

Scottish Women's Convention response
to the Women and Equalities
Committee's Call for Evidence on:

Community Cohesion



January 2025

Premise

The Women and Equalities Committee at the UK Parliament is examining the concept of community cohesion through the following consultation. The inquiry hopes to gather evidence of barriers to community cohesion and how these can be overcome. They have also attempted to understand the role of social media in community cohesion, considering how communities can be maintained as society moves forward.

As a result of these proposals, the UK Parliament's Women and Equalities Committee will assess responses submitted. Relevant information will then be summarised, and combined with oral evidence provided, directly influence the Committee's recommendations regarding this subject.



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.

Our Response

What are the primary barriers and threats to community cohesion?

Throughout SWC work, the issue of community cohesion has arisen regularly. Women in Scotland have provided a wealth of reasons as to why a sense of community has been eroded, including defunding, centralisation of services, poor public transport networks, and a reduction in available volunteers. The following response shall take each of these in turn, providing women's views and experiences.

The issue of poor funding across local communities has been consistently discussed. Through SWC Roadshow events, we have gathered extensive evidence of third sector organisations struggling to manage increasing demands on a “shoestring” budget¹. This has been prevalent across organisations who provide first-line support for issues such as poor mental health, substance use and domestic violence. Employees have explained that due to long waiting lists for statutory services, the third sector are commonly managing the needs of the local populace. Women accessing services have also witnessed a drop in provision, explaining that while charities are vital, they have unfortunately had to limit services as a result of reduced staff and low funding.

These place-based organisations provide invaluable support within communities, contributing to improved cohesion and general wellbeing. We are therefore disheartened to note the continued reduction in funding, particularly long-term funding streams. Third sector employees have consistently highlighted their disdain for short-term, commonly one year, funding agreements, as this prevents job security and can increase the likelihood of burnout amongst remaining staff. We strongly believe that without improved funding for local, community-based organisations, community cohesion is unlikely.

- “On the coal face, we’re all working and we’re all trying to give that support and everything...but I think there needs to be an actual layer of resources...we’re not getting that at the moment”
- “We don’t have long-term funding, but drug deaths are not going to go away overnight...we find in the third sector that we will have referrals coming in from the NHS, from social work, and then all of a sudden...we have to stop and families are left on waiting lists”

Reduced financial investment across third sector and community-based organisations has also resulted in the closure of facilities, such as libraries, community halls and leisure centres. Women noted that this negatively impacted older and young women, as community centres often provided respite from isolation and boredom. We would also highlight the importance these spaces play in less affluent communities. These facilities enable the provision of free and/or minimal cost events and activities within deprived areas. This can reduce child poverty, giving young people access to learning materials and increased opportunities. Libraries can also assist the digitally excluded

¹ Scottish Women's Convention. (2025). Roadshows. Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/roadshows/>

from easily accessing online services. These spaces therefore cannot be discounted as vital to the creation and maintenance of a community spirit, and importantly, provide women with a social space to improve wellbeing.

- “I think community services are being ripped out of Scottish towns and cities. They need to re-establish services like libraries and things to provide a better community support network and assistance for those who can't afford to pay private fees.”
- “There should be more community groups for young women to foster skills, provide fun, build self-esteem, self-worth and include activities that are of value to the local community...Before massive cuts to local government there were many local youth and community workers and groups”
- “I used to work in a library and a lot of people who would come to us are not computer literate, so we would have charities who would come in and help people learn...Presence in community centres, that in-person contact...that work is essential”

Furthermore, community centres and spaces can provide a safe hub for people to congregate, providing socialisation and recreation. Safety in particular can act as a driver to improve community activity. Without a safe space within which to interact with fellow community members, numerous women will become increasingly isolated. This issue can be exacerbated if discrimination runs rampant, for example misogyny, racism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia. It is vital that as a society, we actively address cultures which promote these unacceptable mentalities, with community spaces enabling this endeavour.

Additionally, women in rural Scotland have emphasised the importance of community spaces for health and wellbeing due to the inherent isolation of living in a remote area. This strongly links with the idea of centralisation, with rural women stating that centralised statutory services have forced many to travel long distances for necessary care. For example, women residing in Wick in the North of Scotland must travel for approximately two and a half hours to Raigmore Hospital in Inverness to access maternity services, including when in labour². Women stated that this reduction in locally based healthcare had caused an increase in younger people and families moving away from the area. This depopulation has in turn quickened the centralisation of services, placing those who remain in an increasingly precarious situation. Through this loss of working-age people across rural Scotland, communities have become increasingly sparse, with locals expressing concern surrounding the disappearance of rural culture.

² Scottish Women's Convention. (2024). Wick Roadshow Report. Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/wick-report.pdf>

- “We know that there’s an issue with population here...people who have families, they’re considering whether they move down South to have their babies etc. because we have no maternity services...the young people are leaving.”
- “I hate centralisation...my partner and I were...saying that there wasn’t anyone to have a beer with; there’s nobody our age about, they’ve all moved away. My sisters have all moved...are we going to be the last young couple crofting where we live?”

A further barrier to community cohesion is the issue of limited public transport provision across Scotland. Women explained that rising ticket costs and a reduced service on buses and trains prevents them from easily travelling throughout their community. Unreliable public transport is a considerable problem for those with mobility issues, with disabled women explaining that this can prevent them from accessing work and social activities. The SWC held a conference in May 2024 to understand women’s experiences of transport, making multiple recommendations as a result. These included reducing prices, increasing bus numbers and an integrated ticket system, such as that used throughout Transport for London³. Without these suggested changes, women in Scotland will continue to live in isolation and prevented from accessing opportunities across their local area.

- “There is no bus service where I live. My nearest rail station is 18 miles away and I use a wheelchair, so if I was completely dependent on public transport I would be isolated in my home.”
- “[Transport] makes it really difficult, sometimes the buses run very late...it would be good if there was equally good transportation in all regions...it can be very difficult to get to where you need to go”
- “I have had situations with my part-time work where I needed to go long distances, and sometimes the bus fare was so expensive I would walk, which then meant that I had less time at home for my other job; to do chores, to help my family. I didn’t have a choice.”

Finally, women consulted have raised the lowering number of volunteers as a problem facing communities throughout the country. Volunteer Scotland have noted that in 2023 18% of adults participated in formal volunteering compared to 26% prior to the Covid-19 pandemic⁴. They proposed that this was likely due to increased living costs forcing individuals to work longer hours, resulting in a shortage of surplus income to accommodate volunteering activities. Women have backed this view, stating that combined with caring responsibilities and work, they often struggle to accommodate other pursuits. Caring responsibilities were cited as a particular barrier for those providing care for both elderly parents as well as childcare, otherwise known as ‘sandwich’ caring. This group were left with little time to carry out voluntary work. Also,

³ Scottish Women's Convention. (2024). How Can We Make Transport Work for Women and Families in Scotland. Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/report.pdf>

⁴ Volunteer Scotland. (2024). Scottish Household Survey – 2023 Results. Available at: <https://www.volunteerscotland.net/news/research-evaluation-blog/scottish-household-survey-shs-2023-results>

of those who care for a vulnerable individual, public activities have been treated with caution, in an attempt to protect loved ones from contracting Covid-19. Overall, we must consider how we safely reintegrate women into communities to increase a sense of community cohesion.

- “This constant squeeze of rising costs across every aspect of daily living puts added pressure of working longer hours and sacrificing any quality time with your family”
- “I’m currently paying for my son to go through university and paying his rent. Alongside the rise in living costs, I have had to pull back considerably, including not using heating, not taking part in cultural activities”

Despite these challenges however, women continue to be the backbone of their locales. Throughout SWC Roadshow events we are repeatedly impressed by the strong role women play in their communities, delivering food parcels, organising youth events and providing elderly neighbours with social interaction. This is often carried out with little to no support from local and national authorities, indirectly punishing women for their invaluable efforts. We therefore strongly believe local communities must be more effectively financed and resourced to ease the burden often placed on women’s shoulders.

What impact does social media have on community cohesion?

Social media can have a positive impact on community cohesion. Women stated that social media is an effective communication tool, enabling communities to share news and events with local populations. This concept arose when discussing social isolation with women. Some expressed their gratitude for social media sites during the Covid-19 pandemic, explaining that these sites enabled contact with family and friends during national lockdowns. Women also used Facebook groups to gather information about local support services: for example, those classed as vulnerable were able to contact groups to access food parcels and other forms of support. Additionally, women have stated that they have been assisted in handling the current cost of living crisis through social media forums. They pointed to groups which provide guidance and information about social security payments and localised services.

- “I think that social media is a great way of keeping in contact with people and I can stay up to date with what’s going on”
- “...social media can be positive...round here it’s really good for finding out what’s going on”
- “I didn’t know what social security existed! I don’t know how I would have found the right information if it hadn’t been for Facebook groups.”

Conversely social media can be viewed as a negative force with regards to community cohesion. The pull to carry out the majority of social interaction via social media sites is strong, particularly for younger women. It has been estimated that 70% of 14-year-olds

spend at least one hour per day on social media or messaging people they know⁵ and 22% of 13-year-old girls carry out “problematic” social media use⁶. The ease and popularity of social media tools act as key drivers in retaining young women within their homes, preventing them from actively engaging in their local communities. However, as stated above, the reduction in physical spaces for young people to congregate have become limited. Across Scotland there has been a drop in the number of available youth groups, with women reporting a lack of engaging local activities. Therefore, without enticing alternatives, it is unlikely community spaces will be fully used by young women, retaining social media as the sole communication tool.

What can be done at a local and national level to improve community cohesion?

Poor financing has been identified as the underlying factor in poor community cohesion. Consistent underfunding across Scottish communities has resulted in facility closures and a reduction in service-provision. We would therefore emphasise the need for increased financial resources, with an equality lens taken throughout funding decision-making. This process would enable money to be invested meaningfully, with particular groups targeted as requiring immediate support.

From our conversations with women in Scotland, we would recommend a focus on those at risk of social isolation, such as older women. Across the country, women continue to have a longer lifespan than men, with the average female life expectancy being 80.8 years compared to 76.8 for men⁷. Women over 50 are also more likely to report anxiety, feel less motivated and experience worsening memory than men over 50⁸, each a sign of poor mental health. It can therefore be argued that it is of great importance to gain a greater understanding of what is causing worsening mental health states amongst older women.

In addition, young women face an increased risk of poor physical social interaction. The reduction in youth services across the country is highly concerning, pushing young women into exclusively online relationships. At the SWC, we are aware of the potentially damaging impact of social media sites, with young women citing poor mental wellbeing and low levels of self-worth as a result of usage. It is vital to provide girls with alternative socialisation methods, with community spaces acting as a platform for positive behaviour. As a result, we believe that carrying out targeted interventions amongst these demographics could improve mental health levels, while simultaneously reinvigorating local communities.

Furthermore, as stated, safety is integral to the maintenance of community cohesion. Without safe spaces, women are less likely to engage in community activities,

⁵ Scottish Government. (2022). Life at Age 14: Initial Findings from the Growing Up in Scotland Study. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/life-age-14-initial-findings-growing-up-scotland-study/pages/7/>

⁶ University of Glasgow. (2024). International Study Reveals Insights into Young People's Online Habits in Scotland. Available at: https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline_1112525_en.html

⁷ National Records of Scotland. (2024). Life Expectancy Increases. Available at: <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/latest-news/life-expectancy-increases/>

⁸ AgeUK. (2024). I Just Feel that No-one Cares. Available at: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/siteassets/documents/professionals/mental-health-hub/i-just-feel-that-no-one-cares-march-2024.pdf>

particularly if they face misogynistic or discriminatory behaviour. We would highlight the need for a wider cultural shift, beginning in school settings, which actively tackles misogynistic behaviour. The Scottish Government outlined their intention to create a Misogyny Law, to criminalise misogynistic abuse, something which was viewed positively by women in Scotland⁹. We would recommend a similar approach be taken by the UK Government, proposing that communities must become safe, positive spaces for all community members.

Additionally, while larger cultural change is essential, women have also pointed to infrastructure as a contributor to feelings of insecurity. They have stated that due to poor consideration of their needs, such as improved street lighting and easily accessible public transport options, women are being put at risk. To counteract this issue, we would recommend the embedding of gendered analysis throughout city and town planning. Through a gendered approach, women's needs can be catered to, empowering them to engage across communities in higher numbers.

How should community cohesion be best approached in schools?

While funding remains the key driver of reduced community cohesion in Scotland, it has been argued by some women that a wider culture change is responsible. Women have pointed to the increase in agnostic lifestyles amongst young people as a potentially community eroding factor. They proposed that religion encouraged positive qualities across society, with a clear focus on volunteering and charity.

- “I think that relates back to the lack of religion, like religion was where you would go for these groups and for that community, but the fact that there are fewer people engaging with churches, it's not really seen as a place you can go for help.”

Women also expressed concern surrounding the drop in volunteer numbers, believing that fewer young people were taking part in volunteering. Volunteer Scotland found in 2022 that there had been a reduction in young women formally volunteering since 2014, however, this figure was higher than adult volunteering rates¹⁰. This drop can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, with young women having fewer volunteering opportunities and services closing during national lockdowns. It is hoped that as Scotland continues to recover, volunteer numbers will return to pre-pandemic levels. In order to achieve this, engaging with schools may assist in revitalising a sense of community. We would recommend cross-sector opportunities, enabling young women to enter their local communities where needed.

- “Every charity, every group at the moment is struggling for volunteers...They're [young people] are not getting involved or taking their turn...there's not that same sense of community, volunteering and contribution.”

⁹ Scottish Women's Convention. (2023). Reforming the Criminal Law to Address Misogyny. Available at:

<https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/reforming-the-criminal-law-to-address-misogyny-final.pdf>

¹⁰ Volunteer Scotland. (2023). Young People in Scotland Survey 2022. Available at: <https://www.volunteerscotland.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Young-People-in-Scotland-2022.pdf>

Yet, we must reiterate that young people carry out high levels of volunteering in Scotland. Despite often lacking the means and the physical spaces in which to engage with their communities, they continue to do so. We acknowledge the importance of embedding a sense of community from a young age, however, it may instead be valuable to understand why young people stop supporting their communities as they enter adulthood. From our response, it can be said that this is likely due to the intense pressure young women are under to provide vital caring support for their families, while balancing work and their own wellbeing. We therefore repeat calls for local communities to be comprehensively invested in, to ensure all citizens have equal access to the support they need to thrive.

Conclusion

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

- Increase funding at a community level to enable community cohesion.
- An equality lens must be taken during funding assessments, with groups most in need, such as older and young women, receiving targeted support.
- Commit to eradicating discriminatory behaviour, to provide safe spaces for all.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Women and Equalities Committee's **Call for Evidence on Community Cohesion**. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to this topic and its effects on women's equality.

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

Email - info@scottishwomensconvention.org

Telephone - 0141 339 4797

Website – www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Facebook, X & Instagram - @SWCwomen

