

**Scottish Women's Convention response to:
The Social Renewal Advisory Board:
"What Needs to Change to Build a Fairer Scotland?"
October 2020**

Premise:

The Social Renewal Advisory Board wants to understand how groups have been supporting people and communities at risk, both before and during the pandemic. This includes making sure that the lessons learned on how to support communities through a crisis, and the ideas from that experience about what needs to change, help build a fairer, more equal Scotland.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of Parliamentary, Governmental and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The SWC engages with women using numerous communication channels including Roadshow events, Thematic Conferences and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women and reflects their opinions and experiences in a number of key areas relevant to women's equality.

The SWC is currently engaging with women through digital roadshows, online surveys, asking women to comment by email and by telephoning those who want to talk. We are also using our wide network to ask women to collate views in their local communities and forward these to us on a regular basis. We are continuing to review innovative ways of engaging with women throughout Scotland using whichever medium is appropriate to them.

Given the SWC's wide-ranging remit to consult with women from different backgrounds across Scotland, we have compiled some of the main issues and ideas that have been put forth for submission to the Social Renewal Advisory Board from women.

Whilst women as a group have been disproportionately hit by the current situation, they have been impacted in different ways. There is agreement, however, that women have faced, and will continue to face, the greatest challenges from Covid-19 and the ongoing response to the pandemic. This impact is wide-ranging but is felt in every aspect of women's lives, including the precarious nature of jobs where they dominate, an exacerbation of violence against women and an unequal distribution of caring responsibilities.

The information gathered so far during the current pandemic has been wide ranging. This has brought up several different issues and priorities for women. Taken broadly together, however, the SWC has placed these as being:

- Short term: ensuring women have the necessary resources to stay safe and well during current restrictions.
- Medium term: measuring the extent by which the current pandemic and subsequent response has impacted on women and how this can be alleviated or recovered from. This includes analysing transitions out of the current situation for any disproportionate impacts on women such as childcare and other caring responsibilities.
- Long term: ensuring all strategies committed to offsetting the results of the pandemic place a clear focus on women's inequality at all levels. This includes making sure all policies, particularly around recovery, are not bolstered by cuts to services that disproportionately affect women. To build a successful recovery and Fairer Scotland, women must be at the heart of this, including in senior decision-making positions and through detailed Equality Impact Assessments.

Social Security

With the continuing reliance on social security by women, ongoing benefit cuts and welfare freezes have had a detrimental impact on many communities within Scotland. Women have noted the Scottish Government's unique efforts to counteract this through the establishment of the Social Security Scotland Agency and the help that this has given. In light of the current Covid-19 situation and the effect on household finances, unemployment and social security are set to rise for women in even greater numbers. Women have voiced their ideas around these issues including:

- That the Scottish Social Security System continues to place emphasis on dignity and respect for applicants. This recognises the inequalities that lead women to an over-reliance on welfare systems at both a reserved and devolved level.
- That all new forms of assistance brought in through the Scottish Government account for women's inequality in the designing and implementation of new benefits.
- A consideration of universal social security programmes to relieve child poverty. Universal free school meals, for instance, for all young people of school age would

go some way to relieving the stigmatisation of poverty and contribute towards maximum uptake.

- Ensuring extra supplements, such as those given for Carer's Allowance in June of this year, that can be quickly processed and distributed for those most in need, are considered for their impact on poverty.
- Using mitigation where possible to offset cuts and austerity by topping up benefits and lifting the benefit cap.
- Awareness of the implications that a decade of austerity and public sector cuts has had for many women in light of the current pandemic. This should include effective data gathering as well as continuous assessments of the impact of budgetary cuts on women and their families.
- Ensuring that new social security initiatives such as the Scottish Child Payment, for instance, is recognised for the potential it has to lift many children out of poverty. This should include national awareness raising campaigns and accessible information for families.

Funding

Covid-19 will continue to affect funding streams for many organisations committed to furthering women's equality. These resources are particularly crucial in acknowledging rights and ensuring women have priority access to support. Women have noted that funding decisions must include:

- Accounting for the equalities implications on women by considering stringent Equality Impact Assessments when delivering funding.
- Ensuring services, such as employment rights and advocacy organisations, continue to be funded sufficiently so that women can access and fight for their rights in the workplace. This is particularly crucial for those on precarious contracts or where there is no trade union recognition.
- Ensuring that funding awards for women's services are not restrictive and allow local communities to use their own knowledge as to how money should be implemented.

Employment

The imposition of refreshed lockdown measures to impede the spread of Covid-19 are recognised by women as a public health necessity. Restrictions will have increased detrimental impacts on women, however, given their over-reliance on precarious job contracts with little to no security. Sectors such as hospitality and retail where women, particularly younger women, are over-represented at the bottom of the pay scale are facing momentous challenges. Women have raised issues including:

- That support put forward at both a reserved and devolved level work together for the benefit of women. This should recognise the distinct groups that women make up and the impact that the ongoing issues will have for years to come for employment and equality rights, including the gender pay gap.
- All statutory rights and protections should be available to women from day one, regardless of their status as worker or employee. Whilst recognising that this is a reserved matter, the Scottish Government should use all the levers it possesses to work with employers within Scotland, including using the Fair Work Framework, to acknowledge women's working rights.
- Ensuring women returning to work are aware of their rights, particularly around sick pay in cases where they may have to self-isolate multiple times. This is a particular issue where women are pressured by employers to continue working for fear of losing their jobs, despite the public health implications.
- Funding to promote the use of Workplace Equality Impact Assessments within the private sector in relation to Covid-19. This should include awareness raising of the importance of such measures for those with protected characteristics and their exposure to infection within the workplace.
- Committing to evaluating the extensive use of temporary job contracts during lockdown, particularly for young women, and where such contracts are unlikely to be renewed after a given period.
- Ensuring that women with intersectional characteristics can access further support and resources for employment and education.
- The need to place greater value financially and as a society on the social care sector, including recognising the labour that is undertaken by workers, the majority of whom are women, within this profession.
- Ensuring return to work and retraining programmes take account of all age groups, including older women, and digital skills abilities.

Ongoing Covid-19 Implications

It is crucial that the impacts of further lockdown restrictions are recognised for the effect that they will potentially have on women. Whilst women are aware of the need to minimise the risk of infection spreading, the implications that it has currently and will have in the future must be noted. This includes:

- Recognising the acute financial impact on young women due to the current situation. This has led to inequalities in all aspects of life, including high rent arrears and mental health issues.
- Ensuring that women with other intersectional characteristics are not left out of consultative processes and that the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on such communities is recognised. This should be noted for the effect it has in all aspects of life, including employment and health inequalities.

- The impact of social isolation on older women who may live alone and face barriers to digital communications. The long-term health effects of such issues are only beginning to be acknowledged and this must stay on the agenda going forward.
- Ensuring targeted interventionist funding and additional support for carers that accounts for the numerous obstacles they have faced during this time.
- Continuing to promote all Government Guidance in accessible formats including British Sign Language and other non-English formats.

Mental Health

Ensuring women presenting with complex needs can access fully funded mental health services must be a priority. Other points of note regarding this area by women include:

- Accounting for increased mental health implications, particularly where access to support networks has been limited.
- Making provisions and funding available for key workers whose mental health may be impacted as a result of the pandemic.
- Ensuring that the risks associated with lockdown for women with addiction issues who may face potential relapse and further risk is accounted for.
- Accounting for the impact of further unemployment and financial losses on women's mental wellbeing.

Housing

The implications for women lower down the socio-economic scale and their access to housing has been intensified during the current pandemic. This has led to heightened rent arrears and other financial issues relating to household costs. Women have also pointed out the health implications of a lack of quality and sustainable housing during Covid-19, including dampness and inadequate heating leading to serious health issues. Other points of note include:

- Ensuring ongoing promotion of funding sources for women to access help for housing costs, including the Scottish Welfare Fund and Discretionary Housing Payments, as a priority.
- Further measures to help with rent for those on the lowest incomes should be analysed for their potential beneficial impact. This could include writing off arrears for those in the most serious situations or committing additional funding for such issues.
- Accounting for other financial implications regarding housing, such as Council Tax, where women are already stretched by household finances.

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Social Renewal Advisory Board's call for views regarding building a Fairer Scotland. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to equality at both a reserved and devolved level to recognise how women have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

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