



Gender Equality Strategy

Phase One

Scottish Women's Convention

July 2025

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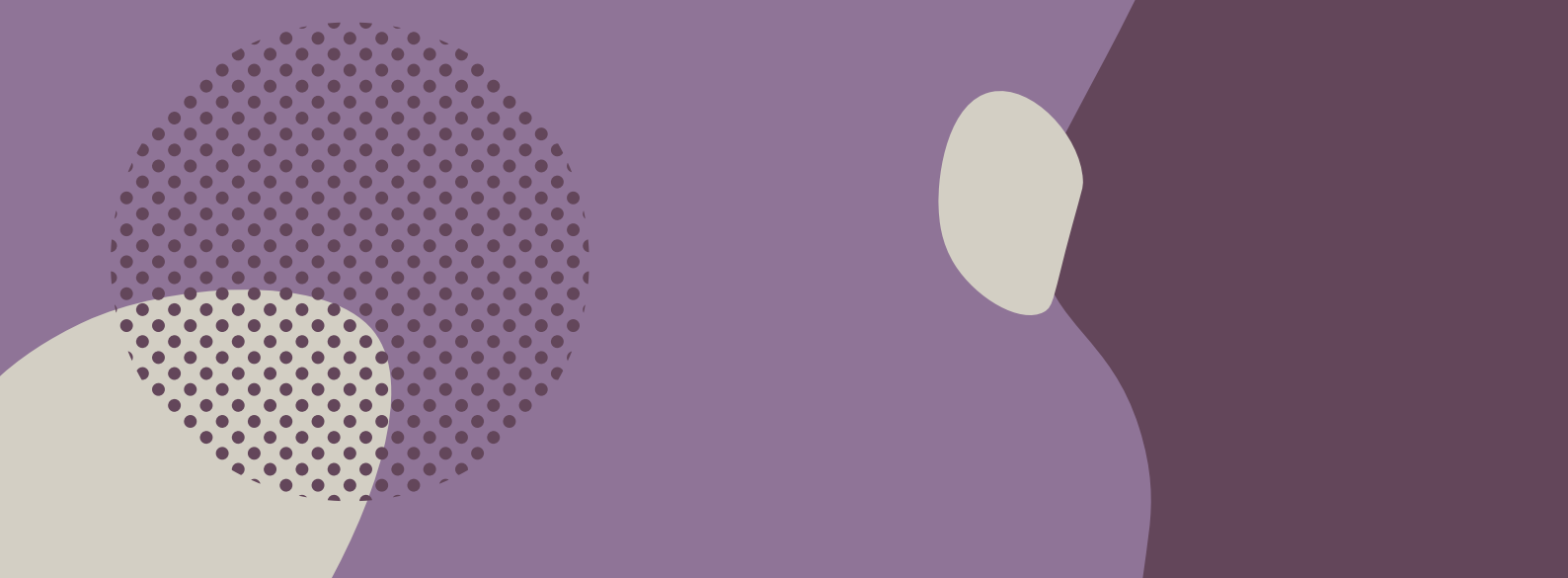
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Gender Equality Strategy

The Scottish Government, through the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG) and the Empowering Women Panel (EWP), is leading the development of a national strategy to address gender inequality and advance the rights of women and girls across Scotland. Central to this process is the commitment to ensuring that the strategy is informed by the lived experience, insights, and aspirations of women and girls from all communities.

To support this aim, the Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) was invited to contribute to Phase One of the engagement process. The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland, to ensure that their views are meaningfully represented in policy and decision-making processes.

Drawing on its extensive network of equalities organisations and community groups, the SWC invited women to a series of roundtable discussions. These conversations provided a platform for participants to reflect on the key themes and questions identified by the NACWG and EWP, and to articulate their own vision for a more equal and inclusive Scotland.

This report represents the findings of those roundtable discussions, capturing the voices and perspectives of women who engaged with the process. Their insights will inform the development of the strategy's goals and vision, ensuring that it reflects the realities and ambitions of women and girls throughout Scotland.



“Thank you to everyone who contributed to these findings.” – Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair



“

Scotland had the
Enlightenment; it was
held up as this
incredible place for
education and
discovery, but we
need a new
Enlightenment, one
that reimagines our
priorities.

”

Women highlighted the value equality would bring to Scotland's public services and spaces.

With a clear focus on medical inequity, women explained that their general wellbeing levels were being eroded. Those residing in rural locations, believed that the issue of access was of vital importance. This has been regularly identified by SWC activities, with the centralisation of medical services contributing to poorer outcomes for women¹.

What would Scotland look like if women and girls had equality?

“We would have the same opportunities for our health and have funded research, making sure that women's health is equal to men's.”

“Healthcare would be accessible for all and not a postcode lottery.”

Women consulted provided multiple experiences which emphasised the continued medical misogyny faced by women and girls in Scotland. A lack of consideration of women's unique health needs fuels gendered disadvantage, contributing to low levels of cardiac and mental health. While Scottish Government initiatives, such as the Women's Health Plan, have worked to improve awareness of women's healthcare needs, medical misogyny remains a significant issue for many. Women proposed that in the realisation of an equal Scotland, medical misogyny would be eradicated.

“We would have access to healthcare and be listened to”

“There should be no healthcare misogyny and gaslighting; we should all have person-centred care.”

This inequity follows women across their lives, including within social care settings. When consulting with women, they explained that inequality was related to the devaluing of social care in Scotland; women make up the majority of social care providers and users, resulting in the sector being largely ignored and underfunded. Disabled women explained that only through improved commitments to social care services, could equality be achieved in Scotland. Therefore, by considering the varying experiences of women, a range of needs can be effectively valued.

“So, I'd say, definitely for disabled women, what would an equal Scotland look like? Huge investment in health and social care; scrapping health and social care charges, especially around that kind of preventative health element; and accessing information”

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

Women agreed that in an equal Scotland, health and social care services would be accessible to all, regardless of location or characteristic. Women and girls would receive timely and appropriate care, with their health needs prioritised and addressed with the same urgency as men's. This would lead to improved health outcomes, reduced health disparities, and a higher quality of life for women and girls across the country.

Women explained that in an equal Scotland, public spaces would be designed to consider women and girls' needs. This linked strongly with women's sense of safety, with attendees stating that current infrastructure, such as poor lighting and transport services, prevented them from fully participating in public life. Women provided a range of activities which they would enthusiastically take part in if full equality was gained – this included work, education, recreation, and sport. Those in attendance agreed that equality would impact design more generally, with products such as appliances becoming user-friendly for all. It was suggested that equality would improve life experiences universally, enabling enhanced wellbeing and living standards.

What would Scotland look like if women and girls had equality?

“...we see [discriminatory] assumptions systematically seeping through to more basic appliances as well; things like hand dryers have been designed to not recognise darker skin”

“If we had equality, then there would be bus and train services running all through the night, and you would feel enabled to take the bus, so you can maybe have better options for your career”

“In my town, we don't have a lot of street lighting because it's not deemed as a priority up here. In the winter, when it's dark all the time, it is quite scary walking by yourself place to place”

Eradicating gender stereotypes was identified as a likely positive consequence of an equal Scotland.

Gender stereotypes were described as limiting factors in women's lives. They stated that through strictly defined expectations, women were prevented from entering some industries, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Young women explained that poor representation across these subjects was a significant barrier and hoped that equality would result in women and men working collaboratively to improve systems.

What would Scotland look like if women and girls had equality?

“...I think you can't be where you feel that you're not seen...I guess from a young age, you're maybe taught that [subjects] could be really difficult for you, and then you don't see any teachers who are like you, so you assume it's not for you.”

“I think the vision of equality would mean all women, no matter the culture, are equally represented in all fields, and not just in positions where they're making the teas and coffees, but in leadership”

Norms work to further prevent women and girl's advancement through continued domestic expectations. Women and girls carry out the majority of domestic labour, providing invaluable care and support within households. Caring responsibilities are widely acknowledged as a key barrier to women's full participation in education and employment. Women proposed that an equal Scotland would encapsulate the private sphere, with domestic tasks equally split amongst family members.

“[If we had equality the] mental load wouldn't fall on women, you know, to remember to do the traditional 'woman' things, as well as doing your full-time job”

“It's about equality, about people being equal partners and contributors to society”

Women emphasised the harm caused by gender stereotypes to all peoples, stating that traits, often associated with toxic masculinity, prevented men and boys from leading happy and healthy lives. Equality was viewed as a clear solution to this issue, with women in attendance believing that this would positively impact all of Scotland.

“Hopefully if we have equality, then I can stop being worried about my son; he can be whatever he wants to be...It's saying to men that it's okay to be you.”

“...if we reach equality, it's no just about the women, it's about the boys, because society is telling them the kind of men they should be growing into.”

Goals outline what is important to women and girls, providing focus for the strategy.

Women were given examples developed by the NACWG and the EWP to discuss:

- “Women and girls are safe”; “Women and girls are healthy”; “Women and girls are represented”
- “Scotland is a safe place for women and girls”; “Scotland is a place where women and girls are healthy”; “Scotland is a place where women and girls are represented”
- “I am safe”; “I am healthy”; “I am represented”

Women presented a range of views on the suggested goals. Generally, they agreed that the goals should be **simple and easy to understand**, stating that those provided met this criterion. This simplicity however was challenged by some as lacking aspiration. Some women expressed frustration surrounding the lack of wider progress towards equality and believed that the strategy’s goals should demand more from Scotland’s decision-makers.

“[The goals] are quite nice and I can see some similarity between them and the rights of the child, the wording, which is good”

“I think it’s a low bar. That’s not really a goal; these things should just be normal. If that’s what we’re aiming for, then that’s shameful for Scotland as a society.”

“We should be considering what Scotland should look like, rather than just looking at what we don’t have right now. It doesn’t seem very aspirational or even new...It should include things like ‘have choices’, ‘be empowered’. Once you get these things, then you’ll become safe, you’ll become healthy.”

When asked what additional goals could be incorporated, women provided multiple ideas. They highlighted the need to include concepts such as **choice, empowerment and empathy**, to create a just and fair society for all. Empowerment in particular was focused on by those consulted; it was suggested that individuals are more likely to meet wider goals if they feel empowered to do so.

What should
the goals of
the strategy
be?

“I think that the goals should include things like empathy, compassion, valued, listened to, respect and inclusion.”

“They have to include something about empowerment, about choice and agency, because some people have fewer choices.”

Women also debated the language of the goals themselves. Generally, conversations focused on the use of “I am”, with some believing that the individual nature acted as a tool of empowerment. The majority of women consulted proposed however, that the use of individualised language furthered a wider narrative of self-blame, allowing decision-makers to negate responsibility. Instead, women suggested “**We are**”, to enable a **collaborative approach** to governance. The idea of embedding feminist concepts across decision-making was furthered by women when discussing the notion of power. They explained that government debate should pivot towards collaboration, actively tackling patriarchal norms.

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“The simpler the better, and them being on an individual basis makes them more impactful for every citizen of Scotland, not just women and girls”

“...‘I am healthy’, that almost feels like the onus is just on you. So, I love the statements, but I think there’s something around that”

“...I think that it should be ‘we’ rather than ‘I’, you know, are we just advocating for ourselves? Making it ‘we’ would add in an element of collaboration, which flies in the face of more heavily masculine things. It would be about collaboration and community.”

“It’s about what does strong mean? ...less of that toxic masculinity...give everyone the opportunity to interact with the feminine, so that decisions are made which benefit everybody, rather than just focusing on egos, power and greed.”

The vision is a single sentence which encapsulates the aims of the strategy.

The NACWG and EWP hope that this sentence is clear and easy to understand. A few early suggestions were provided to facilitate conversations:

- “We have a vision of Scotland where all women and girls are powerful; respected; can reach their full potential; are able to make impactful, meaningful change; are represented and valued in all aspects of society; and where Scotland sets an example for the rest of the world.”
- “A Scotland where women and girls are fully accepted for everything that they are and can be.”
- “Reimagining a bold and brave Scotland where all women and girls, regardless of background, feel equally/equitably safe, respected, embraced, and empowered in all spheres of society – economically, legally, politically, socially, culturally and more.”

When asked what they would like to see in the strategy’s vision, women highlighted the need to include words such as ‘**respect**’, believing that this could underpin an empathetic approach to Scotland’s governance. It was suggested that this ultimately acts as a “**bold and brave**” methodology, working to advance gender equality. They proposed that to be fully effective, the strategy’s vision must instead focus on **equity**, rather than equality. The need to change the strategy’s phrasing was quickly noted, with many suggesting that equity played a key role in achieving equal status for women and girls in Scotland. Equity was also identified as a major component of intersectional approaches, pushing decision-makers to consider the wealth of experiences held by citizens.


“I think we have to take an empathetic approach. We all come from different experiences, and we need to understand that no two experiences are the same. So, to have real progress, we have to be empathetic.”

“...maybe equitable, because for me, equality, everyone gets the same thing, but when we use the term equity, those who need help, they can be elevated to get the help they need”

“...we’re not at that equity point, so if you’re talking about gender equality, you have to talk about equity separately because you have to give the tools to the women...The vision should actually represent equity really.

With regards to the wording of the vision, women held mixed views on the options made above. They explained that the use of ‘women and girls’ acted as an othering tool, clearly demarcating a difference between men and women. This was viewed as a potentially limiting factor of progress, and it was suggested by some that the vision should instead cover everyone.

“I think the emphasis on girls and women makes us different, you know? It should include all people instead.”



What should
the vision of
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be?

A further comment made in relation to the overall vision of the strategy, was that of **accountability**. They therefore suggested the embedding of accountability mechanisms. Many outlined previous policy, stating that intentions were often good, however, this could be bypassed by local authorities. Women stated that through budgeting and assessment processes, accountability could be facilitated. They also suggested that the vision itself could facilitate accountability through the concept of **national responsibility** by placing onus on the entirety of Scotland.

What should the vision of the strategy be?

“I think for me, what’s missing throughout strategies is that accountability.”

“Maybe something like ‘Here in Scotland, we are equal, and everyone is valued and respected’. Take the women and girls out and make it about Scotland”

Women also highlighted the importance of education, believing that the strategy should have a clear vision to educate all Scottish citizens on equality. They focused on positive impacts, suggesting that through effective engagement with men and boys, gendered inequalities would be lessened. It was emphasised that this education should be carried out within schools, however without full societal commitment, achieving equality would be unlikely. Women therefore questioned the realisation of the vision if education was not embedded.

“Well, laws don’t change men’s attitudes; you have to have the education alongside it.”

“...they do say that boys don’t know what they’re supposed to do anymore, they don’t know their roles or whatever, so we should be starting with the boys.”

“...someone said about their son being around his sisters, and that means he turned out well...that starts at home. If it’s not there, then it won’t matter about [this strategy].”

Linking with comments made above, women overall felt that the strategy **lacked ambition**. Their dissatisfaction at the continued degraded status of women across Scotland remained a consistent theme. This has been heightened by recent geopolitical crises, with misogynistic mentalities steering public debate. While the strategy was viewed as a potential solution to these developments, women believed that it must go further, aiming to alter Scotland’s processes and structures. Through collaborative and feminist methods, inequalities can be effectively challenged and eradicated. Women suggested that the current vision could therefore be reworded, listing values as a minimum standard rather than the final outcome.

“...why is a world in which women are treated with respect and empowered...considered bold and brave? Should this not be the base level?”

“We’re saying that we need a seat at the table, but no, we want our own table!”

“Aye, I mean, we were kidding on, weren’t we? It was a gift, all that equality stuff. Some guys let us in, but they didn’t change the structures, so the system was like a big bit of elastic; it’s then just pinged back to the beginning.”

With over 20 years of experience, the SWC brings a unique and informed perspective of women and girls' needs across Scotland.

Financial Independence

While not explicitly raised during roundtable discussions, the SWC believes that women's financial independence is a fundamental pillar of gender equality. Economic autonomy empowers women to make improved choices, enhancing their safety, and enables full participation in society. Embedding financial independence into the strategy – through fair pay, access to employment, financial literacy, and support for entrepreneurship – will ensure that women and girls are not only represented and respected, but economically secure.

Representation Across Society

True equality requires the full and visible participation of women and girls in all areas of public and professional life. While strides have been made, women – particularly those from marginalised communities – remain underrepresented across politics, STEM, media, the arts, and leadership roles. This lack of representation not only limits opportunities but also reinforces harmful stereotypes, narrowing the scope of decision-making. An equal Scotland must actively promote diverse and authentic representation across all sectors, ensuring that women's voices, talents, and experiences are reflected in shaping the nation's future.

Violence Against Women and Girls

Equality cannot be realised without the eradication of violence against women and girls (VAWG). VAWG, in all its forms, remains a pervasive barrier to women's safety, autonomy, and participation in society. The strategy consistently focuses on empowerment and representation; however, it must also commit to robust prevention, protection, and support systems that address the root causes of violence and enhances that all women and girls can live free from fear and harm.

Further
Reflections
from the
SWC



“

...this isn't just about
women, it'll only work
if it includes
everybody. It's not
just about women
doing it for
themselves, it's about
the whole of society
coming together to
make a better
Scotland.

”



Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention thanks all women who contributed to this important discussion. We also thank the Scottish Government for providing us with the opportunity to include women's invaluable lived experience into decision-making processes.

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