

# A MANDATE FOR CHANGE



## 2026 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS



# A MANDATE FOR CHANGE

**The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)** stands as a strong voice for women across Scotland with our policies based solely on their lived experiences. As an organisation, we are committed to ensuring that these experiences help to shape the decisions that govern women's lives.

Over the past five years, our work has been more important than ever. In a period largely defined by extreme social, economic, and political changes, the SWC has continued to ensure that women's priorities are fed directly into the heart of policymaking.

Since the last Scottish Government elections in 2021, the SWC has engaged with thousands of women and girls from across Scotland, through our roadshows in such rural and island communities as Campbeltown and Kintyre, Wick and the Isle of Skye and the Kyle of Lochalsh through to Scotland's cities such as Inverness, Aberdeen, Perth and Dundee. Through this engagement, as well as more local events, national conferences, targeted research, and direct consultations, the SWC has created safe and accessible spaces where women can speak openly about the issues that matter most to them.

These conversations have consistently highlighted the persistent inequalities women face: the disproportionate impact of poverty, barriers to adequate healthcare, the ongoing challenges of violence against women and girls, and the structural inequalities embedded in

such things as employment, housing, and social security and benefits systems.

During the COVID-19 recovery period, and the resulting cost-of-living crisis, the SWC has played a critical role in documenting the impact of these overlapping crises. Women told us of increased financial insecurity, rising unpaid caring responsibilities, deteriorating mental health, and limited access to essential services. From our findings, it is clear that these are not unique experiences but are instead systemic and predictable outcomes of policy decisions that failed to fully consider women's lives. The SWC has ensured these realities were brought directly to decision-makers, through a series of reports, consultations and direct engagement with policymakers, MSPs and government ministers.

Our work has also focused on those women whose voices are all too often marginalised: disabled women, minority ethnic women, older women, young women, and those living in remote and rural communities. By centring intersectionality within our approach, the SWC has challenged a one-size-fits-all mentality in policy development and instead continues to champion for solutions through clear evidence-based recommendations which recognise the many complexities of women's lived experiences.

# A MANDATE FOR CHANGE

As Scotland approaches its forthcoming elections in May, the SWC stands ready to work with all politicians who share our vision for women and girls across Scotland.

The following manifesto serves as both a reflective paper and a call to action and our demands for women are very clear. We are equally clear in saying that the time for listening without action has long since passed. It is now the responsibility of those in power, and those seeking it, to respond with accountability and commitment.

## This is not just a manifesto for women but instead a **mandate for change.**

Prior to working on this manifesto, the Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) consulted with women from across Scotland to gather their thoughts ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliament Elections.

What we have learned from this is that women are demanding change.

As of 2024, women accounted for just over 51% of the adult population in Scotland but despite this they continue to be overlooked in relevant policy and decision-making processes.

Whether this be in health, safety, quality of services, education, the workplace or On many other issues specific to them, women consistently face barriers which deny them equity, participation and meaningful representation.

On their behalf, the Scottish Women's Convention is calling on decision makers to address the key issues raised in this manifesto and to take urgent and sustained action throughout this campaign and beyond.

“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 [women's] priorities.”  
(Scottish Women's Convention Gender Equality Strategy Phase One, July 2025)

# FAIR WORK AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

**“Paid carers are having to pay triple taxi fares on Christmas Day in order to get to work.”**

*(SWC -The Realities of Scottish Social Care for Women, November 2025)*

Women’s economic inequality remains a structural issue in Scotland. The gender pay gap, occupational segregation, and insecure work disproportionately affects women.

We call for:

- The eradication of the gender pay gap through the introduction of mandatory pay transparency and enforcement.
- The expansion of secure, flexible working rights for all women.
- All employers to pay a real living wage.
- More investment in sectors where women’s paid work is overrepresented, including care, retail, and hospitality.
- Recognition of the value and commitment of part-time work.
- Recognition of unpaid care work in economic policy decisions.
- Stronger support for women entrepreneurs, particularly in rural and socially disadvantaged communities.

**“...it was always a challenge for me...I didn’t work until my kids went to school. And when they did, I worked in a call centre for two days a week and that was only manageable because of my parents.”**

*(SWC - What Should Childcare Look Like in Scotland, February 2024)*

# EDUCATION, FAIR ACCESS AND LIFELONG LEARNING

**“...you can have the best resources in the world, but if the staff don’t have the capacity, or the means to be fully trained in that content, or they choose not to teach certain aspects of that curriculum, then problems arise.”**

*(SWC Bullying and Harassment, June 2021)*

Education is key to empowerment, yet barriers persist for many women and girls.

We call for:

- Equal access to education and training for women at all stages of life.
- Targeted support for women returning to education after caring responsibilities.
- Action to tackle gender stereotyping in subject and career choices.
- Tackle misogyny and gender bias in schools and colleges.
- The reintroduction of practical life skills education into the curriculum.
- Investment in digital inclusion to ensure no woman is left behind.
- The promotion of places for women and girls across all Modern Apprenticeships.

**“[We must] incorporate and encourage discussion of women’s achievements in all subjects.”**

*(SWC Misogyny in Education Survey, 2025)*

## CHILDCARE AND OTHER CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

**“I could only take on jobs where I worked within childcare hours and I needed to watch my finances...I also felt being a single parent...I couldn’t advance my career.”**

*(SWC Childcare in Scotland Survey, 2024)*

The women we spoke to have made it clear that childcare and inflexible working patterns are two of the biggest barriers to work. Also, women, especially kinship carers and unpaid carers, provide vital support every day, often without recognition or adequate financial support. Paid care workers are also under pressure, with, in many cases, too little time being allocated in order to carry out their roles effectively.

We call for:

- Free, accessible childcare to allow women’s participation in the workplace and in wider public life.
- A universal, flexible childcare system that reflects women’s working patterns.
- Universal access to free school meals.
- Increased support for women caring for children with additional support needs, older relatives and those with other caring responsibilities.
- More investment in childcare in rural and remote areas

- Policies that address the unequal distribution of unpaid care, at present predominantly undertaken by women.
- The provision of regular respite breaks to protect carers' wellbeing.
- The recognition of unpaid care as real work and support carers accordingly.
- Improved pay, better workplace conditions and professional recognition and training for women working in the social and childcare sectors.
- Improved working conditions for paid carers so that they can spend meaningful time with those they support.

**“More and more families are taking on the care of their loved ones because they just don’t trust the system.”**

*(SWC The Realities of Scottish Social Care For Women, November 2025)*

## HEALTH & WELLBEING

**“I know my own body, but I still have to fight to be believed.”**

*(SWC Women’s Health Roundtable Glasgow North East, 2025)*

Women’s health needs are often under researched, underfunded and poorly understood. We call for:

- A comprehensive women’s health strategy that addresses gaps in services and research.
- Improved access to GP and primary care services across all geographical areas of Scotland.
- The reduction of unnecessary bureaucracy in the health care system.
- Increased investment in research into better understanding of women’s health issues.
- Improved access to mental health services tailored to women’s experiences.
- Assurances that women are actively involved in referral and treatment decisions on their care.
- Better support for reproductive health, maternity care, and menopause services.
- Action on health inequalities affecting marginalised groups, including disabled women and minority ethnic women.

**“We’re grateful for the scraps because we’ve learned not to expect more.”**

**“We’re not taken seriously, not with our health, in business, not anywhere.”**

*(SWC Health Roundtable Glasgow North East, 2025)*

# WOMEN'S SAFETY AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

**“I mean, media is so strong, it’s like the bedrock out of which [this misogyny] is growing from.”**

*(SWC Misogyny in Education Report, February 2025)*

Violence against women and girls remains a major issue across Scotland and therefore requires a coordinated and properly resourced response to it.

We call for:

- Guaranteed long term funding for frontline services to support survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence.
- Improved access to justice, including trauma-informed policing and court and judicial processes.
- Education and prevention strategies to address the underlying causes of continued violence against women and girls.
- Stronger protections against online abuse and harassment.
- The banning of sexualised advertising in public spaces.
- Tackle of the links between media representation and violence against women and girls.

# HOUSING, TRANSPORT AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

**“There was a point in my life when I thought social housing was a wonderful thing, and now I can see a sector that has been Thatcherised and marketised.”**

*(SWC Women’s Experience of Housing in Scotland, February 2023)*

Secure, affordable housing is essential for women’s safety and independence. As well as this, women need a reliable transport system to help them feel and safe secure when travelling or commuting. Over 50% of the respondents to our recent Transport in Scotland survey rated public transport in their local areas at below a 5 out of 10.

We call for:

- Increased investment in social housing across Scotland.
- Housing policies that reflect women’s needs, including those fleeing abusive relationships.
- The need for homes to meet the needs of families and communities.
- Improved transport links to reduce isolation.
- The delivery of safe, affordable, and reliable public transport.

**“I used to walk home or get the midnight bus from town and never felt afraid but now I go to the city centre and I'm like; this feels really unsafe.”**

*(SWC Women's Health Roundtable Glasgow North East, 2025)*

## RURAL AND ISLAND WOMEN

**“...I mean we have to go to Inverness for most things, and the public transport is not reliable, so if you get an early appointment, you have to go the day before, but they don't take that into consideration when they're making appointments for you.”**

*(Scottish Women's Convention 2024 Roadshow, Wick June 2024)*

Women in rural and island communities often face very distinct challenges. We call for:

- Tailored policies that reflect rural realities.
- Improved access to healthcare, childcare, and employment opportunities.
- Investment in digital and transport infrastructure.
- Recognition of the vital role women play in sustaining rural economies and communities.

**“It's brilliant if you get a ferry and there's a bus waiting for you, but realistically, the bus will have left five minutes before the ferry gets in.”**

*(SWC 2024 Roadshow, Isle of Skye and Kyle of Lochalsh June 2024)*

## SOCIAL SECURITY

**“Before I got correct benefits I managed as a disabled woman on a small amount. I lost a lot of money over the years because I wasn't aware of my entitlement to them.”**

*(SWC Poverty Survey 2024)*

Women are disproportionately affected by welfare reforms and are more likely to manage tight household budgets under financial pressure. Devolved powers present an opportunity to create a more just and compassionate system.

We call for:

- The design of social security services that uphold dignity, fairness, and respect for applicants.
- The embedding of women’s lived experience in the design of social security and employability services.
- Constructive work with the UK Government to mitigate policy conflicts.
- Ensuring that all benefits and services are delivered with dignity, fairness, and transparency.

**“The system keeps women in poverty, particularly single women, single parents, they get limited support.”**

*(SWC The impact of Poverty on Women, November 2024)*

## REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION

Women remain underrepresented in decision-making at all levels.

We call for:

- Gender-balanced representation in political, public, and private sector leadership.
- Support for women to participate in civic and political life.
- Greater inclusion of diverse voices, including minority ethnic, disabled, and LGBTQ+ women.
- Continued engagement with women at grassroots level to inform policy.

## WOMEN’S VOICES IN DEMOCRACY

Women remain under-represented in political life despite making up over half of the population. This imbalance weakens democratic representation.

We call for commitments to:

- Encourage equal representation of women candidates across all parties.
- Require publication of gender-disaggregated election data.
- Support initiatives that enable women to stand for election.

Our manifesto reflects what women across Scotland have consistently told us: equality cannot wait. It requires political will, sustained investment, and a commitment to listening to women's lived experiences.

The Scottish Women's Convention pledges to work with policymakers, communities, and stakeholders over the next five years in order to help build a Scotland where every woman can thrive -economically, socially, and politically.

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

*(SWC Gender Equality Strategy Phase One, July 2025)*

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Scottish Women's Convention is a charitable company limited by guarantee. Registered in Scotland No. SC0327308.

Registered office 348 Argyle Street, Glasgow G2 8LX.

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