

THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION

A BLETHER ON...

Widowhood



June 2023

International Widows Day 2023:

To mark International Widows Day 2023, we invited women to an online discussion to share their experiences of widowhood, and how widows can be better supported by the Scottish and UK Governments. International Widows Day was originally established to highlight the poverty and discrimination that widows face across the world, and through our discussions we can confirm that widows do experience intersecting levels of disadvantage as a result of personal tragedy. Those that attended our blether, discussed multiple key themes: **mental health**, **lack of information**, the **impact on children** and the importance of **community/family networks**.

6 Recommendations:

1. Mental health support for bereaved individuals is key to improving psychological wellbeing across Scotland.
2. To minimise distress, all relevant information, including social security provision, should be given when registering a death.
3. Ensure that Scottish Government online advice for widows is up to date and easy to access.
4. The education system should become more empathetic to bereaved children's needs, providing increased support and flexibility.
5. Ensured funding for widow support groups is a must, as they provide an essential sense of community for some widows.
6. Cultural sensitivity has to be engrained in future widow-centred policy, alongside further investigation into different norms relating to bereavement.

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.

Women's Views:

Mental Health

“I lost my husband two and a half years ago. It was during Covid, and it was very sudden, and it was just life-changing for me overnight...I thought I was a confident, independent person, but I lost all of that. For me, grief made me housebound”

Throughout our discussions, women explained that the inevitable result of losing a loved one is the significant impact on mental wellbeing. They stated that the process of grief is long, with no two widows' journeys being the same. It was explained by those who had recently lost their partner, that the toll on their mental health had been significant, with some experiencing high levels of anxiety and loneliness. This was further worsened by those who had lost family members during the Covid-19 pandemic, with lockdowns and public health messaging compounding trauma. It is therefore key, that the Scottish Government look to provide improved mental health support for widows, so that they can be supported throughout their grief. This support must also be ongoing, with one woman highlighting that current systems assume grief has a clear endpoint, rather than it being a continual process.

- “You know, people think that time is a healer, I would say that you just learn to live with it and hide it from other people”
- “I could be watching a soap and you see a husband and wife, and it just gets me, it's that loneliness and companionship that you miss. You know, 35 years is such a long time to be with someone, you're so used to being a couple, that even if you go anywhere, you're just on your own.”
- “The loneliness that people feel when they lose their life partner, and they don't have children, that's massive. People who have gone from being a family, to being alone.”

Lack of Information

“...the practical help is really important. You don't know where to start with the entitlements. Information. Information reduces stress...Different people tell you different things. No. You want all the information to come from one source.”

During our discussions, women also explained that there is a lack of information available for widows. They stated that after their partners passed away there were many practical elements to organise, such as funerals and payments, adding to distress. Widows explained that online information was varied, and that Scottish Government sites were not accessible. Information relating to social security was particularly complex, with rules around pensions being unclear, as well as general benefits. Widows who attended our blether proposed that this information could be provided during the death registration process, and that this would be particularly valuable in relation to time sensitive claims. It was stated that this would assist with the newly established Bereavement Support Payment, which must be claimed within three months of your partners death. Women felt that this was not a sufficient time period and contributed to further hardship for widows across the country. Furthermore, this payment is only provided for 18 months after a partners death, whereas the previous payment, Widowed Parent's Allowance, was available until an individual's Child Benefit stopped, or when they reached State Pension age. Women believed that this would negatively impact widows, particularly those widowed young, and therefore, better protections must be put in place. It was also highlighted that information online is varied, with there being no clear location for widow helplines.

- “...it was a very sudden death, and all of a sudden I had to do stuff; I had to register the death, I had to organise the funeral, I had to figure out the bank things, and it was very much a pot luck who you spoke to, that’s how it felt.”
- “...Bereavement Support Payment for those who have children. People don’t know that they’ve got that, but they only have a finite time to claim it...It should be part of the registration of the death process, that should all be given to you.”

Impact on Children

“For me, for my journey, the focus was my kids, they had an adverse childhood experience, their dad died at 41...but there’s no allowances made for them in the education system whatsoever.”

Widows also discussed the impact bereavement has on children, with particular emphasis on a lack of consideration for bereaved children within the education system. They stated that schools placed unfair expectations on young people to quickly handle their grief and pressurised them into re-entering the schooling system as soon as possible. Women did give some examples of schools being patient and flexible regarding exams and schoolwork. However, this was accounted to parents being forceful, rather than the general rule. Widows would therefore, like to see increased counselling and flexible educational structures in place for bereaved children.

- “I’ve battled with my own girls’ school, and they were brilliant, they eventually got it, but the government should be ensuring that that’s the case...there is bereavement in the Scottish education system, but it’s not used, it’s not done well”
- “...the children do need help with their academics, and they need counselling and time. They need time to deal with the schoolwork, don’t just assume that they’ve moved on because it was three months ago”

Community and Family Networks

“I actually joined a widows and widowers meet-up group which meets near me, and that has five years ago now, and you know, they organise daytrips, lunches, dances, so I’ve moved on in that sense.”

A consistent theme throughout women’s experiences of bereavement was the importance of community and family structures. They explained that they relied on these networks heavily, particularly in the direct aftermath of loss. It appeared to be incredibly important for women to talk through their experiences with other people who have also went through similar situations, reducing loneliness. However, it was stated by some ethnic minority women, that varied cultural norms can be difficult to navigate, with family members further compounding traditional roles, worsening grief. In addition, widow support groups provided care throughout the process of grief, with women stating that this was highly valuable. They explained that speaking to others who had went through a similar situation, offered support that could not always be provided by family members. Women, therefore, believed it was vital that Governments continue to financially support widow support groups.

- “...the bit that really helped me, I never used the helpline, I never used the financial and legal stuff, but I used the people, I used their lived experience, and when I was going through a really rough day, I could just dump it there”
- “...I don’t know about other people’s culture...but in mines, if you wear something fancy...there’s a stigma...They expect your life to just be you sitting in a corner crying”

Thank You!

Thank you to the women who shared their experiences with us, we feel privileged to be entrusted with your stories particularly due to the difficulty of the topic. We will continue to strive to advocate for women across Scotland so that their views are included in the policy-making process.



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