



CONFERENCE REPORT

Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2022

Glasgow Grosvenor Hotel

The Scottish Women's Convention

# **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS**



# Agnes Tolmie

## SWC Chair

I would like to start by thanking all the women who have participated in our online and in-person roundtables on this topic, as well as our online survey that had more than fifty responses within the first 48 hours. Women clearly need to have their say about this.

Firstly, I think we must reach an agreement that the issue of violence against women and girls (VAWG) is getting worse, not better. The online abuse is shocking, and our team faced it organising this conference. Women change their behaviour all the time in anticipation of what men are going to say or do, but it is the system that has to change, not us.

At the core of this misogyny legislation is the fact that we have begged and pleaded with these guys for too long. We have tried to educate them. We have tried to persuade them. We have tried all sorts to get men to change their behaviours and attitudes towards women.

I am an eternal optimist and know that someday this will change. I accept that that they will battle with us when this comes out for consultation, but we will play our part in ensuring that appropriate consultation amongst women takes place.

We have come a long way because of the organisations that are represented here today, and I believe we have come a long way because we have a Scottish Parliament and councils with more women in them. The more women we have representing us, the more we will find we have better policies than we did before.

## 5 Key Points & Recommendations

- The recommendations of the Misogyny and Criminal Justice in Scotland Working Group need to be implemented in full, and there should be ongoing engagement with women throughout this process.
- More reliable funding needs to be invested in VAWG services to ensure consistency.
- There must be a greater commitment to an intersectional approach, including better representation of BME women and the inclusion of familial and honour-based abuse in domestic abuse legislation.
- Education about gender stereotypes, respect, and consent should start at a younger age.
- Culture and attitudes within the police and justice systems need to be addressed if women are to trust them enough to report abuse and not fear being retraumatised.



## Christina McKelvie MSP

Christina was reappointed as the Minister for Equalities and Older People in May 2021. She has been the MSP for Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse since May 2011 and has been chair of the Equalities & Human Rights Committee. Prior to this, Christina worked as a learning and development officer for Glasgow City Council.

She emphasised that we can only achieve an end to violence against women and girls by changing pervasive societal attitudes.

- “We need to call out misogyny and sexism when we see it. The silence of some men enables sexist attitudes and abuse to appear normal and acceptable... The gendered attitudes which allow men to act with aggression, without self-reflection, and with seeming impunity, need to be challenged in every area of Scottish life.”
- The Scottish Government has expanded its innovative Caledonian System, providing specialised rehabilitation to male perpetrators of abuse.
- Noting Police Scotland’s ‘Don’t Be That Guy’ video campaign, she reiterated; “Misogyny cannot be the sole charge of women to convince men that they have every right to be seen as equal... This is a man's problem, not a women's problem.”

Discussing prevention strategies, she highlighted the important role of education.

- “We all wish that teaching on this matter was not required, but education on issues like consent, gender equality, and healthy relationships is key to preventing sexual violence and to making lasting change.”
- The Equally Safe programme was developed for schools to begin awareness for both girls and boys from an early age.
- Scotland launched the world’s first gender-based violence charter for colleges and universities in December 2021, and the Scottish Government funds Emily’s Test to promote gender equality and safety on campuses.

Primarily, though, she stressed that her purpose at the conference was to listen to women.

- “When I stop talking today, my ears are wide open, my mind wide open and in most cases, for you, if you need it, my heart is wide open as well.”
- “For many women, the voice is taken from them. They lose the control of their life or are not sure how they can speak up. When that voice is dimmed, we’ll be the voices for those women.”

“ I do have faith in the future of women in Scotland... I know that women like you in this room will always endeavour to advance women's equality, and ensure a female voice is at the centre of everything we take forward. ”

## Sandy Brindley

Sandy is Chief Executive of Rape Crisis Scotland and has been involved in the movement for over 20 years. Her work and activism have been influential in driving progress for survivors of rape, sexual assault and abuse in Scotland, changing legislation and cultural attitudes that enable violence. Sandy sits on multiple strategic forums, including those of the Scottish Government, and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Glasgow in recognition of her contributions.



In the week prior to the conference, Sandy had received unwanted press attention after a senior QC made inappropriate sexual comments about her.

- “It was inappropriate but also just so clearly sexist... what they're doing here is clearly using sex as a weapon to try and put me in my place.”
- “I think it's important to reflect on what this means for women in Scotland trying to access the justice system. If that is their attitude towards me as someone who works with them professionally, what are they doing to woman within the system?”

She spoke about how the pandemic changed the way their service operated.

- “In the early days of the pandemic, we had people calling us from cupboards or from their cars, just trying to find a safe space to talk.”
- “I do want to pay tribute to the Scottish Government for providing emergency funding to enable us to provide services remotely really quickly, and also pay tribute to all our workers in our centres across Scotland who worked so hard to make sure women still got these essential services.”

One of the areas she most urgently wanted to see change is in the justice system.

- Covid has meant even longer waiting times for cases getting to court - “Those delays can be so distressing because every morning women wake up with a tape playing in their head of what they're going to say, or what might happen during the cross examination. Women can't move on with their lives.”
- Her recommendation was to “be moving towards no rape survivor attending court unless they really want to” by pre-recording evidence and completing a cross-examination beforehand so women at least have certainty of the date.

She concluded that the key to real change is engaging with survivors in an ethical way.

- “How do you make sure that survivors feel validated and listened to, and that we act on what they're telling us? Those are the concepts we keep at the front of our minds.”
- Giving an example of a survivor she had supported through a complaint, she recalled “What she said was that it felt to her like justice. She didn't get justice through the formal system, but a sense of being listened to, believed and taken seriously.”

“ We're confronted on a regular basis with that level of misogyny, trying to stop us from making a difference for women across Scotland. We can't let it stop us. ”



## Mariam Ahmed

As Chief Executive Officer for Amina MWRC, Mariam's expertise is in gender-based violence and supporting BME women. She is a qualified Independent Domestic Abuse Advocate, and her previous role was leading a BME domestic abuse service for over 11 years. She is the committee member for the Equalities and Human Rights Commission in Scotland, Director of Scottish Women's Aid, and the Chair of a local women's charity called the Glendale Women's Café.

Amina supports BME and Muslim women within Scotland to ensure they can fully participate in society without fear of discrimination or inequality.

- In addition to their frontline domestic abuse service, they offer employability programmes, financial advocacy, befriending services, VAWG campaign training, community work, and a multilingual helpline.

Discussing the holistic approach needed in women's services, she described her work as "the one-stop shop."

- "Come in and I'll do your benefits, I'll find out whether you can get your recourse to public funds. You've got no clothes? Don't you worry, I'm on it. We've done absolutely anything and everything it takes to keep women safe."

She spoke about the structural inequalities that were disadvantaging BME women even before the pandemic.

- BME women experience higher rates of domestic abuse-related homicides and are three times more likely to commit suicide compared to other women.
- Nearly half of BME women experiencing abuse from their partners also experience abuse from multiple perpetrators – "Our domestic abuse laws are not fit for purpose. There is no criminal conviction or even an aggravation for extended family abuse."
- "I could spend a whole day talking about the impact of no recourse to public funds... it has a huge impact when trying to receive relevant support and justice."
- "BME women are still not represented in power structures. If you look at a lot of violence against women organisations, they don't even have any BME, black or brown women on their boards."

She exemplified her typical case work with a recent example: Zara.

- She faced numerous barriers: no available refuge spaces, social services refusing to take responsibility due to her immigration status, and lawyers refusing to pay for an interpreter. Mariam had to use Amina's own limited funds to resolve these issues.
- "Why are we playing pass the parcel with women's lives? We're so busy dealing with no recourse to public funds and bad practice from organisations that it takes away from the trauma work that you want to do. It takes away from them."

“ If we want to tackle violence against women, and we want to create a change, we need to start having BME women better represented everywhere. We need that sisterhood. ”

## Eilidh Dickson

Eilidh was a member of the Misogyny and Criminal Justice in Scotland Working Group. Until April 2022, she worked at Engender where she led advocacy for women's equality and rights at both the Scottish and UK Parliaments. She is currently the Policy and International Officer at the Scottish Human Rights Commission, a member of the Scottish Parliament's A Parliament for All Advisory Board, and a Poverty Alliance board member. She attended and spoke at the conference in an independent capacity.



She explained that discussions dated back to 2003 with concerns that a gender provision in hate crime laws would not be understood or implemented by the police and courts.

- “We’re now 20 years on, and those same issues are still at the core of what we were talking about in the working group.”

Misogyny covers a range of behaviours and attitudes, and it is a “routine part of how the majority of women navigate work and leisure, public space and privacy, from a young age.”

- It includes sexualised language, sexual violence, objectification, and unwanted touching, as well as defamation and disruption to a woman’s career – “punishing women for acting outside the way that men want women to behave.”
- “Not only does it affect the original victim, but women see it happening and change their behaviour in response to avoid it. There’s an anticipatory impact as well.”

The key recommendations from the working group are:

- A new Misogyny & Criminal Justice Bill – not adding sex to the Hate Crime Bill
- A new offence of stirring up hatred against women
- A new offence of public sexual harassment of women
- A new offence of issuing threats of, or invoking, rape or sexual assault or disfigurement of women and girls online and offline

However, she addressed the challenges that we will face in ensuring these are achieved.

- Cynicism over systemic commitment to supporting women’s equality - “Women have very good reason not to trust the police or criminal justice authorities.”
- “Funding is going to be critical. This is not going to work if it's not resourced.”
- Careful wording to avoid equalities issues - “No woman should have to prove she's a woman to benefit from the law. It's about focusing on the perpetrator’s motivation.”
- Cultural pushback and the need for accurate public information so it is not sensationalised – “It is no one’s intention to lock up every man who wolf-whistles.”

She concluded that we need to manage expectations as it will take time to change attitudes and build trust in reporting - “If we have 20 offences in the first year, it's not a failure.”

“ Criminal law is designed by men for men. Let's design it for women. ”

# Discussion

## Intersectionality and Representation

A woman who has been delivering services to Sikh women for over 35 years raised concerns that her community is still overlooked.

- “We've tried so much to be involved, but when you're a minority within a minority, you might as well think you're invisible.”
- “We don't get any funding from the Equality and Human Rights Fund. Of the 42 organisations that want money from that fund, not one of them has any direct links to Sikh women or the Sikh community at a grassroots level.”
- “I think the Scottish Government needs to start acknowledging us... I've got skeleton staff, and I know they're getting burned out, but they're not getting the credit.”

Mariam added that the Scottish Government does not currently take any data on BME women's experiences of violence or abuse and just uses information from England which is not good enough.

- “I think that is going to be the first step to really having that deep understanding about Sikh women's experiences, Muslim, refugees, asylum seekers, everyone. We desperately need that analysis.”

Sandy also confirmed that Rape Crisis Scotland are about to commission a piece of research about BME women's experiences of VAWG, accessing services, and the justice system to ensure that these voices are amplified.

## Justice Reforms

The limitations of the justice system in relation to VAWG cases were raised.

- “Of course the Not Proven Verdict doesn't work. Lots of women aren't seeing the convictions they deserve.”
- “Fundamentally, my view is that if the jury do not want to convict a rape case, giving a not proven verdict is like giving nothing because the end result is the same. That guy will get off with no consequences. My view is get rid of not proven guilty verdict.”
- “The job of the justice system is sadly not about the truth or innocence, it's about whether there's enough evidence. There's a fundamental misunderstanding, because no conviction does not mean a woman has lied, so she should not be facing charges of false allegations for complaining of rape.”
- Women also welcomed the campaigns that are pushing for a move away from juries in cases relating to VAWG to tackle misogynistic bias that denies women justice.

## Changing Attitudes

Women reiterated the need for cultural change and better education for men and boys.

- “I don't think there's anybody in this room who hasn't been in company and felt that their female friend has been inappropriately or unnecessarily belittled by her partner or another family member. We very often put our eyes down and don't call this out, but part of making progress on misogyny is us feeling comfortable in the company of friends to say ‘Why did you say that? Why are you trying to put her down?’ That's when they realise that they're not going to get away with that behaviour. I think the legislative approach is going to be an important stimulus in giving women the confidence to have those conversations.”
- “There are men who can't deal with the independence and confidence of women because they blindly believe that that is at their expense. We have to educate men to change these attitudes and behaviours.”
- “I'm more than happy to try and help that journey of men understanding that we can live as equals, and that our progress and independence is not at their expense.”

Christina also spoke about her work with the Advertising Standards Authority creating a toolkit to tackle pervasive misogyny in the media. She reported that this has been successful in removing several adverts that promoted negative attitudes towards women.



# **Thank You!**

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to thank all of those who attended our conference, as well as those who contributed online and via email. We would also like to thank our speakers for providing their wealth of knowledge and experience, as well as brilliantly contributing to our broader discussion. This conference was part of our broader project on Violence Against Women and Girls, and we will use all the voices gathered from this alongside those from our survey and roundtables to feed back to policy makers regarding this vitally important subject.

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