to the services. Then I was coming home and putting my head down and not functioning. I was looking at social media and the newspapers I could see what our country our government and our politicians think about women like me and its not good enough and as a survivor of rape and multiple sexual assaults and coercive control where up is down and right is wrong and black is white and now male is female and man is women. I could see so many parallels where people conduct themselves around this issue where in my view they are adopting the tools of the abusers to bring us into line and to get what they want. I also want to reiterate about this coming from multiple directions my own employer is the NHS and they put out a policy about supporting our trans colleagues and in that policy they removed our single sex spaces and they hoped we wouldn't notice, mention it or push back against it. This policy was pulled by our health minister, in that policy it did state that men who did want to use our spaces might be cross dressers and it did say they may be doing this for erotic purposes. I am not making this up and I can send this to you. I could not believe as a survivor of rape, multiple sexual assaults, domestic abuse that works in an organisation which is primarily staffed by women, females that they were just sliding this out not thinking about the one ¼ of us who have almost certainly been sexually assaulted in our lifetime."

"I also want to talk about male voices because having come out of a coercive relationship, I could not talk to any of my male family members in any discussion for the first year because of the male voicing, because I was being back being told that I wasn't right I was wrong that what happened didn't happen so I had to rely on female only support from family members for the first year and found it really difficult to communicate with my brothers who I am really close with. The idea that I could hear a male voice in the place were I need to recover is just beyond my comfort. I just could not take it in the first year of my recovery its really quite difficult to understand for people who have had that level of gas lighting to gaslight them at such a national level where some men are actually women it gives you such a distrust in the whole support apparatus. I was in Psychiatric hospital a number of times in a mixed ward but I had my own room with a lock on the door. I was in observations every hour and my door was unlocked, because of this I never slept for a week, as every time I was checked, I had to go up and relock the door because there were men walking about the corridor. I was so aware of these males that it actually inhibited my recovery and this will inhibit other women's recover because of that males voice and that male gait. I could tell it was a male walking down the corridor compared to a women walking down the corridor and to not recognise this and say that some males are women is just unconscionable so the psychological impact of that does feel like I am back being abused."

"There doesn't seem to be any attention to any other protected characteristic other than gender reassignment in the equality act. We are allowed to exclude people with the characteristic of gender, you are allowed to exclude men who identify as women from female only spaces due to retraumatisation, dignity and privacy and safety all I am arguing for is that we uphold the equality act 2010 the single sex provision

exceptions. I don't want to take rights away from anyone. I don't want their rights to be given to me I want the equality act 2010 single sex provision exceptions to be upheld and that's what I am hoping for the SWC will try and help us explain."

"It is crucial to highlight again the protected characteristics. I worked on boards of organisations such as WA for BAME women, it has a diverse staff team and everyone on the staff team were clear that if any of these services had a male or someone that women perceived to be male the service would empty immediately. Women would not stay added to this as well is gender reassignment, it's become clear that we are not talking about someone who is trying to pass as a woman. This male does not have to make any changes about how he looks, how he dresses, anything if he says he is a woman we have to regard this person as a woman and that is a major issue because it links to the gas lighting highlighted previously. For woman who have experienced this gas lighting, that have been told that right was wrong etc. its hard for them to say this may look like a man but it's actually a woman. Trauma does not recognise legislation, it is there inside you and works completely independently of what the government says. The whole issue about women in refugee is that women will have that protected characteristic of sex and yes disability, as I have never met a woman that has been in a refugee that has not had some form of PTSD from that experience. So why does gender reassignment trump that and that's the question I feel needs to be answered. I am also very wary that there will be challenges or could be challenges with regards to single sex services when someone actually gets a GRC. It does say that person has changed their sex so will that person automatically be expecting to have access to a women's only single sex service or space this will be challenging.

Agnes asks if in the work they have done if they have personally witnessed a trans women come in and try to get services. The woman stated yes and Agnes asks how that was dealt with? Agnes was advised they supported anyone who contacted them at point of service and they supported the trans woman at the point of contact and they were referred on to other services. Agnes was advised that they had someone who transitioned whilst they were getting a service and the support was seen out until its conclusion.

"Nobody counts the self-excluders but I know of two others and I'm sitting amongst other women who are saying in this meeting that they are self-excluding and none of us are that unique there must be loads of us out there who are self-excluding. If you 'self-exclude it can cause big issues because of your self-exclusion it has caused me big problems. There is working class women out there who are self-excluding if they self-exclude from refugee that is life threatening. If they turn up to a refuge and there is a man self-identifying as a woman sharing the same accommodation or in the same vicinity you are probably going to feel safer going back to the man that may be trying to kill you than in that refuge, as women don't want to be around any man regardless of how they identify."

Conclusion

Having listened to the women, our three key recommendations on this topic are:

- That all organisations state clearly that they have women only spaces under the equality Act 2010 single sex space provision.
- That the NHS and hospitals provide single sex spaces to protect the mental and physical health of all women.
- That proper support, counselling and trauma informed services are available to all women at all times which can help them to deal with the violence they have faced at the hands of males.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to talk to women at our roundtable events. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences and its effects on women's equality.

For further information or to share your views,
please contact:

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