Livingston Roundtable Report
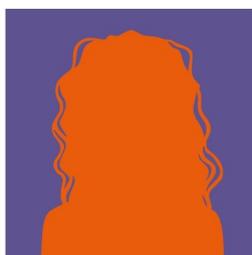
Thursday 27th July 2017

Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) visited the Youth Action Project in Livingston on the 27th July, 2017 and held a roundtable event with young women. At this discussion, topics raised focused around issues specifically relating to young women such as the rise of social media, educational and career opportunities and political representation of young people.

These views will be used to influence policy at both a Scottish and UK government level. Young women hold an extremely important place within our society that is often underestimated due to the likes of negative portrayals of youth within the media. It is vital that their voices do not go unheard within Scotland

The SWC would like to extend a warm thanks to all the young women and the Youth Action Project for participating in the event.

Key Issues for Young Women

Social Media

As the first generation in Scotland which had grown up where usage is essentially commonplace, views were sought on the value of social media. The young women had both positive and negative experiences. A key point was the portrayal of social media by parents, teachers and the wider community in general.

Schools seem to lack a formal structure when it comes to teaching young people about the benefits and drawbacks of being online. Consensus seemed to be that teachers tend to *"dumb down"* social media or just chose to ignore it.

"If they do talk about it, it's always in a negative way without seeing the good it does."

"They just go 'don't add strangers' and that's it. That's literally all you get. They don't see the good it does for a lot of people."

Other perceptions, however, were more worrying. Some noted the idea that some teachers were quite ignorant, and seemed to downplay not just the positives, but social media entirely, including online bullying.

Training in terms of online usage was felt to be *"extremely basic"* and implemented at a later stage in a school career, despite the fact most young people will have been using the internet from an extremely young age. In addition, whilst there are a handful of visits from police to schools to address the likes of online abuse, it was felt that this was *"a quick fix"* with officers simply instructing young people to come forward if they experience this.

"Teachers are too busy to talk to you about social media. I don't think they get that bullying can happen over it."

"What is said online can be internalised and it can end up escalating."

Consensus around online bullying seemed to be that it was generally groups of people targeting a single person. The young women noted that there is a real perception that this was mainly groups of females targeting a solitary girl. In several instances, however, it actually amounted to groups of boys sending abusive messages to one girl, believing it easier to get away with if not done in person. A number of young women spoke of instances of websites being set up solely to target one young woman as a result of bullying.

Many commented on the positives that online usage can have for people's self esteem – something that is not as quickly picked up by older generations. Despite feeling that schools only reinforce the dangers of it, they explained how social media can be used for good if applied maturely and effectively.

"Social media does just that- helps people to socialise."

"I know a lot of people who have gained confidence through it. Like they're really shy but they've found this place that they can be themselves. But that can be a danger because it means you don't want to interact in real life."

"The media makes online seem really negative. It never focuses on the positives for young women. There are only ever stories about the exploitation that occurs through it."

The young women were all aware of the different types of platforms offered and the benefits and drawbacks of each. There was consensus over what sites are not monitored appropriately and what sites are more intimidating.

The level of knowledge displayed by the young women in terms of keeping themselves safe online seemed more mature than the basic warnings they are delivered at school.

"Twitter is the worst. People go over the top and start arguments for the sake of it. It tends to be more political."

"The likes of Periscope is not monitored appropriately and is an easy platform for the exploitation of women and children."

"YouTube is really good for posting and uploading music. But, those with less followers tend to be more open to abuse because they don't have a large enough following that will stand up for them"

Internet Access

All were in agreement that many families still do not have internet access within the home but that schools tend to assume that all people do. One young woman commented on having to stay after hours in school to catch up, especially if the course was centred around computing.

Subjects these days were thought to be heavily reliant on the internet. Whilst local libraries are thought to be a good way of getting round this, it was noted that these only cater for one hour sessions – which is more often than not too little time for coursework to be completed.

Schools were also seen as having expectations that children should not only have online access but also be computer literate from as early an age as five years old.

Lack of internet at home can also have an impact if the school is unexpectedly closed. In these instances, teachers can use the server to put work up online but do not factor in what could happen if there is no computer or internet there.

"You tell them you don't have it and they just say 'oh well if you don't, you'll just need to catch up"

Politics

Voting is seen as a huge responsibility and it was felt by some that 18 was an appropriate age limit. Those who are younger might not be knowledgeable enough about politics to take part in the election process.

"You have to be 18 to get a tattoo so you should be 18 to vote".

Others, however, thought that the right to vote should be lowered to 16 as it was young people's futures that would primarily be decided by politics.

"Politics should be taught in schools. Modern studies is too basic and it's not even mandatory."

Given the number of elections and referendums over the past few years, it was noted that there was not enough information given to young women despite it being all over the news and social media.

Some noted that teachers preferred to ignore political discussions in order to prevent influencing student's views during the likes of the independence referendum. Whilst this was seen to be a positive move, it meant that teachers would not answer student's questions directly, seeming to be more anxious in case they landed in trouble.

"I get that they can't tell us how to vote, but you ask questions about what you'd see all over Facebook and they were too scared to give you an answer."

Careers and Education

Careers and education in schools were two subjects discussed at length. When choosing subjects of National 4 and 5's or Highers, many commented that teachers expect appropriate choices to be made for a certain career path even at this early age.

Young people find it difficult to know what career to follow. There is very little guidance and what is given can be extremely patchy.

There is also a lack of clarity around what a careers advisor actually does or even how to make an appointment to discuss future prospects.

"I don't really see the point in it. You just have to do all the work yourself anyway."

"I know our careers officer sits in the library for appointments a few times a week but you're not really told the reasoning behind going to see one. You're not told that if you're unsure about what to do in life that a careers officer can help."

STEM Subjects

The young women were very positive about being encouraged to study male dominated subjects. Schools and teachers are making an effort to support those who want to learn about non-traditional careers.

"You can begin to see the difference now a little bit. The classes are starting to get a bit more 50/50."

Typically "male" modern apprenticeships (MA's) were also viewed more confidently, with more young women taking up the likes of joinery or plumbing. However, the old stereotypes are still there. Taking up an MA in a traditionally male dominated area, young women noted that they tended to be the only female. This can lead to singling out and can be *"embarrassing and scary".*

"When you tell people you are doing it a lot of them are bemused that as a woman you would do this."

In areas such as plumbing, many of those in the workplace tend to be older men. It was felt that they did not understand a girl doing the same job as them. Young men were more approachable and supportive.

Higher Education

In terms of schooling, the discussions focussed on the bridge between this and further education options. Higher education, especially universities, is often communicated by teachers as the one career path that will get you anywhere in life.

Due to this pressure to continue onto further study, there is a stigma in schools around wanting to leave at 16 in order to take up apprenticeships or choosing to go to college rather than university after sixth year.

Pupils as young as thirteen have even commented on this, noting the stress when picking third year subjects.

One young woman commented on *"feeling forced"* into doing a crash higher course by a teacher even though she didn't want to. She believed that she was being pressured into picking university as a career path over the likes of an apprenticeship.

"There's still that idea in schools that university is the way if you want a respectable job. So if you're smart the teachers pay attention and mark you out for university. If you need a bit of extra help they don't really bother explaining university options to you"

Generational Differences

The young women spoke at length about the differences between themselves and older generations. This was not so much on the differences that actually exist but more the negative portrayal by the media.

There was felt to be many dangers facing elderly people in society such as the vulnerability of isolation, especially in winter times, and the risk that can be faced in the likes of sheltered housing from scams and robbery.

It was felt that the media sought to perpetuate a *"young v old divide".* This was thought to have been made more apparent with both the Scottish and EU referendum, with older people being portrayed as "no" and "leave" voters and young people on the opposite side. This was noted as extremely stereotypical and perpetuated by the media.

Political manifestos further emphasised this, with both old and young people alike feeling *"displaced."* The women noted that this divide tended to be perceived as arrogance by one generation for the other due to feeling forgotten about within society.

"I think a lot of people forget how hard it is growing up now, everything happens so fast, everything is online and accessible, it can be really scary and intimidating to young women."

Conclusions

The SWC would like to thank all the young women and the Youth Support Project in Livingston who took the time to talk about the issues which are important to them. It is essential that the voices of real women in Scotland continue to be heard at all levels of policy and decision making. Discussions such as this, as well as others being held by the SWC throughout Scotland, will ensure that this happens.

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.