



CONFERENCE REPORT

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Glasgow Grosvenor Hotel

The Scottish Women's Convention

**Unfiltered: Women, Body Image, and the
Illusion of Perfection**



Agnes Tolmie

SWC Chair

Body Image is often discussed, and dismissed, as something superficial, brushed aside to be replaced by more ‘serious conversations’ on health. However, for many women and girls in Scotland, this is an issue that goes far deeper than that. Body image issues can have a profound and lasting impact, affecting a women’s confidence, her self esteem and even hampering her ability to engage both socially and professionally: these pressures start early and don’t just simply disappear with age.

Body image issues are not about a woman’s individual confidence and they certainly don’t just spring up from nowhere, rather they are fuelled by outside influences and worrying trends that continue to link a woman’s worth to her appearance.

Women and girls are all too often faced with narrow, unrealistic, and unattainable, standards at every turn, through television, advertising and social media platforms.

In Scotland alone, 29% of women report feeling shame about their bodies, over half of young women see themselves as being ‘too fat’ and 74% of young women refuse to participate in sport or exercise because they are worried about how others see them. These statistics tell a simple story: these women and girls are being held back, not in any way through their lack of ability but by a culture that judges their appearance first and foremost.

If our politicians are really serious about equality then it’s high time for them to call out unrealistic beauty standards and create a Scotland where every woman and girl knows their real value comes from their voice, their strength, and their character and not just from what they see staring back at them from the mirror.

“When one in five women in Scotland link their body image to suicidal thoughts, this stops being just a ‘confidence issue’ and instead becomes a public health failure.”

Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair

Key Points & Recommendations

- **Stronger regulation of advertising:** Introduce clearer rules on the use of sexualised images to sell products. Heavily edited or filtered images should be clearly labelled. Young women and girls should not be targeted with ads for cosmetic surgery, weight-loss products, or anti-ageing treatments.
- **Educate young women and girls about social media:** Schools should teach how algorithms promote appearance-focused content and help young women and girls to critically understand edited images, unrealistic beauty standards, and harmful trends.
- **Support parents and carers:** Provide accessible guides and workshops to help families understand online body pressures and have open conversations about body image and social media.
- **Honest education about life stages:** Prepare girls realistically for puberty, addressing body changes, comparison, and confidence; Challenge “bounce back” culture after pregnancy and include body image discussions in postnatal care and normalise menopause and ageing, with positive representation of older women.
- **Shift health messaging away from weight-shaming:** Focus public health campaigns on overall wellbeing such as movement, sleep and mental health rather than weight or BMI. Train healthcare professionals to discuss weight sensitively and to consider the effect of certain health conditions on weight.
- **Increase diverse representation:** Government funded campaigns should reflect women of different ages, body sizes, ethnicities, and abilities to promote belonging and reduce shame.
- **Strengthen mental health support:** Invest in early intervention and counselling for young women and girls experiencing body image concerns, eating disorders, or low self-esteem.
- **Recognise body image as a public health issue:** Address it across education, health, equality, and digital policy, acknowledging its wider cultural and societal influences.

Rebecca Fagan

Rebecca Fagan is a Policy Executive at Advice Direct Scotland (ADS). ADS is Scotland's largest digital advice agency, providing free and independent advice to the citizens of Scotland. The organisation provides advice on a range of issues, including welfare, housing, energy, debt, tax, and consumer issues.



Rebecca addressed the fact that across Scotland women and girls are trying to navigate an environment where appearance is no longer just a personal thing but has instead become political, commercial, and increasingly medicalised. Rebecca focused on what happens when that pressure collides with an under-regulated, non-surgical cosmetic industry and why the legislation currently progressing through the Scottish Parliament is significant.

“We are living in a society where women’s bodies are relentlessly scrutinised, where ageing is treated as a failure of effort, and where quick fixes are marketed as routine maintenance.”

Rebecca stated that the Non-Surgical Cosmetic Procedures Bill, currently at Stage 1 in the Scottish Parliament, was seeking to address a long-standing regulatory gap. At present, procedures such as Botox, dermal fillers, and other injectable treatments can be delivered with no specific or consistent training requirements; no standardised skills framework and no clear restrictions on where most of these procedures can be carried out. This has put Scotland at odds with regulations in other parts of the UK.

Rebecca went on to speak more about the Bill stating that its overall aim was to improve consumer safety, increase accountability, and to rebuild confidence in a sector that has largely operated with little or no regulations up until now. Key elements of the Bill include introducing statutory frameworks to define who can carry out procedures; clearer training and competence standards; introducing regulations on where procedures can be carried out; fines and potential prosecution for those providing procedures to minors, generally those under 18, and to expand statutory inspection and enforcement powers.

“If women are to participate confidently in public life, the markets operating on their insecurities must be properly governed.”

Rebecca remarked that cosmetic procedures are often framed as individual choice, and although choice does matter, it is important to consider the context in which many choices are made. Society continues to relentlessly scrutinise women’s bodies, promote cosmetic ‘maintenance’ as routine, amplify insecurities through algorithms and false advertising and treat ageing as a failure.

“Confidence, participation, and wellbeing are not superficial concerns. When women are harmed, shamed, or made to feel unsafe, their ability to participate fully in public life is affected.”

Rebecca indicated that over the past two years she had worked with more than 430 cases relating to beauty and cosmetic procedures, with many women left with hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of debt; almost half of the women had also suffered physical harm or adverse effects to the treatment. Cases included being upsold procedures they hadn’t asked for, inadequate aftercare and their complaints being dismissed, treatments carried out in unsafe environments and women being injected with wrongful substances. In many of these cases, there had been no recognised

qualifications and no clinical oversight meaning that the liability for risk fell almost entirely on the individual customer.

“Women’s bodies are not acceptable testing grounds for poorly governed markets.”

In closing, Rebecca stressed that the proposed legislation was not about demonising practitioners, many who were actually highly skilled and already using ethical measures, instead it represented a practical and proportionate step toward reducing harm in a society that places extraordinary pressure on women and girls.

She stated that without standardised regulation and legislation, many women would be left navigating a landscape where practitioners’ ability varied greatly and any accountability for their wrongdoing was virtually non-existent.

“The legislation in itself is not a silver bullet however it is a concrete step toward reducing harm in a society that places extraordinary pressure on women and girls to conform.”

Sheli McCoy

Sheli McCoy is a powerhouse athlete and media personality, celebrated for her exceptional strength, versatility, and dynamic presence both on and off the competition floor. A five-time British Weightlifting Championship competitor and international CrossFit contender, Sheli is widely regarded as one of the UK’s most inspiring and formidable fitness figures. She has gone on to win the Scottish BAFTA for ‘Best Scot on Screen’ In 2023, Sheli was introduced to millions as the fearsome ‘Sabre’ in BBC One’s reboot of Gladiators, where she highlighted not only her elite athleticism but also her commanding on-screen charisma. Beyond television, Sheli has written a monthly health and wellness column for The Scottish Sun, offering practical advice and motivation to her growing audience. Sheli is a proud ambassador for Women’s Aid and Help for Kids and recently lent her voice to the children’s audiobook The Fiercest Fairy. Sheli uses her platform to champion fitness, confidence, and holistic health.



Sheli told the women in attendance that she has used her public profile to call for authenticity and diversity in both sport and the media. Although initially reluctant to enter the sphere of television, Sheli ultimately decided that it could be the perfect opportunity to contribute to wider conversations about pressure, representation, and self-worth.

“I never, ever wanted to go on TV, but the reason I said yes to that role is for exact opportunities like this.”

Reflecting on her teenage years, Sheli described growing up as a highly athletic young woman whose appearance and body shape did not conform to conventional beauty standards. Sheli’s muscular build and interest in sports set her apart from her peers, often drawing comments and cruel nicknames at school. While Sheli later embraced her identity as a weightlifter, she remarked that these hostile experiences highlighted the pressures that many young girls face regarding their appearance and developing bodies.

“I was really athletic, I had big, strong legs which was totally out with the norm.”

Now 36, Sheli stated that she is extremely purposeful in how she presents herself on public platforms. As a Gladiator, Sheli stated that she appears in front of millions of people wearing a bikini on prime-time television every Saturday night and because of this she consciously rejects unrealistic body expectations. Sheli remarked that she chooses to present herself as she naturally is, without extreme dieting or any aesthetic alterations, believing that having this degree of visibility carries with it great responsibility.

“I don’t have a 6 pack and that’s deliberate...I will not show up with an unachievable standard for a young girl to try and push towards.”

“I don’t cut my calories. I don’t lose weight. I don’t show up as anything other than I am on screen.”

Sheli stated that for her and her fellow female Gladiators, diversity was not just symbolic as each of them represented different ethnicities, body types, cultural backgrounds, and upbringings and were all united in a shared desire to challenge unrealistic ideals of perfection.

Beyond television, Sheli carries out extensive work to address inequality within sport. Sheli highlighted that Scotland historically lacked independent funding for female weightlifters due to outdated and non-inclusive practices. After joining the board in 2023, Scotland secured independent funding for women in weightlifting for the first time. This milestone reinforced Sheli’s belief that meaningful change requires women to be present in decision-making spaces.

“So, the really important thing was taking an organisation that didn’t recognise women as part of sporting progress and encouraging change.”

Sheli’s activism also extends into the digital sphere. With 250,000 Instagram followers, Sheli has transformed her platform from a training diary into a space for conversations about authenticity and body confidence. Over time, her social media audience has shifted from predominantly male to predominantly female and she attributes the decline in criticism and negative comments on her profile to the tone and transparency of her content, noting that vulnerability and honesty can disarm negativity.

“I don’t tend to attract as much criticism as before because criticism needs a home.”

A significant portion of Sheli’s concerns rest on artificial intelligence and digital manipulation. She warned of the growing risks associated with AI-generated imagery and deep fake technology, emphasising the lack of regulation surrounding it. Sheli argues for clearer labelling of edited and AI-generated content so that audiences can distinguish between reality and digitally altered images. She also calls for stronger age restrictions on social media, expressing concern that teenagers are not developmentally mature enough to manage the pressures associated with some of the content responsibly.

“There are no permissions whatsoever...because the people that are creating these images are sitting at home with a laptop and a bit of free time.”

In her professional life, Sheli has taken a firm stance against image alteration. During a recent photoshoot, conducted while preparing for international competition, Sheli refused permission for any edits that would change her body shape. For Sheli, her athletic identity is defined only by performance and capability.

“My body is for need. I’m an athlete. This is not about my aesthetic presentation.”

Sheli further critiqued social media algorithms that prioritise flawless appearances over educational and authentic content. Rather than advocating for the removal of social platforms, Sheli believes that they should evolve into a space for meaningful engagement and realistic representation.

In concluding, Sheli spoke about her work in undertaking school visits, university talks, and community outreach and stated that she consistently promotes individuality and self-confidence. She emphasised the importance of young people understanding their natural worth without comparing it to filtered or manipulated standards. Ultimately, Sheli believes that transparency, accountability, and representation are essential to protecting women and future generations from the harms of digital distortion.

“People will believe anything you tell them, and they will surely believe everything you show them...I think it’s about time we show them what’s real.”

Melissa Gillen

Melissa is the founder of Happy Mind Wellbeing Coach, born from her own experience of antenatal and postnatal depression, trauma, and feeling unheard within medical systems. What began as a personal healing journey has grown into a passion for supporting other women to feel seen, listened to, and truly valued.



She holds a First-Class Honours degree in Community Development, alongside a Master's in Adult Education, and is trained in mindfulness, NLP and holistic emotional therapies. Today, Melissa uses her voice to help women reconnect with their confidence, wellbeing, and sense of self.

Melissa began by reflecting on her childhood which was heavily shaped by poverty. Melissa stated that she did not initially recognise her circumstances as being unusual because her community had a high degree of social deprivation with overcrowded housing and second-hand clothing being the norm - it was a situation which was accepted quietly and without discussion.

“I didn't know I was in extreme poverty because a lot of my friends were in the same situation as me.”

Melissa said that she only felt the sting of being different when entering high school when the divide between herself and her peers became glaringly apparent. Classmates, and even teachers, commented on her clothing and her appearance, sometimes subtly but often blatantly and directly. This school environment exposed the social codes she had never been taught about like how to dress and how to “fit in.”

“When I went to school, it was kind of highlighted...the way I dressed and the way I looked.”

This stigma of poverty shaped how Melissa was treated at school, through ‘dirty looks’, ridicule and social exclusion. Melissa stated that rather than rebel, she internalised it all and tried not to draw attention to herself.

“I tried harder academically and tried to shrink socially”

As well as the issues she experienced at school, Melissa was also a young carer from the age of ten. While other children could focus on their homework or friendships, Melissa managed her mother's medication and caring needs, who struggled with mental health challenges, as well as being the primary carer for her 3 younger siblings.

For Melissa, along with the bodily changes, adolescence brought with it more targeted bullying at school about her appearance and a deeper awareness of how different her personal situation was. Melissa said that athletics became her refuge, where physical ability mattered more than her background or her appearance.

“It was a freedom. For the first time, nobody looked at you for how you looked. It was how you performed and how you supported your team.”

Melissa said her first experience of challenging authority came at the age thirteen, when she wrote directly to Margaret Thatcher in relation to her family's housing situation. Weeks later, officials arrived to repair their leaking roof.

“That was my first taste of challenging power. I thought, right, I'm an individual. I've got a voice.”

Melissa excelled academically however the continued daily balancing act of her caring responsibilities, having to return home at lunchtime to care for her family, and having to return to school as though nothing was different, eventually took its toll.

Melissa disclosed that after years of prolonged stress this eventually led to deteriorating mental health in late adolescence. At eighteen, she experienced what she only now recognises as a nervous breakdown. Melissa's concerns were dismissed as hormonal or 'just typical teenage behaviour'. Later, when she became pregnant, Melissa encountered further dismissal from medical professionals in a largely male dominated practice. Complications during childbirth almost cost both her and her baby their lives, yet she was sent home with no help or psychological support.

Postnatal depression followed, combined with an abusive relationship and persistent medical diagnosis dismissals. During one consultation, a GP told Melissa: "Mrs Kelly, this is your third child now. Stop being so bloody selfish and pull yourself together."

Melissa stated that this comment silenced her. Fearing judgement, and the potential loss of her children, she withdrew into herself and developed agoraphobia, remaining housebound for over two years and worried about her health and appearance. Yet her desire to show up for her daughters became the catalyst for her gradual recovery. Melissa described using lampposts as physical markers on the walk to school, breaking the journey into manageable steps to overcome her anxiety.

"The only person you can truly rely on in these situations is yourself. Learn to be your best friend."

Rejecting a prescription only approach to her health, Melissa adopted person-centred healing through such things as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), therapy, and holistic practices. Her daughter's pride in her reaffirmed her sense of purpose.

"Mummy, I'm so proud of you. You're my best friend."

Motivated to ensure no woman felt isolated like she had, Melissa then founded a free women's wellbeing group that eventually grew to almost 1,000 members before evolving into independent networks that still continue today. Recognising that credibility often opens doors, Melissa returned to university at 46, earning a first-class honours degree and later a master's qualification. Melissa stated that this was not to prove her worth to others but to reclaim belief in herself and to gain access to decision-making spaces.

"It was to prove to me that this little girl could still do it."

Melissa's journey from a young carer in poverty to an educated advocate for women demonstrates a resilience that can only be forged through hardship and strengthened by purpose. Melissa continues to challenge systems that silence women, particularly those marginalised due to social circumstances out with their control.

"I am me. I am real. I have bits and bobs missing, but I'm still here."

Discussion

After we heard from our guest speakers, we held a question-and-answer session during the morning session followed by roundtables sessions after lunch.

The following section will outline the views of the women we spoke to in these roundtable sessions where they were invited to share their views on what body image means to them.

The women reflected on how they themselves defined body image, how their relationship with their bodies may have changed over time, and how the Scottish media, advertising, social media and online influences had a bearing on their perceptions of women's bodies.

The discussion was highly insightful as it helped to emphasise generational differences and the evolving role of traditional and digital media in shaping women's perceptions and expectations of their bodies.

“It's about reminding yourself you are beautiful...even when you don't feel it.”

1. Defining Body Image, Confidence and Identity

When asked what body image meant to them, many of the women described it as being multifaceted and as a combination of both self-perception and perceived judgement from others. Their responses were not limited to their weight or shape but formed from their sense of identity as well as social factors.

The women spoke about the tension they felt between accepting themselves and being critical of their perceived flaws. Importantly, participants recognised that body image shifts over time and can also be influenced by their mood, life events, relationships and health and never in isolation.

- “It fluctuates...there's periods of your life when you feel really great about yourself... and periods when you get hard on yourself.”
- “It's about how I show up in the world.”
- “For me it's kind of how I see myself in the mirror... there's parts that I like but I get to a point, and I hate saying this, that you have to be self-accepting.”
- “Everybody must conform. “Get your eyebrows done”, “get your makeup on”. “Make sure your hair's done”. “You can't go out like that that, can you?... we're all told that.”
- “How I appear to the outside world...it's about confidence and self-belief.”
- “There's periods of your life that you can feel really great about yourself and confident about yourself, periods of your life, that you feel, you get hard on yourself...it's this ever kind of roller coaster, depending on what it is, it's influencing how you feel.”

2. Early Experiences relating to Body Image

Many of the women we spoke to traced body image awareness back to their early adolescent years. Puberty was described not as an empowering developmental stage as many girls are often told it will be but instead as a source of embarrassment, confusion and vulnerability.

Our discussions described a distinct lack of open conversation around menstruation and bodily changes. The absence of guidance at home, combined with teasing at school, created a sense of exposure and shame and there was a strong recognition that body issues began before girls fully understood their changing bodies.

In addition to this, the sexualisation of young girls' bodies, particularly with early breast development, left lasting psychological scars for many. Importantly, several women emphasised that the criticism did not only come from boys, but from other girls, reinforcing comparison and competition from an early age.

- “It started off when you took your periods in class in front of the boys... my mum never sat down and told me anything about anything like that.”
- “You get called names because you had bigger boobs than everybody else.”
- “Nobody is looking at you and then everyone is looking at you...expecting you to dress in a certain way.”
- “The word in itself is really heavy...that’s you, you’re a woman now.”
- I've talked to so many women that when they go through puberty, that’s when they feel quite uncomfortable, get eating disorders and things like that.”
- “I remember you'd become very aware of how men are looking at you and I when I was at secondary school, so when I was about 14, I knew men used to come and park outside just to watch girls coming out.”
- “I remember really becoming aware of how much attention I was getting and then dressing very boyish.
- “I've talked to so many women that when they go through puberty, that’s when they feel quite uncomfortable, get eating disorders and things like that.”

The women remarked that much of the early criticism directed towards them about their body image came from family members, particularly their mothers. While often well intentioned, these remarks often led to long term issues around their bodies.

- “My mum would say things to me...’you can’t wear that, you’ve got fat legs.’”
- “I look back at pictures of myself at that age and I certainly was not fat but that’s the way I felt.”

This highlighted how generational attitudes toward dieting and appearance are passed down, often unintentionally.

- “We label body shapes, so wiry, big boned...because if you're too fat, you have names, if you're too thin, you're too thin, and it's what we're setting is a kind of trend.”
- “But when I started working, it was the older women in the office, was saying, you're awfully thin, are you all right?”

Cultural differences were another area covered here with some of the women discussing the long-term impact of their families comments as well as cultural messaging.

- “I was really insecure about body hair... I refused to wear sleeveless clothes.”
- “Being fair was considered as being beautiful.”
- “They’ll accuse me of bleaching... it took me many years to accept... this is my thing.”

3. Make Up, Teenage Culture and Competition

The women we spoke to reflected on the rituals they went through during their adolescent years in order to make themselves look better, often for the sake of others rather than themselves.

- “When you were a teenager... all the girls are in the bathroom putting makeup on.”
- “it's just a few things from when I was little...I remember the story of Hans Christian Anderson, the little mermaid and her beautiful hair and somebody saying, ‘you must suffer to be beautiful’”

Teenage body image was often modelled around conformity and comparison. Makeup and clothing were not simply personal choices but a sort of social currency and affirmation from others.

The women we spoke to reflected over whether these behaviours were genuinely about attracting boys, or whether they were driven by competition amongst girls themselves.

- “Are we doing it for the boys? ... they don’t seem to care about these things.”
- “We’re actually just competing with one another.”

4. Body Image, Pregnancy and Motherhood

Experiences around pregnancy varied widely amongst the women we spoke to. Some of them described feeling comfortable and content in their pregnancies while others recalled heightened insecurity around their changing bodies.

It was agreed that the rise in social media put added pressure on women post-pregnancy, fuelling unrealistic timelines on when a woman’s body should be back into shape.

- “The pressure... she’ll be back in shape within 6 weeks.”
- “That was 41 years ago... and I don’t think the bounce back was a thing then.”

Again, ‘well meaning’ comments from family members had a direct bearing on how women felt about their post pregnancy bodies, putting pressure on them to look their best as a new mother and to keep up appearances.

- “Maybe you should try a diet... because you look frumpy.”
- “It takes years for a woman to recover from pregnancy.”

5. Menopause and Ageing

Many of the older women we spoke to described ageing as liberating but also challenging. Some of the participants said that they experienced a greater self-acceptance and were less concerned with external comments or approval.

- “Women become less worried about what other people think of them.”

Others described a conflict between their internal age and the visible signs of ageing they were experiencing.

- “I don’t want to look the way my granny looked when she was 55...I want to look the way I look.”
- “Your head is telling you that you’re 21 but your body isn’t marrying up.”
- “Then the jowls start and everything starts moving downstairs.”
- “If it takes a wee bit of makeup and some hair colouring, that’s what I’ll do because it makes me feel good about myself.”

Overall, there was a general consensus that getting older was something to be proud of, particularly after experiencing health challenges.

- “As I’m getting older, I’m quite privileged to be this age. I know a lot of my friends that haven’t made it.”

6. How Women’s Bodies are Portrayed in the Media

One of the most detailed areas of discussion centred around sexualised imagery and how women are portrayed in everyday life. These images are not confined to adult spaces but are widely available in mainstream, accessible environments.

The women we spoke to described how things are not necessarily much different to what they were years ago when tabloid newspapers had features such as Page 3, where women and girls posed topless in photographs. These newspapers were sold in every shop and were readily available to everyone. There were also such things as ‘lad’s mags’ which were available for sale next to children’s comics and books.

- “You could go out to the corner shop and just buy them.”

Promotional campaigns on such things as beer cans and other targeted male products were also commonplace in the 70's and 80's.

- “There were these beautiful women on cans of lager, my dad used to collect them...I used to look at these women and think, Oh my God, that's glamorous.”
- “I worked in food and drink for years in marketing...I know what advertising does and what it suggests to people.”

Whilst overt imagery in newspapers may well have declined, the women felt that contemporary pressures have increased through social media algorithms and more targeted content.

- “You put some things in, and it comes up... and it does affect how you feel.”
- “You set up a social media account as a 15-year-old girl... it's scary... it's pushing agendas.”
- “The algorithms are vitally important... whatever it is you're searching, that's what you see.”
- “...and even social media glamorises eating disorders and the whole hashtag of nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.”

There were also concerns about young women being exposed to anti-ageing messaging and appearance-related content at increasingly early ages.

7. Cosmetic Procedures: Personal Choice or Pressure

The women we spoke to had very mixed views on cosmetic procedure: some felt strongly that this should be a personal choice, while others were worried about young women feeling pressurised into changing their appearance because of social media.

There was acknowledgement that cosmetic procedures can be empowering for some women but there were general concerns around the normalisation of invasive procedures among young women, financial pressures and debt and the blurred lines of informed consent and influencer marketing.

- “...the filler and the Botox and all the rest of it to make you look like a porn star.”
- “Some people like that, and you kind of just need to go... is it their look?”
- “If it makes you feel better about yourself then why not?”
- “Girls as young as 15 are thinking ‘I need to use retinols.’”

It was agreed that this was a complicated area of discussion and what may feel empowering to one person may have the opposite effect on another.

8. Women's Health, Weight and BMI

The women we spoke to indicated that many of their negative healthcare experiences had led to their having serious issues with their bodies in general. They spoke about suffering from issues such as endometriosis, osteoporosis, menopause, PCOS and chronic pain, all of which led to weight gain, as well as being dismissed and misdiagnosed leaving them with long term body image issues.

There was frustration at the over-prescription of antidepressants instead of investigation into hormonal causes. The women acknowledged that there was a distinct underinvestment in women's health research which reinforced the belief that women's bodies are not prioritised within healthcare systems.

- “Medical students get two seminars on women’s health.”
- “They’ll give you antidepressants.”
- “Are we even taking people seriously anymore?”
- “There’s more research done on male pattern baldness than endometriosis.”
- “I don’t want to talk about weight; I don’t want to hear anyone call themselves fat.”

Weight and health messaging were discussed at length with the BMI measurement being particularly criticised for being outdated and harmful. The women we spoke to felt that discussions about weight in healthcare settings often lacked the relevant support from healthcare professionals and instead directed the blame firmly towards the patient, without taking health factors into consideration.

- “BMI is not fit for purpose...it’s just a mathematical equation.”
- “BMI doesn’t tell the full story, it doesn’t consider muscle, hormones, medication or genetics.”
- “For me to be the right weight... I should be 7 stone 11.”
- “How can I turn around to somebody and say you should lose weight when I’m not exactly slim myself.”

9. Poverty and Structural Inequality

The women we spoke to emphasised that it was difficult to separate body image issues from social deprivation and other socio-economic factors. It was agreed that such things as healthy food, gym memberships and cosmetic treatments require financial resources and that prepackaged and ultra-processed foods are far cheaper and were the only option for many women. They believed that these themselves could lead to weight and body image issues.

- “Have you seen the price of fruit?”
- “You could buy a packet of biscuits and still get a dinner.”
- “It’s unattainable if you live at home.”
- “People are putting themselves into debt to try and look a certain way.”

The women also pointed out that as food is essential to good health, weight issues are often more complicated and pronounced than people might admit.

- “You can live without alcohol... but you can’t live without food.”
- “Food addiction is not treated the same.”

10. Advice and Reflections

After a worthwhile roundtable session, the women we spoke to reflected on what they had learned over the years and what advice they would give to other women. There was a strong feeling of gratitude, especially from women who had experienced illness, for them just being alive was something to appreciate. The advice to younger women was simple but powerful: respect yourself, know your worth, and don’t let appearance define your value.

“Just be happy. As long as you get up in the morning and put your feet on the floor, that’s a win.”

Conclusion

At our conference, women described body image as a lifelong, evolving experience shaped by personal history, social expectations, and media representation. While it could be argued that some forms of pressure have shifted, from overt sexualisation in everyday newspapers and publication to digitally curated appearance standards, the scrutiny of women's bodies remains persistent and harmful to many.

Across all discussions, the following systemic failings were highlighted:

- Conformity and judgement are ongoing features of a woman's lived experience
- Body image is often shaped by external judgements
- Puberty and adolescence are a high risk stage for shame, bullying and identity issues
- Media influence on women's body image is still highly prevalent but has evolved over the years
- Women's experience life stage pressures on body image which are linked to puberty, pregnancy, menopause and ageing
- Concerns about body image can have a mental health impact and cause, anxiety, comparison and loss of confidence
- Self-acceptance of body image can be a process often growing through age, perspective and self-belief

We were encouraged that our conversation also revealed a strong resilience. Many of the women we spoke to described growing self-acceptance with age, a shift from external validation towards internal satisfaction, and a conscious rejection of unrealistic standards.

Overall, the findings of our discussion, and the collective insight of our participants, underscores the need for continued dialogue, policy engagement, and media accountability to ensure more diverse and realistic representations of women's bodies across all life stages.

“That pressure is not coming from you, it's coming from elsewhere.



Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention thanks all women who attended our conference and who contributed online and via email. We thank our speakers for providing their contributions on the day.

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