

**Scottish Women's Convention response to:**  
**The Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee Inquiry:**  
**Covid-19**  
**May 2020**

**Introduction**

On 8 April, 2020, the Equalities and Human Rights Committee agreed by correspondence to hold an inquiry on COVID-19. On 23 April 2020, the Committee agreed the remit for the COVID-19 inquiry. On 27 April, the Committee launched its inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on equalities and human rights.

**The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)**

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The Scottish Women's Convention engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to women's equality.

The SWC is currently engaging with women through digital roadshows, online surveys, asking women to comment by email and by telephoning those who want to talk. We are also using our wide network to ask women to collate views in their local communities and forward these to us on a regular basis. We are continuing to review innovative ways of engaging with women throughout Scotland using whichever medium is appropriate to them.

*The SWC would like to take this opportunity to give our unreserved thanks to all frontline staff including NHS, care, retail staff and many more who have given their full commitment day and night to the current Covid-19 pandemic. We ask all policy makers that this commitment is not forgotten in future.*

## How have groups of people been affected by the virus?

Whilst there are concerns regarding Covid-19 and the response in relation to reserved areas such as employment and most aspects of social security, we have chosen to comment here on those areas impacted by functions as devolved to the Scottish Government and Parliament. As an organisation, however, we are extremely wary of contextualising one form of inequality as belonging to only one of the reserved or devolved remits and thus some areas will see a broad cross over. The SWC stresses that all aspects of equality entail a coordinated approach and a strategic framework of both Administrations and their respective Legislatures.

Pre-pandemic Scotland saw women suffer inequality in a wide range of ways that spanned numerous levels dependant on individual circumstances and characteristics. This has been further fuelled over the past decade by rising poverty, precarious work, and austerity. In tandem with gender issues such as VAWG and disproportionate caring responsibilities, women have faced a major drain on access to resources and safeguards that could bolster equality. As a result of the current pandemic, these issues have been magnified leaving many in insecure positions and at risk of exploitation and deprivation.

Whilst society as a whole has seen severe changes to ways of life as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, women, particularly those with intersectional characteristics, have been hit disproportionately and in differing ways. Many individual women's rights and opportunities have been significantly reduced. This has come to the forefront for women in many forms including, but not limited to:

- Lack of a secure social safety net for women, particularly young women, in insecure work with little financial security and facing exploitation.
- Issues regarding black and minority ethnic women and their absence at decision-making levels coupled with ongoing inequality in all areas of society.
- The disproportionate risk on women as the frontline workers of the health and social care response.
- The strain being placed on unpaid carers who have seen their responsibilities become markedly higher and may have to balance looking after children at home as well as caring for a number of other relatives.
- Digital exclusion for the most vulnerable such as older women, children unable to access educational materials and those in areas where connectivity is low.
- The loss of safe spaces for many women to present their fears and vulnerabilities in a way that can accommodate their individual needs. This is a particular concern where women may be exposed to dangerous situations during confinement and have underlying health conditions.

## Which groups have been disproportionately affected by the virus and the response to it?

Women as a homogenous group have been impacted by the virus and the subsequent response to varying degrees depending on a range of characteristics that result in societal and cultural inequality. One of the most fundamental aspects of the current crisis is the heavy impact that income inequality at a gendered and intersectional level has had. Whilst this has always been the case, it has largely been magnified by the current pandemic in a myriad of ways.

### Employment:

- Women classed as essential retail workers are still facing precarious conditions such as zero-hour contracts despite being expected to work long shifts at the forefront of the pandemic.
- An increase in threats by members of the public to essential women workers has led to many facing escalating violence at the present time which can often be highly sexualised and abusive in nature.
- Health and Safety Legislation covering only “employees” rather than all workers such as women on zero hours contracts leaving them with fewer legislative rights if returning to work.
- Redeployment of full-time workers leaving women on lower or zero-hour contracts who relied on overtime seeing their hours drastically cut and are facing financial penalties as a result.

### Education:

- Concerns amongst women over the impact of home schooling and predicted grading on widening of the educational attainment gap. This is a particular issue where schooling materials may not be readily available or where women do not feel they have the time or sufficient capacity to home school in a way that will ensure their children keep up.
- The exclusion of black and minority ethnic women and children where English is not a first language and where children may suffer from a lack of schooling.
- The lack of a national free school meals approach during school closures leaving many families facing a “postcode lottery” in terms of what is provided. This can often leave many women feeling stigmatised when having to pick up lunches from designated hubs. Additionally, they may be left at financial loss where certain local authorities have switched to a programme of means testing rather than universal provision for primary one to three.
- Digital exclusion for children whose homes lack internet, broadband connectivity or correct equipment. This has led many women to worry about their children’s future grades and prospects.

- Limited access to sanitary products for girls who may be unaware how to claim these within their own local authority area where they were previously available in schools.

#### Healthcare:

- Continuing fears over a lack of adequate PPE stock for essential workers. This includes women having to wear “unisex” stock which fits incorrectly.
- Women, the majority of whom make up those in the social care sector, continuing to be undervalued despite the current pandemic illustrating the important role they play.
- Unequal distribution of medical letters regarding who should be shielding and who should not with many women only having recently received these.
- Confusion and fear as to when medical health screenings relating to issues such as cervical smear tests and mammograms will restart and how these will be implemented safely.
- Concerns over the risk for women in unsuitable accommodation where problems such as housing damp may be common and lead to severe respiratory issues if exposed to Covid-19.

#### Housing:

- The ongoing lack of social housing or sufficiently priced private lets has led to overcrowding within many communities meaning higher risk of exposure. This is particularly critical given the current lockdown with many households crammed together most of the time.
- The increase in rent arrears, particularly for women in private let accommodation. Whilst measures implemented have afforded some leeway in increasing time limits for arrears to be paid, this does not alter the fact that for the majority of tenants, this will lead to arrears simply building up during the longer period.
- Inadequate proper medical equipment for those discharged early from hospital fitted within their homes. This coupled with the current limitations on face to face services have seen many vulnerable women being left exposed to high risk situations where they may sustain physical injuries.

#### Food Insecurity:

- For many women, the current pandemic has exacerbated what was already the pernicious problem of food insecurity. A decrease in foodbank donations coupled with less volunteers due to the pandemic have left many community initiatives with reduced capacity to help vulnerable individuals.
- The large volume of panic buying by much of the public which tended to focus on a range of long-life goods that were heavily relied upon by those lower down the income scale. Stockpiling of items such as dry pasta and frozen vegetables

coupled with subsequent rationing in many shops to deal with demand has left many women not being able to afford more expensive items.

- Families who have had to self-isolate as a precautionary measure unable to bulk buy food to see them through the isolation period due to a lack of funds and living from one wage to the next.
- The high cost of living in rural areas due to high delivery costs and a lack of competition means many women are left out of pocket when accessing food for themselves and their families.

#### Mental Health:

- Confinement of physical space as well as anxiety and stress over the current pandemic has exacerbated prevailing mental health issues for many women. This has also acted as a trigger for others who may have not previously presented with particular problems.
- A risk of addiction relapse for many women where services are no longer available as well as heightened anxiety and stress.
- The current situation coupled with feelings of hopelessness about the future and little prospects has seen a dramatic increase pushing young women into serious mental health problems.
- A potential for young LGBTQ+ women to be isolated from friends and peer support groups, particularly where these were relied upon in the absence of familial bonds.
- Concerns over the risk for those who were undergoing counselling and other forms of therapy where it is now inaccessible. This is compounded where women may be triggered by an increase in stress and anxiety given the current situation.

#### Social Security:

- For many women, this will be the first time they have navigated the social security system. Confusion as to how much money you can get alongside the sheer backfill can be daunting for many.
- Whilst current delays of the roll out of particular aspects of Scottish Social Security such as the Scottish Child Payment are understandable, women have voiced concern on the overarching negative affect this will have on families if they are not restarted as a priority.
- Worries over many vulnerable individuals still being unaware of their rights to entitlement under both reserved and devolved aspects of social security and subsequently missing out.

#### Violence against Women and Girls:

- Women have continued to voice issues around the current restrictions and the heavy impact this has had and will continue to have on violence against women. There is a worry that the limitations on women being unable to leave the home

exposes them to a wide range of physical, emotional and financial abuse.

- The imposition of one household limits on social security such as single Universal Credit payments coupled with a loss of jobs has left women vulnerable to financial abuse and reliant on partners.
- Fears for the most vulnerable women suffering exploitation not knowing where to go to access help due to digital exclusion.

### Have there been specific equality and human rights impacts on groups of people as a response to the virus?

The response underpinned in the current emergency powers put forth by both the Scottish and UK Governments has been seen as proportionate for the present situation. Fears have continued to be voiced, however, regarding what this could potentially mean in the future for safeguarding procedures for vulnerable persons. Concerns have arisen over:

- Worries that safeguarding features which are currently scaled back will not be reimplemented as appropriate.
- Using the current situation or the legislative response as a way of excusing the UK's international obligations to human rights. This is a particular fear when the economic response begins, and cuts start to emerge which may leave the most vulnerable severely at risk.
- Worries that impact assessments regarding equality and human rights are being disregarded and will have repercussions in future. A major worry regards the over-saturation of services post-lockdown but where funding may be deprioritised.

### What do the Scottish Government and public authorities (e.g. local authorities, health boards, etc) need to change or improve:

#### As a matter of urgency?

Whilst recognising the limitation of devolution the Scottish Government and other public authorities may hold in relation to exercising their powers, some issues which may be looked on as a matter of urgency include:

- Commit additional funding for agencies to ensure legal help to individuals regarding equality, health and safety legislation and employment rights during the time where unscrupulous employers may use the current situation to exploit individuals.
- Ensure all relevant public authorities are scrutinising the emergency powers afforded to them under the current legislative procedures to ensure no harm may be unknowingly caused to vulnerable persons. This includes transparent,

accountable procedures and bolstering mechanisms where complaints can be made as to when appropriate safeguards have failed to be taken into consideration.

- Committing the Scottish Government to analysing all measures institutionalised by reserved powers to ensure these do not have a disproportionate impact on those with protected characteristics and are not skewed in favour of those higher up the income scale.
- Ensuring nationalised structures take account where women may be stigmatised as a result of poverty during the pandemic. For instance, using the standout example of some local authorities using cash payments for free school meals directly into parent's bank accounts to reduce stigmatisation.
- Analysis of putting in place a temporary state financial system for those on lower incomes to offset the vulnerability of applying for high risk finance for individual household debt.

### In the medium to long term?

Women from across Scotland have voiced a number of concerns regarding the easing of current restrictions and the sustained toll the virus may have on the economy for years to come. It is widely accepted that austerity measures and cuts implemented after the last financial crisis saw women severely hit and played a major contributing factor in pushing many into vulnerable categories and poverty. Medium to longer term impacts must take note of this and ensure policies and legislative decisions take account of entrenched equality issues as well as those exacerbated by the current situation. This should take the form of novel approaches to sustainable economic growth that ensures equality is at the heart of the agenda including:

- Committing to evaluating the use of Universal Basic Income as a means of bolstering the economy post-lockdown and the equality impact on this.
- Ensuring all individuals placed in temporary accommodation because of the current restrictions continue to be able to access services and secure accommodation so as not to end up homeless.
- Assurances that funding given over to the societal and equality impacts of the pandemic will not be lost post-lockdown, leaving vulnerable groups at high risk.
- Committing to work in partnership with businesses in Scotland and trade unions to ensure that post lockdown, women are not forced back into work where this is not feasible due to issues such as childcare or health conditions.
- Structuring the economic response to take account of the cost of living as well as inflationary and employment issues with appropriate safeguards in place for those at high risk of poverty.
- Investment in skills and development for women to ensure high quality employment, particularly in sectors where they are under-represented.

- A wide scale review into the impact of both the private and public social care sector including the undervaluation of the work of employees, exposure during the current outbreak and implementation of higher wage rises.

### Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament Equalities and Human Rights Committee's call for evidence regarding the current Covid-19 pandemic and the response to such. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to the pandemic and the effect of this on equality at both a reserved and devolved level.

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