

CONFERENCE REPORT

24th October 2026

Glasgow Grosvenor Hotel

The Scottish Women's Convention

Our Voices, Our Space - Young Women Leading the Conversation



Agnes Tolmie

SWC Chair

The Scottish Women's Convention spends a great deal of time travelling around Scotland, listening to women, understanding their concerns and making sure their voices are heard. But one thing became increasingly clear to us. We weren't hearing enough from young women, and we were determined to change that.

Yes, some came to our events and contributed to our discussions, but nowhere near enough. And that is something we felt really strongly about. Not because we needed to tick a box or improve the age profile of those attending our events, but because the absence of young women's voices represents a serious gap in our understanding of women's lives in Scotland today.

We know that young women are already bring a wealth of ambition, talent, energy and fresh thinking to our communities and workplaces. Yet too often, their voices are overlooked, their contributions undervalued and their futures shaped by decisions they have little say in.

From economic insecurity and inequality to violence, harassment and online misogyny, the pressures young women face demand action and it is they themselves that must help decide what that action looks like.

Young women should never have to shout to be heard or fight to be taken seriously. If Scotland's decision-makers are serious about equality, they must put women of every generation at the heart of the decisions that affect their lives and that means that young women's voices must be seen as a priority and not just an afterthought.

That is why our conference matters. We can't talk about the future without first talking to those young women who will help shape it and we certainly can't claim to speak for all women across Scotland if an entire generation is missing from those conversations.

This event is a chance for us to listen, to learn and, crucially, to act upon what young women are telling us. It is our responsibility that the discussions we have today are not quietly pushed aside and instead have a meaningful place in Scotland's future.

And the Scottish Women's Convention will make sure that happens.

"This conference is an important beginning, but it can't be the end of the conversation...we can't build a better future for young women without them."

In response to the feedback at our event, the SWC will host an annual event for young women to ensure their voices continue to be heard.

Key Recommendations

- **Safety:**
  Women-only changing facilities
  Staffing on public transport especially during the hours of darkness
- **Housing**
  Safe and affordable housing for young women
  Women only refuge centres provided for young women whenever they need it
- **Health**
  A mental health service delivered specifically for young women in Scotland
  Train healthcare professionals to listen and offer appropriate advice and support.
- **Participation and Implementation**
  Guarantee a young woman's place on every public body
  Pass Misogyny legislation to enable young women to safely participate in society.

Our Panel Session

It's important for young women to have their say and [this] conference gives us the space to do that...we all have our own journeys so we need to make sure we are kind to each other and acknowledge that everyone's story is relevant."

Our young women's conference took a slightly different approach to the usual format of our previous events. Rather than focusing on speaker presentations and structured round table sessions, our panel discussion and workshops were designed to provide a more informal and relaxed setting.

Our aim was to encourage more open dialogue and allow young women a safe space in which to share their experiences and perspectives on the important issues that matter most to them.

The following report highlights the key themes, insights and reflections which emerged from these discussions as well as also capturing real life testimonies on the many challenges many young women have to face.

Panel Facilitator: Eireann McAuley



Eireann is an activist and campaigner who has been active in the trade union movement since the age of 15, Eireann previously served as National Policy and Equality Officer at the Scottish Trades Union Congress. A qualified Modern Studies and History teacher, Eireann also works closely with care-experienced young people and those affected by addiction.

Eireann brings powerful lived experience to her work, including experiences of homelessness and the care system, losing a parent to addiction, and navigating her own mental health challenges. These experiences have helped shape her commitment to equality, dignity and ensuring that people with lived experience are meaningfully heard in decision-making.

Panel Member: Rajsee Saraf

Rajsee Saraf is an award-winning youth activist with national campaigns that focus on women's rights and safety, DEI and better democratic wellbeing for young people. As an elected Trustee at the Scottish Youth Parliament and on the UK Youth Parliaments Steering Group for Scotland, she has extensive experience in consulting constituents, debating motions and influencing policy. Her goal is for young people to be better represented in politics.



"As a young woman, you'll find things difficult at first, you'll be spoken over, you'll be ridiculed but please keep going, you are the main character in your own story so keep the fire alive."

Rajsee discussed how her personal experiences shaped her involvement in politics and campaigning on women's healthcare, equality and violence against women and girls and highlighted how many young women still struggle to have their health concerns taken seriously.

She also discussed the importance of creating opportunities for young women to become involved in politics and democracy through youth parliaments, community groups, voluntary organisations and local campaigning. Her message was clear: young women and girls don't need formal qualifications or political connections in order to become involved. Rajsee summed up by saying that success should only be measured by the difference women can make in others' lives, rather than needing titles, positions or recognition and that every young woman has the power to make a difference.



Panel Member: Amnah Sayedqasem

Amnah is a Sport Inclusion Officer at the University of Strathclyde and works to make sport and physical activity more inclusive and accessible for students. She is passionate about women of colour in sport and period health in sport and draws on her own lived experiences of outdoor sports.

"Racism, sexism and classism are all very closely aligned in sport...when you don't have the money to buy the right kit, it shows."

Amnah shared her experiences as a Muslim woman of colour, explaining how sport had been an important part of her life since childhood, despite repeated discrimination because of her gender, ethnicity and religion. She recalled being disqualified from a badminton competition after reaching the final as a child, with her achievement questioned, and she also later experienced exclusion from training opportunities and social activities in whitewater kayaking.

Amnah also highlighted menstrual health in sport, explaining how periods could be treated as embarrassing or inappropriate in male-dominated environments. She described the practical difficulties women face in outdoor sports where changing facilities may be unavailable.

Amnah spoke on how discrimination is not always obvious and can take many forms including attitudes and assumptions. Despite these barriers, Amnah has continued kayaking and now uses her experiences to promote inclusion. She emphasised that sporting organisations and wider society have a responsibility to remove barriers and create environments where everyone feels respected.

"Sport is for everyone and so if we are told there is no space for us then we make space."

Panel Member: Molly Geddes

Molly is a youth worker and writer for the Glasgow Girl's Club, a community organisation working alongside women and young girls across Glasgow.
Molly develops and delivers creative youth led work on healthy relationships and violence against women prevention, and wrote and led Where We Stop, Glasgow Girl's Club's award-winning short film and campaign.



"My first ever relationship seen me facing domestic violence and suddenly this young woman who had never been known to 'hawd her wheesht' had lost her voice."

Drawing from her own personal experience of an abusive relationship, Molly explained how difficult it had been to recognise what was happening to her. Much of the information available didn't reflect the experiences of young women in their first relationships, motivating her to help create something specifically for them.

Working with Glasgow Girls Club, Molly helped develop ***Where We Stop***, a short film and campaign addressing coercive control and domestic abuse in younger relationships. Targeted focus groups ensured that the lived experiences of young women fully informed the campaign and demonstrated situations that could be easily recognised.

Molly explained how Glasgow Girls Club reaches young women through schools, community groups and local neighbourhoods and highlighted the need for more spaces where young women can share their experiences and be listened to.

Panel Members: Kat and Khola

SAY Women

SAY Women offers emotional support and safe housing to young women aged 16-25 who are survivors of sexual abuse or violence. Kat & Khola are service users from the SAY Women Leadership Board and promote the organisation and the work that they do for them.

"I was sexually abused form the age of 6...the world told me that sexual abuse was my fault...

SAY Women saved me."

Kat and Khola, spoke extensively about their involvement with SAY Women, an organisation supporting young women who have experienced sexual abuse, rape or sexual assault and who are homeless or at high risk of homelessness.

Both women shared deeply personal experiences of abuse, homelessness and the challenges of rebuilding their lives. Their contributions illustrated just how important specialist, trauma-informed support can be, not only in providing accommodation and practical assistance but also in helping young women regain their confidence, independence and a sense of belonging.

Kat explained how SAY Women had supported her after experiencing homelessness and how she had subsequently become involved in the organisation's leadership group. Kat challenged why decisions about services are traditionally made without sufficient involvement from the young women using them.
"Why aren't we the ones that are sitting there?"

This raised a fundamental question about who holds the most power within organisations. Kat stated that if services are designed to support young women, then it must be those women with direct experience of the issues being addressed that should have meaningful opportunities to influence how they operate.

Kat explained that SAY Women has been developing a more genuinely young-women-led approach, where they could participate in discussions, challenge proposed changes and influence decisions.
Khola similarly described how the support she received had helped her recognise her rights and rebuild her confidence after leaving an unsafe home environment.

She also highlighted how cultural expectations could make it particularly difficult for some women to leave abusive situations or seek independence.

One of Khola's strongest messages was:
"It's never your fault for someone else touching you without your consent."

Her contribution reminded everyone that abuse cannot be justified by cultural expectations, family circumstances or social norms. Every young woman has a right to safety, dignity and autonomy.

Both Kat and Khola also highlighted the importance of learning about feminism and the wider systems of inequality that affect women's lives. Their experiences showed how understanding these issues can help young women recognise injustice, challenge harmful attitudes and become involved in creating change.
"Say Women is sadly the only organisation that bridges homelessness and sexual abuse for young women, there has to be more funding put into place...there are not enough mechanisms and services and although they say there are hostels, these are not a safe space for sufferers of sexual abuse."

Discussion

The post speaker discussion took the form of a wider conversation about how organisations can reach people who may not know that services or opportunities exist. The young women emphasised that meaningful engagement requires organisations to be visible, flexible and willing to work directly within communities. Simply inviting participation is not enough; organisations must consider whose voices remain missing and what barriers prevent people from taking part.

Healthcare emerged as a significant focus during audience questions. One young woman described receiving an endometriosis diagnosis after several years, yet she continues to face difficulties in accessing effective pain management and support. Her experience highlighted the distinction between obtaining a diagnosis and receiving appropriate, ongoing treatment. Speakers and audience members discussed the importance of recording symptoms, understanding available healthcare guidance and having support to advocate for individual needs.

A pharmacy student highlighted resources including NICE guidance and the British National Formulary. A retired midwife emphasised that clinical guidelines must be applied alongside professional judgement and an understanding of each woman's circumstances. A representative from Haemophilia Scotland also shared information about detailed menstrual tracking resources that could help women communicate their symptoms to healthcare professionals.

These exchanges demonstrated the value of bringing lived experience and professional knowledge together. They also exposed the frustration women can feel when they repeatedly have to explain and defend their healthcare needs. The discussion reinforced the importance of listening to women, taking their concerns seriously and supporting them beyond the point of diagnosis.

Across the contributions, a recurring theme was the connection between personal experience and activism. Many of the speakers had become involved because of discrimination, inadequate healthcare, domestic abuse, homelessness or exclusion from decision-making. Their experiences had motivated community campaigns, creative projects, efforts to improve services and opportunities for other young women.

The conversation also explored what can be achieved when young women are supported, believed and trusted. Participants recognised that opportunities must be accessible to women from different backgrounds, including those affected by poverty, racism, trauma or a lack of confidence. Meaningful inclusion requires organisations to understand these barriers and adapt how they engage, rather than expecting everyone to participate in the same way.

A strong sense of solidarity ran throughout the discussion. Speakers and audience members shared experiences, offered practical advice and identified opportunities for collaboration. Together, their contributions showed how individual experiences can inform wider social change, and how spaces that encourage women to listen to and support one another can help turn shared concerns into collective action.

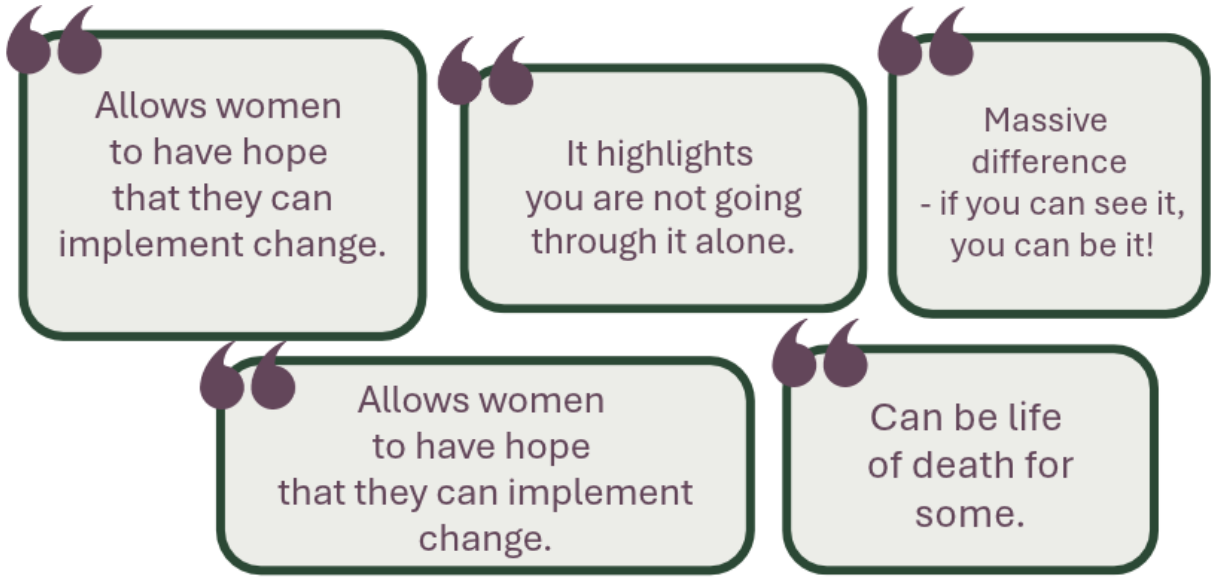


Workshops

During the roundtable sessions, the young women took part in an activity where they were presented with four prompts to encourage them to reflect on what they had heard from the speakers, bring forward their own ideas and participate in a meaningful discussion with the other women in attendance.

Women were encouraged to get to get creative, write, draw, use sticky notes, and chat to each other about anything thoughts and ideas that these prompts brought up. Their responses to the following questions were wide ranging and varied:

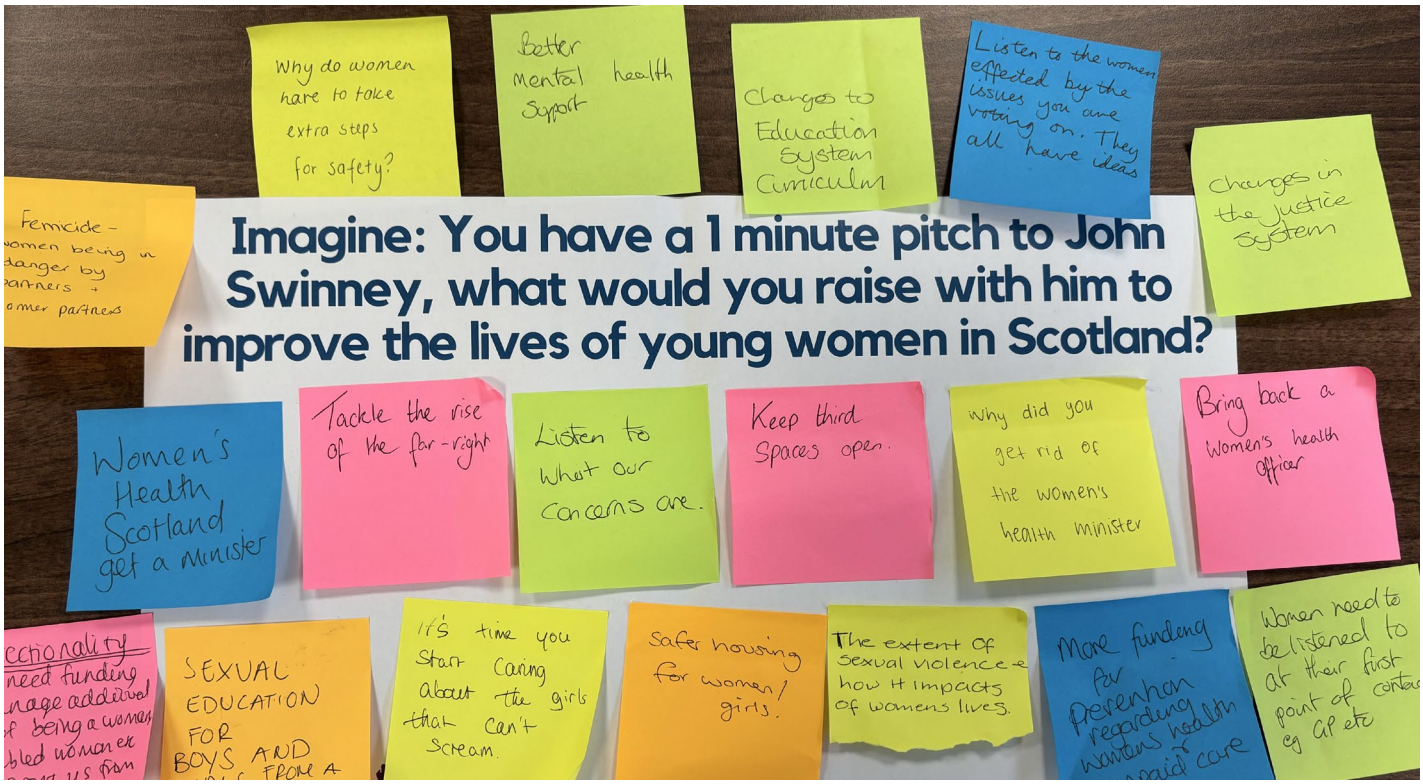
1. What difference does representation make to you and other young women in Scotland?



2. Where do you think the experiences of young women are overlooked?



3. Imagine: You have a 1-minute pitch to John Swinney, what would you raise with him to improve the lives of young women in Scotland?



4. "I'm going to use my voices and experiences to...

- Help create change for care leavers.
- Outreach in ethnic spaces targeted towards allowing more women that look like them as well as understanding them.
- Hold others accountable.
- Advocate for women who aren't currently able to speak up.
- Research and advocate for better & targeted anti-femicide policy.
- Be a safe space for others.

Conclusion

Overall, our conference highlighted the importance of involving young women in conversations and decisions about the issues that affect their lives. Whilst each of our speakers brought different perspectives, their message was clear: young women should not have to wait for permission to get involved and organisations have a responsibility to make meaningful involvement possible. Their experiences and ideas are valuable knowledge that can strengthen decisions and ensure policies, practices and services reflect their needs.

Meaningful participation includes involving young women at an early enough stage to influence priorities, taking their contributions seriously and being clear about how their views will shape what happens next. It also requires organisations like ours to consider who is missing from these conversations and what needs to change. Young women across Scotland have different experiences, circumstances and needs, and opportunities to participate must reflect that diversity.

The priority now is to turn the experiences and ideas shared into tangible action through continued engagement, accessible opportunities to participate and a commitment to addressing the barriers that have been identified. This work must extend beyond individual events, with time and resources dedicated to building relationships and supporting young women to contribute in ways that work for them.

Ultimately, listening is only the beginning. Our conference's value will be reflected in what follows: stronger relationships, more inclusive decision-making and practical changes that young women can recognise in their own lives.

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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Scottish Women's Convention

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