

The Scottish Women's Convention

WOMEN'S PRIORITIES FOR 2024/25

Programme For Government



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Who are we?

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 report 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 across Scotland.

Introduction

The Scottish Government publishes key actions each year in a Programme for Government document. These actions cover a range of areas, including health, housing, employment and more, furthering the overall values of the current Scottish Government. First Minister John Swinney, MSP, outlined four areas which he hoped would have the “most immediate benefits for people in their everyday lives”, underpinning plans for 2024-2025[8]. The four key areas were:

- **Eradicating child poverty**
- **Growing the economy**
- **Tackling the climate emergency**
- **Ensuring high quality and sustainable public services**

At the Scottish Women’s Convention (SWC), we believe that the voices of women are vital in the development of these democratic processes, proposing that women’s lived experiences must be included throughout decision-making.

To understand what women want from public service-providers in the 2024-2025[10] period, we gathered views from a rural and urban perspective. The focus of these activities, was to gain improved knowledge around women in Scotland’s priorities, considering if these align with the key areas outlined by the Scottish Government. The following document provides a report of women’s experiences in Scotland, utilising the information gathered during relevant SWC activities throughout 2024. We have also made multiple key recommendations, which can be found on page 4, that we believe align with the wants and needs of women in Scotland.



Women's Priorities

As a result of our discussions with women in Scotland, we have outlined the following recommendations, which we believe align with the priorities of women for the 2024/25 period:

- **Increase the number of teachers and teaching assistants, to provide the appropriate support for all children.**
- **Reduce childcare costs, creating a system of universal free childcare which is flexible and Scotland-wide, removing the key barrier to women's employment access.**
- **Re-establish healthcare provision across Scotland, with a specific focus on dental care, mental healthcare and the reintegration of face-to-face appointments.**
- **Carry out a comprehensive review of maternity experiences throughout the country, to understand the occurrences of pregnancy-related trauma.**
- **Build more social housing across Scotland for women and families.**
- **Tackle misogynistic and racist attitudes within the justice system through clear guidance and training for all staff, in an effort to eradicate male violence against women and girls.**
- **Increase the number of local authority care homes, to ensure the proper care of all women in Scotland.**
- **Centre social care as a key mechanism for the proper functioning of society, through improved funding for services and pay for staff.**
- **To address child poverty. One of the methods should be to provide universal free school meals for all.**
- **Provide local authorities with the power to establish an accessible, affordable, safe and integrated public transport system, improving women's transport options, while simultaneously reducing carbon emissions.**

Climate

The changing climates exhibited across the globe, present a clear cause for concern for the women of Scotland. Much public and political debate has followed the issue of climate change, however the Scottish Government have widely accepted that we are currently in the midst of a 'climate emergency', as highlighted in the First Minister's key areas of focus. This commitment is furthered through the Scottish Government's Climate Change Plan 2018-2032, which outlines aims of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 75% by 2030, and to reach net-zero emissions by 2045[9].

As of 2021, greenhouse gas emissions were down 49.2% since 1990, not meeting Government assigned targets[10]. Also, the target set for 2030, has been dropped by the Scottish Government, with UK Government policy cited as cause[11]. It is therefore, vital that further consideration is given surrounding the environment, with the following points raised by women highlighting their want for decisive action around climate change.

Awareness Raising

When discussing climate with women, there was a clear focus on improved awareness and education. They believed that it was vital that conversations were had within schools, as well as community hubs. This latter point was seen as particularly key in changing the behaviours of older adults, while also improving social cohesion through community projects. It was also proposed that climate change language can be off-putting, with complicated wording being a significant barrier for those with less knowledge on environmental issues. Women believed that instead, advertisement and community work should utilise inclusive, simplified language.

Awareness raising was also highlighted during the SWC's 'A Blether on... World Environment Day', where participants advocated for climate action hubs[1]. Scottish Government funded climate action hubs make up a network across Scotland where local communities are supported to develop climate action projects and build awareness[12]. This initiative closely links with women's focus on community-led activism, as they believe that additional funding should be made available for community projects Scotland-wide.

“...there isn't enough awareness. If something good is happening out there and people aren't aware of it, then it can't go that far.

“...it's great to engage with people who are already switched on to the issue, but really, you want to generate conversations with people who maybe... have busy lives

“...it needs to reach people outside of the school curriculum as well, they should be able to come along to climate cafes, climate conversations, even just in their own local community settings or groups.

Active Travel

Changing transport habits will play a large role in achieving Scottish Government net-zero targets. Transport accounts for 27.9% of Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions in 2021 and 41% of this is personal car usage[13]. As a result, the Scottish Government have outlined their want to increase levels of walking, cycling and wheeling, alternatively known as 'active travel' across the country. These hopes are in an effort to reduce transport-related emissions and better the health of citizens[14].

Overall, women viewed improvements to cycle lanes and pathways as positive, believing that this would enable more active travel choices. However, they highlighted investment disparities witnessed across public transport networks. Women suggested that public transport options, such as buses and trains, provided good alternatives to personal car usage, however, routes were often limited, prices high and the overall network was described as "disjointed". They suggested that until public transport offerings were improved, it is unlikely that many will choose to stop using personal vehicles, with this option being far more practical for most families. Women also raised the issue of safety in relation to public transport and active travel, explaining that due to safety concerns they were less likely to make use of either option, preferring a personal vehicle. **Therefore, if the Scottish Government hopes to tackle the climate emergency, it is imperative that public transport and active travel become safe and reliable for women.**

Women residing in rural communities, presented their concerns surrounding the focus on active transport goals, stating that they had no choice but to use their own vehicle. They explained that this related to the complete lack of public transport on offer, with their inherent rurality, making the likelihood of bus networks being put in place, unlikely. Instead, they hoped for improved road networks, such as the dualling of the A9, with more direct road links, reducing emission levels.

“

...cyclists have to share the road with vehicles – that's a safety risk.

“

...when we are promoting active travel... in rural areas, you absolutely need a car.

“

We must invest in public transport if we are to hit climate targets.

“

Low emissions zones and other initiatives to get people out of cars will only work if there is a reasonable public transport alternative.

“

...there isn't a safe feeling on a bus, there are no conductors, and because they don't have as many stops, you have to get off the bus and walk a good wee while.

Further detail surrounding women's views on transport, can be found on pages (22-23), alternatively please see our conference report entitled: How Can We Make Transport Work for Women and Families in Scotland?[2]

7 Education

In Scotland, there are 705,528 pupils attending school, and of those pupils, approximately 49% are girls[15]. Young women and girls' experiences of schools are highly variable, as the attainment gap between the most and least affluent communities remains stubborn and is in fact rising: 2024 SQA exam results, show that there is a Higher qualification attainment gap of 17.2 percentage points, compared to 16.9 in 2019[16]. With regards to teaching staff, there are just over 54,000 teachers across the country, 77% of which are women[15]. Due to this over-representation within the education workforce, it is clear that changes made will disproportionately impact women, therefore, requiring special consideration of their needs.

School Staffing Numbers

When consulting with women in relation to education, they show great concern surrounding the dropping numbers of teachers and assistants across Scottish schools. Recent budgetary decisions made within local authorities have resulted in a reduction in teaching staff. For example, within Glasgow City Council, 450 teaching jobs are to be cut over the next three years[17] and in Aberdeenshire Council, requests have been made to increase the annual allocation of new teachers to 44, but were instead allocated 20[18]. As stated previously, women make up the majority of teaching staff in Scotland, meaning that recruitment decisions directly impact women's economic independence.

Women highlighted mainstreaming policy, whereby, schools take an inclusive approach to education, ensuring that all children and young people "learn in mainstream schools and early learning and childcare settings"[19]. Women believed that the core principles of this policy were commendable, however due to a reduction in staffing numbers, were unsure that children with additional needs were being effectively served by the education system in Scotland. It was also stated that cuts to spending across the schooling estate, may result in a reduction in essential support services, such as breakfast clubs. Overall, women believed that education required increased funding, with specific commitments around school staffing numbers and inclusive practice.

"I think it comes back to funding...and the local authority budgets...in Glasgow they've been told to lose 400 teachers over the next three years...and that means children are not going to have the support."

"...it all comes back to that misogyny...the mother will just take care of them at home...women will pick up that work."

"...where has the one-to-one support...gone? Especially during their education years."

"I work with a lot of kids from other countries, but there is no agency really supporting them, I see kids struggling in secondary school every day."

"...there's so many kids that are living such fragmented lives with poverty...Bairns are going to school, they're not eating."

8 Young Women's Mental Health

Women proposed that there were gaps in current mental health provision for young people, believing that this was fuelled by a combination of factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic, violence and social media. It was suggested that the erratic education experienced by young women across national lockdowns, negatively impacted grades, as well as social skills and has increased anxiety levels.

Mothers recounted stories of their children being unable to attend school due to experiences of bullying and harassment, with young girls subjected to misogynistic abuse and assault. Young women themselves, have told the SWC of their experiences, with misogynistic comments made in-person and online being dismissed as 'banter', lowering their sense of self-worth. It was suggested that mental health support could be provided in sex and relationship education, including targeted interventions against dangerous and misogynistic behaviours.

“

...misogyny needs to be developed into the education process.

“

...I think for some of them, they were like primary six when Covid hit, and then there was a lot of variation on how much education they actually received...There was no transition for them, that's such a big thing...they were totally isolated.

“

...the headteacher said that it was my fault that my child wasn't attending school, but she was too anxious... No-one said that it wasn't okay for a little girl to be slapped or grabbed by the wrist.

“

...one thing is said about a girl...and then you have all the people talking about it, and you feel like everyone is talking about you...social media probably just makes that worse.

Examinations

When questioned on academic monitoring, women had varying views. Some believed that the current curriculum had a clear emphasis on examinations and academic performance, disadvantaging certain children. This has resulted in a devaluing of practical subjects, such as home economics or wood working, limiting the positive outcomes for children who did not want to attend university. However, some women did suggest that examinations were a fairer measure of educational achievement, requiring less at-home support from parents, limiting the effects of affluence. Therefore, further consideration is required surrounding the removal of examinations, with all arguments effectively reviewed.

“

All kids are taught in the same way, and not all children learn in the same way. I mean, as well, like all the exams you're testing memory, you're not testing knowledge.

“

Pupils who do not have the support at home, and don't have the input...exams are the most equitable way to get through their school education...the evidence is absolutely there.

“

...life skills need to be brought into education more...subjects like Home Economics seem to not be available... We are not setting our kids up to enter the real world correctly.

Employment

Good quality employment remains a key element of women in Scotland's lives, influencing their access to improved outcomes, while simultaneously providing the means in which the general Scottish economy can flourish. As of April 2024, 72.7% of women aged between 16 and 64 were in employment, 0.5% higher than the UK rate[20]. Despite the large proportion of women in paid work, women face a myriad of disadvantage within workplaces. For example, the gender pay gap remains persistent: in 2023, women employees earned 8.7% less per hour than men[21]. To meet the key aim of an improved Scottish economy, tackling the inequity experienced by women across workplaces should be of significant concern to the Scottish Government.

Working Conditions

Multiple commitments have been made by the Scottish Government to improve the working conditions and pay for workers through the Fair Work Action Plan. This Plan aims to promote fair and inclusive workplaces, incorporating actions to tackle gender and disability pay gaps and takes an anti-racist approach[22]. **Through this work, the Scottish Government have made some progress: gender and ethnicity pay gaps have narrowed and pay levels in general have increased**[23].

Much progress is still to be made; it has been found that approximately 10% of workers in Scotland are in jobs which pay below the real living wage, with 72% being women[24]. Women have suggested that this is likely due to part-time, low-quality work, being flexible and allowing for caring responsibilities. The experiences of ethnic minority women were also highlighted, with this group facing additional levels of discrimination. It has been estimated that people from ethnic minority backgrounds experience a rate of in-work poverty that is three times that of a white worker[24]. Women went on to state that as employment remains a reserved matter with the UK Government, major overhauls were unlikely, however they believed that the Scottish Government must do more to encourage change.

“

...employment relations are still a very reserved matter...so yeah, the Scottish Government try, but what they need to do is lobby Westminster more.

“

I know, from what women have told me, especially women from the African community, they feel that they're not being treated equally when it comes to employment.

Misogyny

As well as structural inequality, women face continued misogyny across workplaces, worsening their professional experience. The SWC carried out specific work around misogyny in May 2023, asking women to consider the newly developed Misogyny Law, whereby the Scottish Government will develop multiple new offences which seek to tackle misogynistic behaviour[25]. During this work, the SWC Team found that women continue to face misogyny across employment, namely poor promotion opportunities, boys' club mentalities, gendered roles and sexual harassment[3]. These experiences negatively impact women's mental wellbeing, while also forcing women away from paid employment.

Our 2023 report, *Misogyny in Scotland*, recommended the creation of anti-misogyny toolkits for employers and effective complaint mechanisms for those experiencing misogyny and sexual harassment.

“

...I had a guy member of staff. When I was running something...they would come in and speak to him. They assumed he was the boss...That would happen all the time.

“

...there had been a kind of, sexualised, smutty joke...I'm not going to go voluntarily into a situation where ridiculous jokes are being made when I'm trying to run a business.

Job Application Processes

When discussing work, women highlighted the job application process itself, stating that this can act as a significant barrier. They explained that poor communication from employers can be frustrating, contributing to feelings of low self-worth. It was felt that the job application process itself required specialist knowledge, which was not effectively explained to young people at school. Migrant women also explained cultural differences can heavily impact this process, with these women explaining that employers lacked cultural sensitivity. Women believed that there should be improved information surrounding job applications for young people, as well as awareness-raising around cultural differences.

“

I didn't actually know you could ask for feedback, it was my husband, who is from the UK, who told me I could do that, so I asked for feedback. That made me now realise that I had to learn how to do CVs, do application forms, be prepared for interviews.

Childcare

The societal pressure placed upon women to carry out most household tasks, prevents them from taking on full-time work and gaining promotions, contributing to the persistence of a male-breadwinner model. When asked how these pressures could be relieved, women were clear: an increase in the number of childcare providers across the country and the provision of universal free childcare should be available.

SWC work focusing on childcare has found that care options are often not flexible or affordable, again, placing pressures on mothers and grandmothers to fill in childcare gaps. Ensuring that childcare provision is comprehensive across all Scottish communities is imperative to women's labour market participation, without which, the Scottish Government cannot fully realise their hopes of improving the Scottish economy.

“

There is no-one providing private childcare here [rural location] ...I mean, [women] are leaving their jobs.

“

...you know, they may have children...at the same time they're looking after older relatives, it doesn't just stop when they come in the door... the work starts at home yet again.

“

Access to funded childcare from birth would alleviate the financial burden

Health

Throughout exchanges with women, the topic of health remains a constant – with women’s healthcare needs being insufficiently handled across Scotland. The Scottish Government have outlined plans to tackle elements of women’s unequal access to healthcare through the Women’s Health Plan. This Plan was launched in 2021, outlining plans to 2024, with specific health concerns being centred, including, menopause support, improved endometriosis diagnosis, postnatal contraception, access to abortion, improved menstrual health information and an overall reduction in health inequalities[26]. The below points shall highlight what is required over the 2024–25 period to improve women’s healthcare outcomes.

According to our survey, health was deemed to be the area which the Scottish Government should make their key priority for 2024/25

Obstetrics and Gynaecological (Obs and Gynae) Care

Whilst carrying out SWC Roadshow events, women provided multiple examples of poor support when accessing obs and gynae care. Firstly, women recounted distressing stories surrounding childbirth, with rural women travelling long distances to access support. In particular, our time spent in Wick, highlighted the lived impact of the centralisation of services, with pregnant women travelling for hours to give birth in Inverness’ Raigmore Hospital[5]. In some instances, women were unable to access maternity services, and instead, gave birth in cars and emergency departments. Women who reside in urban communities have also alluded to a worsening maternity experience, with the removal of patient autonomy being of great concern. These women raised negative birthing experiences, highlighting a rise in birth-related trauma.

“

We are hearing more and more about scheduled inductions and C-sections, so they can time these things. We are finding that women have less choice.

“

We’re creating a whole load of women with birth trauma... That hospital seems to be incredibly cynical about women’s wisdom and women’s knowledge of their own body.

“

My oldest was nearly born in a layby by Loch Ness...that was really traumatic. Really traumatic.

The SWC also heard from women who have experienced menopause. Menopause support for women across Scotland remains sporadic, with many being offered anti-depressants as initial treatment. Anti-depressants can provide relief from hot flushes[27], however, may not be appropriate in every case, and women stated that there is an over-reliance on this treatment method. Awareness of menopausal symptoms also appears to present a challenge in relation to treatment, with poor education contributing to misinformation from both medical professionals and patients.

“

I didn’t have any clue what was going on...I thought it was dementia, I couldn’t stop crying, and my doctor told me I was depressed, so put me on antidepressants. It was two years before I even heard the word menopause

Rural Health

Women residing in rural communities in Scotland face increased challenges when attempting to access healthcare. Centralisation has resulted in a reduction of community-based services, with women being redirected to larger hospitals. Accessing hospitals for routine treatment was frustrating for women, particularly due to the poor transport options available. For example, women with endometriosis explained that centralisation had seriously impacted their access to treatment, and regular long-distance travel to hospital had worsened their personal and financial wellbeing.

Women living in rural areas have also explained that the low number of healthcare staff has contributed to the poor situation. The reduction in public services available within communities, such as healthcare, schools and childcare, has caused fewer young professionals to move to rural areas. This has an inevitable impact on employee numbers, resulting in depopulation. Depopulation has been recognised as an issue facing multiple areas across Scotland, with [SWC Roadshow Reports](#) providing further detail[5].

“

...I mean we have to go to Inverness for most things, and the public transport is not particularly reliable, so if you get an early appointment, you have to go down the day before.

“

If we don't have young people, we can't sustain everything...like how do you get childcare if there are no workers...How do you get all the services that you need, if you don't have people to deliver them?

“

We have had high quality professionals move away

Dentistry

A further area of concern for women across the country, has been the reduction in dentistry provision. Women explained that dental practices are closing, resulting in fewer NHS-funded places. Women highlighted that dental hygiene is a vital element of health and should therefore be provided by the NHS. The dental sector was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with lockdowns resulting in almost complete closures and dental students being prevented from continuing with their studies. These factors have caused major treatment backlogs, which the Scottish Government have aimed to manage through reducing the regularity of standard check-ups[28]. Women hold concern surrounding these changes, believing that the wider oral health of Scottish citizens will degrade.

“

I think most people have to go private for their dentists now. It's privatisation through stealth!

“

...I am aware that dentistry here is pretty much non-existent, that's major. It's actually quite serious, I think. Plus, they're closing, so when you think about kids, they might not even see a dentist.

“

The lack of NHS dentists is a major problem. No dentists are accepting new patients. Almost all dental practices which had NHS people on their book have delisted or forced them to go private.

Mental Health

Women have reported that the current mental health provision is insufficient across the board, particularly support for young people through Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Women's mental health can also be seen to be deteriorating; between 2019 and 2022, women's average mental wellbeing scores fell by more than those for men[29].

Women have provided examples of increased isolation as a result of community facility closures, as well as substance use to manage mental health crises. Scotland's drug death crisis is continually worsening, with 2023 figures highlighting an increase of 2% for women, and a narrowing of the drug death gap between men and women[30]. It was suggested that third sector organisations are often fulfilling statutory duties, assisting families with the management of mental health conditions, despite limited resources. Calls have been made to increase long-term funding for third sector organisations, with a focus on offering community services.

“...for young people it's the waiting lists to see CAMHS that are through the roof. We've got few community psychiatric nurses, and then that puts a strain on mental health services, and so they're having to go to third sector organisations for help.

“People over the age of 60 are coming in and struggling because they're in the house on their own, they don't have these avenues anymore, and we need to be more aware of people's mental health.

“...we were working with people with substance use and mental health issues together, that funding has now stopped...That's the problem with the third sector, we start up stuff to support people and then the funding stops.

Patient Experience

Women in general have explained that the current patient experience is poor, requiring dedicated attention. They have alluded to an undercurrent of misogyny when discussing health concerns with medical professionals, with their pain and needs being dismissed. Women were also frustrated by the increased use of triage methods, whereby receptionists ask basic medical queries. They felt that this was a breach of privacy and made receptionists 'gatekeepers' of medical treatment. They also expressed concern in relation to the overuse of telephone and digital appointments, explaining that face-to-face meetings were preferable. Older women in particular stated that the increased usage of these appointments prevented them from accessing healthcare support. It can be said that this practice is exclusionary against those who do not have access to digital technologies. Women suggested improved training for primary care providers on women's health issues, as well as the re-establishment of face-to-face appointments.

“Since Covid, all interactions with the GP are taking place through the phone or email...nobody sees you face to face, and nobody takes you seriously.

“But I mean, that's a receptionist, you're having this conversation with someone who has no medical background, they're asking what's wrong...they have absolutely no medical training.

“An improvement would have to start with the attitudes of individual GPs, perhaps additional training; listening skills; building on expertise.

Housing

Access to safe and secure housing provides a stable basis from which women can succeed. Yet, Scotland is in the midst of a government-declared 'housing emergency', with the number of affordable homes reducing, rent levels rising and 45 children becoming homeless every day[31]. It has been estimated by Shelter Scotland that as of September 2023, 15,625 households were in temporary accommodation and that 1.5 million people live in overcrowded, dangerous, unstable or unaffordable housing[32]. Through the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living, which includes adequate food, clothing and housing[33]. ICESCR is just one international covenant which the Scottish Government has committed to incorporating into Scots Law through the development of the Human Rights Bill, which through the [SWC's consultation response](#), is shown to be viewed positively by women in Scotland[6]. Therefore, to achieve the key aims established by the First Minister, taking a human-rights based approach, which prioritises the right to housing is imperative to establish the foundations for societal growth.

Affordable/Social Housing

Women's key concern surrounding housing, is the lack of affordable homes available throughout Scotland. They explained that current housing prices on the private market are regularly increasing, as evidenced by the increase in average house prices across 18 of 32 local authorities and the Scottish average price of a new build property is £232,000. Increases were also witnessed within the private rental market, where increases are greatly dependent on location: for example, in Dumfries and Galloway private rents increased by 1.5%, while in Greater Glasgow, they increased by 22.3%[34].

It was suggested that these rises were the result of a lack of social housing stock, with increased need, driving exploitation. Of those who were unable to afford private options, they were left waiting on lengthy housing lists, with some experiencing homelessness. This was of great concern for women fleeing domestic violence, as the total lack of social housing prevents them from accessing alternative homes, remaining in refuges for an average of 142 days[35]. The uncertainty surrounding housing, is a significant barrier to women fleeing abuse, resulting in some returning to abusive households, particularly mothers, to regain a sense of stability[36]. Therefore, it is imperative that the Scottish Government work to increase the affordable, social housing stock, while taking a gendered approach to homelessness prevention.

“

Every time I think I have saved up for a deposit, the prices of houses jump up, and I'm left yet again saving for an ever-increasing mortgage.

“

...women in our refuge, it used to be about six months maximum to get them a place somewhere else...but now it's taking two years. These are women, vulnerable women, who need accommodation...And it can be made even more difficult if they have children.

“

...there is no housing, and I've gone looking for social housing, there's really nothing.

Rural Housing

Rural areas in Scotland have been significantly impacted by the level of housing available, with housing stock being reduced through geographical and logistical elements. However, in recent years additional factors have influenced local housing markets, such as the increase in demand for second homes and the number of wealthy retirees choosing rural Scotland as their home.

As noted in multiple SWC Roadshow Reports, housing prices in these regions are sharply rising. For example, the average house price in Ross, Skye and Lochaber in 2022/23 was £234,950[5]. Rural women explained that these high prices prevent young families from remaining in rural locations, causing depopulation, which in turn, reduces the number of workers to manage essential services, such as health and social care. Overall, women called for an increase in housing options across rural communities.

“

If we don't have young people, we can't sustain everything, it knocks on to everything...How do you get all the services that you need, if you don't have people to deliver them?

“

...my three sisters have all moved away, they just couldn't afford housing, they've been pushed out.

Household Costs

In relation to housing, women also stated that they have experienced increases in general household costs, such as heating and electricity bills. This has resulted in some turning to foodbanks to manage their household expenses. The increase in living costs has also impacted women in work, with in-work poverty remaining a significant challenge: 57% of working-age adults in relative poverty after housing costs were living in a household where someone was in paid work[37]. The responsibility for balancing household finances is often placed at women's feet, with women being described as 'shock-absorbers' of poverty. Women are more likely to go without food or essential items to ensure that their families are cared for, making rising living costs a directly gendered issue. As a result, the Scottish Government must consider how poverty interacts based on societal roles, actively tackling women's poverty as a priority, alongside children's poverty with the two being inextricably linked.

“

...everything is so expensive, I'm struggling to buy food, let alone clothes, I pay my bills, and then I can only afford my food shopping, that's it.

“

...that's the thing about the cost of living, is that it's impacting people who would normally never have felt those kinds of things.

Justice

Between 2022/23 and 2023/24, crimes recorded by Police Scotland increased by 4%: non-sexual crimes of violence increased by 4% and sexual crimes are now at the third highest level seen since 1971. Despite, these increases, Police Scotland estimate that only 29% of crimes are reported[38], with mistrust and stigma preventing women from accessing justice. This mistrust has been founded on a basis of misogyny and racism, as acknowledged by the former Chief Constable Sir Iain Livingstone[39]. Having access to a robust legal system is the cornerstone of civil society, while protection from potential crime enables women's participation in the public sphere. Therefore, ensuring that women and girls feel safe across Scottish society is vital in improving outcomes for the general populace.

Police Presence

When asked about how safe they felt in their local community, 63% of our survey respondents responded 'yes'. However, some did state that they would prefer to see an increase in police numbers, reasoning that budget cuts were to blame.

Ethnic minority and migrant women we spoke with had alternative views of an increased police presence from that of their white, Scottish counterparts. They provided examples of racism when interacting with police in Scotland, stating that these experiences prevented ethnic minorities from reporting crimes. Women who had sought asylum or had migrated to Scotland were further hindered, due to concerns around deportation. BME women, however, provided examples where they had worked alongside the police to improve relations. Yet, they explained that the lack of resources for police officers prevented many from engaging at a community level. Therefore, it is vital that Police Scotland take a well-monitored, anti-racist approach, alongside funding for police-community engagement.

“

...being a black woman...it's a shame, some cops as soon as they see you, it's the colour they see...you can tell, that yeah, you need to be careful, otherwise you will be in big trouble.

“

When there's a situation when they need to seek justice, an asylum seeker, a single parent, they will immediately think, 'oh my god, what will happen to me and my children?'. They don't want to go [to the police] because if they do, they will report themselves.

“

...I organise sessions, where the police come in and hear from the women themselves about what they're going through...I was able to bring in hate crime and reporting.

Training for Police Staff

During discussions with women, they explained that there should be improved training held in conjunction with community groups, actively targeting issues which disproportionately impact women and girls, such as domestic abuse. It was felt that stigma remains a significant barrier when reporting domestic violence and sexual assault and the risk of not being believed when speaking with the police. This was likely based in engrained misogynistic attitudes, which must be actively confronted through effective training for all police staff. It was suggested that this should be carried out in a community setting, in an effort to establish trust between the police and women.



Many women do not report incidents of domestic violence, sexual assault or harassment, due to a lack of trust in the justice system and fear of not being believed.



Sometimes they [police] don't come when invited [to community information sessions], because they don't have capacity, so are the police funded enough to do these things?

Sentencing Women

The issue of sentencing women arose during conversations, with many believing that sentences can often be harsh. Some women explained that police officers carry out mediation, in an effort to minimise the risk of court appearances. However, it was suggested that this intervention can be ignored by the wider justice system, with charges being brought against vulnerable women and girls unnecessarily. Women felt that this was related to an institutional bias, whereby women's poorer access to economic stability, a deep-rooted misogyny and discrimination impacted experiences of justice. Women also alluded to the wider impact on families when women enter the justice system. In cases where a mother is jailed, children can be taken into care, adding to distress. Alternatively, we would recommend an emphasis on community-based sentencing, alleviating pressures on women and the wider family unit.



Women on low incomes do not have fair access to justice in Scotland.



The majority of the women who have to go into prison, the majority of them are there because they can't afford to pay fines for petty crimes.

Elitism

Women proposed that a wider re-assessment of the justice system in Scotland was required, explaining that the current model was outdated and elitist. Class differences were cited as a significant contributor to harsh sentencing, with many in positions of judiciary power lacking understanding of the problems faced by those in desperate need. It can also be suggested that due to a lack of representation across powerful judiciary positions, issues which disproportionately impact women, such as domestic abuse, are overlooked – women make up only 27% of these appointments[40]. Victims and witnesses of crime, have emphasised their interactions with powerful judicial staff, stating that this can be belittling and actively harmful, degrading their trust in the wider justice system. Therefore, we would recommend a large-scale review of the criminal justice system in Scotland, enabling modernisation and the embedding of an anti-misogynistic, empathetic approach.



...we have a criminal justice system that doesn't work. The people who are operating within that system, and I'm not talking about the police...We have people there who have been spoon-fed their entire lives, they have no idea of what reality is really like.



There is evidence of gender bias in the handling of cases involving women, from police response to judicial decisions.

18 Social Care

Social care can be defined as care which supports people with daily living tasks, to enable independence and an improved quality of life. This care can take place within the home or within a specific location, such as a care home or sheltered housing, providing support for the elderly, disabled and unpaid carers. Women make up the majority of the care workforce, 80%[41], and women also carry out the largest share of household caring responsibilities. It can also be said that women are more likely to be in receipt of social care in Scotland, making up 61% of service-users[42]. Therefore, it is clear that social care is dominated by the presence of women, and so requires women's priorities to be embedded throughout policy development.

Care Homes

During 2022/23, there were approximately 50,000 people residing in Scottish care homes, 69% were women[43]. Women's increased representation within care homes is likely due to their higher life expectancy, which is currently 80.7 years, compared to 76.5 for men[44]. Scotland is also undergoing significant population changes: the number of those aged over 65 has increased by 22.5%, evidence of an ageing population[45]. This rise in older people will likely result in an increased reliance on the social care sector, in particular care homes and community-based care.

Despite this, women across Scotland highlighted the reduction in care home numbers. Between 2013 and 2023, there was a 19% decrease in the number of care homes, with the majority of spaces being provided by the private sector[43]. Women highlighted how the reduction in numbers had increased pressure on unpaid carers and isolation for older women where care in the community was limited. Those residing in rural areas, highlighted that isolation was particularly prevalent, due to poor transport networks and long distances. Women explained, that often, elderly people within rural areas were placed in care homes which were far removed from their local community, eroding social connections.

“

The care homes are closing. The availability of getting a place is very difficult.

“

There are very few options [for social care]. Some people can be told to go quite far away, they've maybe lived here [in a rural community] all their life, and sometimes a couple can be separated...they're split up during the final years of their lives.”

Social Care Employees

As intimated above, social care workers are facing increasingly pressurised workplaces, due to a myriad of factors. The sector has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with burnout and trauma reducing workforce numbers; Brexit has caused a reduction in social care staff from the European Union; and consistent undervaluing of services results in low pay rates. It is this low pay that was of significant concern for women, with many believing that pay must increase by a substantial level to properly compensate social care workers for their crucial service. They suggested that pay rates were closely linked to a general devaluing of the sector, which was fuelled through women's over-representation in the workforce.

The Scottish Government have proposed a move towards a wellbeing economy, whereby economic activity serves to deliver improved health and wellbeing. With social care provision being a key element of this initiative, ensuring that social care staff are effectively valued and financially provided for will be imperative for the development of the Scottish economy.

“

Social care needs a makeover...change how social care is viewed, perceived and understood. Improve pay, invest in services, respect staff.

“

...I mean the workers in social care are undervalued, because the majority are women, they're not paid enough...I think there's going to be a catastrophe, unless something really serious happens.

“

...a few of the carers took my [disabled] son down to a theme park a few weekends ago...that's the narrative that we need to be sharing around social care...one of them said that their job was to go into work and make sure that someone's happy

Furthermore, the social care sector has a vacancy rate of 43%^[41] Women suggested higher staff wages would attract potential workers. It can be said that social care work is highly skilled, requiring qualifications and many personal skills. Therefore, ensuring that pay is reflective of these elements is vital in filling social care staffing gaps, as is recognising the multifaceted nature of the sector.

“

The social care system was already challenged in terms of recruitment and safe staffing pre-pandemic, and this has only worsened since. Recruitment and retention rates are very difficult with care sector jobs competing with supermarkets for staff.

Ableism and Ageism

Women also believed that the social care sector was largely undervalued due to the prevalence of ageism and ableism across Scottish society. They explained that there is a lack of care and respect for older women and disabled women, which ultimately resulted in poor fiscal provision. These groups have regularly explained that their views and opinions have been ignored across all sectors, directly impacting their quality of life. It was stated that increased consultation must be had with service-users to understand the social care journey, as well as a wider reframing of social care, which recognised its significant impact on society.

“

I think it all comes back to disabled people and their families not being valued, they're seen as a burden; that they cost too much.

“

...if we take it right back, it's that disabled people aren't valued, they're seen as a burden. So, if we start from that premise, everything we build on top of that is gonnae be piecemeal.

Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs)

Concern was raised surrounding the integration of health and social care across Scotland, through the implementation of HSCPs. There are 31 HSCPs in Scotland, and they are responsible for adult social care, adult primary healthcare and unscheduled adult hospital care, some also take on the responsibility of children's services, homelessness and criminal justice social work[46]. Women did propose that partnership working could benefit the Scottish populace, believing that improved social care services improved health outcomes. However, it was suggested that healthcare was clearly prioritised over social care, with funding being allocated accordingly. Therefore, women believed that in order to improve health outcomes, social care should be properly resourced and valued within HSCPs.

“

...the focus is on healthcare and the NHS, without cognisance that an appropriately funded and staffed social care system could solve many of the problems of the NHS system.

“

...all the managers in HSCP are health, they don't know about the social model of disability, they don't know about human rights...They see lots of stuff around time and task, it's about keeping people alive.

National Care Service (NCS)

During conversations, we asked women for their views on the proposed NCS. The NCS Bill was introduced in 2022, outlining the key principles and services included. This decision was made as a result of an independent review of social care, the Feeley Report, led by an Advisory Panel made up of multiple health and social care professionals. This Panel lacked representation from paid and unpaid care workers, however additional efforts were made to work alongside these groups throughout the review. The review concluded that a NCS would “achieve the consistency that people deserve”, making 53 recommendations[47]. These recommendations were then to be built upon by the Scottish Government, enabling an improved social care system.

The Scottish Government have stated that the proposed NCS will enable “access to consistent, high-quality services” across Scotland, at time of need[48]. Women are not convinced. They expressed considerable disappointment in relation to the integration of the Feeley Report's recommendations into current NCS plans. In particular, women believed that Scottish Government proposals lacked ambition, and would ultimately, not rectify the persistent undervaluing of the social care sector. Women instead called for a reconsideration of current NCS plans, fully incorporating the recommendations of the Feeley Report.

“

The current Bill is not fit for purpose and does nothing to meet the expectations of the Feeley Report, which was intended to inform the direction of travel of the NCS.

“

I think what I struggle with, is the fact that they're ignoring the majority of the recommendations in the Feeley report...it's now getting watered down.

“

Introducing a diluted National Care Service will not improve this [social care] situation.

Social Security

Reducing child poverty has been clearly outlined as a Scottish Government target since the establishment of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. This Act aims to reduce the proportion of children in relative poverty to 10% and absolute poverty to 5% by 2030. Data released in March 2024, has found that child poverty rates have remained steady, with relative poverty sitting at 26% and absolute poverty at 12%[49].

What is relative poverty?
Current household income is less than 60% of the current UK median.

What is absolute poverty?
Current household income is less than 60% of the UK median in 2010/11, adjusted for inflation.

More widely, the Trussell Trust have reported a 21% increase in the number of food parcels being distributed in Scotland compared to 2018/19[50] and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) have found that over one million people live in poverty in Scotland [24]. It is therefore clear that the issue of poverty is major across the country, negatively impacting women and families.

“
I think it’s just accepted now that there’s so many foodbanks. It seems to be acceptable, and it’s not!

“
**I ran the food larder for while, and before Covid, it was people who were on benefits, and then...it moved to in-work poverty.
We’ve had nurses come in...And yeah, they have a house, they work, but they can’t afford food.**

Providing social security is a way in which governments can reduce the likelihood of poverty and mitigate its associated hardships. Social security payments are a shared responsibility between the UK and Scottish Governments, with some, such as Universal Credit and State Pension, remaining reserved to the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). While others, such as the Adult Disability Payment and the Scottish Child Payment, are provided through Social Security Scotland (SSS), an executive agency of the Scottish Government.

“
As a disabled person on... adult disability payment, I’m reasonably happy with it... [it’s] certainly a much more straightforward and humane system than PIP [personal independence payment].

Experiences of women utilising these services are incredibly varied, however there have been strongly negative connotations and accounts provided by those accessing DWP-led payments. Alternatively, women who have had interactions with SSS, have stated that these have been relatively positive.

“
The SSS need to live up to their mission statement around dignity and fairness. The response timescales are a nightmare.

It has been reported by the JRF, that the Scottish Child Payment has combatted child poverty in Scotland, benefitting families[24]. Despite these improvements, women have stated that there has been a slow response rate from the SSS, with wait-times being longer than expected for payments. Women also stated that the universal provision of free school meals would make a difference to child poverty.

Furthermore, due to rising living costs, women have pushed for higher levels for those in receipt of benefits, from both the UK and Scottish Governments. In relation to payments provided by the DWP, women have urged the Scottish Government to lobby the UK Government to increase payment amounts and remove the two-child benefit limit: the two-child benefit limit was introduced in 2017, restricting child tax credits and means-tested benefits to the first two children in most households[51]. Furthermore, due to recent decisions made by the Scottish and UK Governments to no longer provide a universal Winter Fuel Payment to all pensioners[52], it is likely that poverty experienced by older women will increase.

Lack of Information

Women suggested that there is a lack of information surrounding benefit entitlements, negatively impacting the population of Scotland. They explained that the uncertainty around benefits created a significant barrier for those in need, which was then further compounded by general stigma surrounding poverty. It was highlighted that the information provided by SSS was helpful, outlining entitlements, however the complicated bureaucracy which surrounded claiming, was an additional hurdle for women.

Pensions

The topic of pensions arose when discussing social security with women. They have highlighted that women have been ever-present in workforces, but have traditionally been underpaid. Therefore, it was suggested that pension payments should be adjusted to consider women's economic contributions. These issues were particularly pertinent for women born in the 1950s, who were unfairly treated as a result of changes to the State Pension Age, as found in the SWC's Pension Review Roundtable in 2023[7]. Reviews of the State Pension Age were raised an area of concern by women, with some proposing that those on low incomes are forced to work later on in life, worsening the quality of life experienced after retiring. Overall, women were proponents of pension reform, accepting that this is a reserved power, however, believed that the Scottish Government must advocate on behalf of the women of Scotland at the UK level.

“They need to remove the two-child benefit cap.

“...you're on about £70 a week, you're trying to pay your electricity, that's doubled, insurances have doubled...So, like how can people survive? Everything has gone up, but benefits haven't.

“...it's been easier with the adult disability payment and the child disability payment, as opposed to PIP and DWP, but it's still hoops to jump through.

“Sometimes people don't know what they can actually get as well.

“...that leads into systemic poverty for your older women, because now your pension is so much less than a man who worked from 18 to 60. Whereas you've taken time out to have children

“People over 60 who have worked most or all of their lives, but have not been able to save or invest in pensions due to low income...are not able to keep working till state pension age.

“We just have to look at the rising state pension age, we're to work until we drop. We were looking at state pension reviews, and they were wanting to put that up to 72!

Transport

The transport system across Scotland is of major importance for women in Scotland. Transport plays a significant role in the move towards a greener economy, but also provides women with the means to access education, employment and recreation. With regards to means of travel, women are less likely to hold a drivers' license than men, resulting in higher usage of public transport options[13]. The work of the SWC has highlighted the need to include women's voices across public transport decision-making, with specific focus on the below areas of concern.

Affordability

Women have regularly emphasised the importance of affordable transport across Scotland, feeling that costs present a significant barrier to use. During the [SWC Transport Conference](#) in May 2024, the conversation focused on the practice of privatisation, and how this has created an unfeasible situation for users[2].

The Scottish Government trialled the removal of on-peak train tickets, which was welcomed by commuters, however this has been reversed due to "limited success", with passenger levels not reaching the required 10% increase to become self-financing[53]. This is likely to negatively impact women's finances, with a return to high ticket costs being unwanted. Additionally, those most at risk of poverty are more likely to use buses to access employment[54], and therefore, women called for improved regulation of bus companies, believing that local authorities should be provided with mechanisms in which to control public transport systems.

In relation to affordability, women highlighted the Scottish Government's Under 22s Bus Pass scheme, whereby all under citizens aged between 5 and 22 are entitled to free bus travel through a National Entitlement Card[55]. This has positively impacted families, taking away additional household costs, such as travel to and from school. It has also been stated that the extra manoeuvrability provided by the scheme, allows young women access to social and recreational activities.

“...better pricing, so that it is more cost effective to take the bus or train than to drive would be good.

“More affordable transport, as many families cannot afford to use buses due to the high costs.

“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 think I'd be about £500 a month on buses, if they didn't have that free bus pass.

Accessibility

A further area of concern for women, in relation to transport, was lack of access. This was expressed by those who reside in rural locations, with poor public transport being recognised across multiple SWC Roadshow reports, for example Inverness and the Isle of Skye and Kyle of Lochalsh Roadshow Reports[5]. Rural women explained that due to the poor transport availability, they were limited in pursuing education, healthcare and employment. This issue also relates to women with disabilities and older women, with these issues interacting to create an incredibly difficult situation for some. It has been highlighted by women with mobility needs, that public transport providers can be unsympathetic, actively preventing them from going about their daily lives. With disabled people being more likely to use bus services than non-disabled people[56] and half of all bus journeys in 2022 being made by concessionary travellers[13], such as those over 60 years old, it is imperative that all public transport options are made more accessible for users.

“

There are no bus services where I live. My nearest railway station is 18 miles away and I use a wheelchair...I am isolated in my own home.

“

There is another older lady, who was walking with a Zimmer frame, she approached the bus, it was too high, the bus driver said that because she wasn't in a wheelchair, he wouldn't move it.

“

[I'm disabled] I use the bus regularly...There is one driver who threatened to leave me behind because I took too long going to use the [public] toilets during a scheduled stop.

Integration

Women proposed that a joined-up system was needed, with one ticket being used across multiple modes, including matching timetables. Significant frustration was expressed by women when recounting experiences of mismatched timetables, with this issue adding time to their complicated journeys. It can be said that women are more likely to 'trip-chain' when travelling, carrying out multiple non-direct journeys every day, often accompanied by children[57]. A lack of joined-up timetables also actively worsened outcomes for island residents, with ferry times often not matching connecting buses or trains. Overall, women hoped to see an integrated system, which facilitated their busy lives.

“

A smart ticketing system for use across all public transport would be great.

“

I don't believe you can get a bus on a Sunday from the ferry terminal...and there's no information.

“

It needs to be much more joined up, frequent, reliable and safer.

Conclusion

Throughout this report, we have highlighted the need for women's voices across the policy landscape. Women make up 51% of Scotland's population, interacting with the full range of public services available. As outlined, they continue to experience discrimination and disadvantage as they negotiate their lives on a professional and personal level. This discrimination results in the lowered economic status of women, as well as poorer wellbeing outcomes, impacting the wider family unit.

With regards to the four key proposals made by the First Minister, the SWC Team recognise the admirable intent. Women's voices have strongly aligned with each, with a particular focus on the reduction of poverty remaining a significant aim for Scottish society. However, children's poverty does not exist in isolation from the poverty experienced by that of their mothers, sisters and grandmothers. It is therefore imperative that the Scottish Government fully incorporates a woman's approach to the development of social policy and public services.

Thank You

Thank you to the women in Scotland who took part in our discussions. Our work would not be possible without your continued support and contributions. We will persist in our drive to represent women's voices in the policy-making process and continue pushing for women's equality across Scottish society.



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