

Scottish Women's Convention response to:**The Commission on Parliamentary Reform: Call for Written Views****February 2016****The Consultation**

The Commission on Parliamentary Reform was launched by the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament on 26 October 2016. The remit of the Commission is to consider how the Scottish Parliament:

- Can increase engagement with wider society and involve the public;
- Can clarify its identity, as distinct from the Scottish Government; and
- Can be assured that it has the right 'checks and balances' to enable effective conduct of parliamentary business.

The Commission wants to hear views about how the Scottish Parliament is performing in these areas. It plans to engage with people across Scotland in a number of ways.

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 Scottish Women's Convention 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 the issues around engagement with the Scottish Parliament.

Question 1

Has the Scottish Parliament engaged effectively with the people of Scotland so far? Has it engaged better with some groups or on some issues better than others?

Women in Scotland have commented on the accessibility of the Scottish Parliament. The ease with which individuals are able not only to access the building itself but elected representatives is commended by those who have had direct involvement with the Parliament. This is especially the case in comparison to engagement with Westminster, which is seen as *"inaccessible, stuffy and unwelcoming"*.

Despite positive comments overall, some criticism has been levelled with regards to outreach work. Whilst a number of issues which affect women are applicable to those living in both urban and rural areas, many are specific to or are more acutely felt in more remote parts of the country. Transport, employment and childcare are overwhelmingly the three most important challenges and priorities for women throughout rural Scotland. Suitable, sustainable and affordable housing, access to

digital media, health, education and access to services are also issues of concern. There is a feeling amongst some women who live outwith main towns and centres that the specific issues and barriers faced in rural areas are not fully understood across the Parliament overall.

"It's positive that there is a Committee which deals specifically with rural areas, as well as the existence of the rural Parliament. It is not adequately recognised, however, that the work undertaken by almost all of the Committees will have some rural dimension – whether that's around education, justice, health or external affairs. Perhaps the Committees, or even the Parliament as a whole, could hold sessions outwith Edinburgh, which would go some way to broadening MSPs understanding of rural issues. If this is not considered, there's a real danger of further alienating many parts of Scotland from Holyrood."

Voices of women in Scotland are heard at the Scottish Parliament through SWC engagement with consultations and Committee calls for evidence and inquiries. The organisation endeavours to respond as often as possible, in order to ensure that the views, opinions and concerns of women throughout the country are considered in a number of key policy areas. There is very little information available in the public domain, however, as to how individuals themselves can contribute to this work.

"It's great to know that the SWC are keeping women's voices on the table. I would be interested in inputting my own opinions about a lot of the work of, for example, Parliamentary committees, but I wouldn't know how to go about it. It seems to be something that organisations are encouraged to do, not ordinary people. If the Parliament put out more information about how people could get involved, then it stands to reason that more would engage."

The Scottish Parliament website, which is the most likely way for women to find out how to get involved, is not considered to be user friendly. The site is difficult to navigate and often does not answer even the most basic queries.

"I suppose if you use the website a lot it's fine, but as a first time visitor trying to find out information it's not very easy to get around. It doesn't look very appealing either – it's as if it's designed to put people off rather than engage them."

Question 2

What has been your experience of direct engagement with the Scottish Parliament?

The SWC engages with the Parliament in a number of ways. As well as providing written evidence to calls for evidence and consultations, representatives from the organisation have given oral evidence at Committees on a range of policy issues. The SWC is also involved in Cross Party Groups. Our involvement has allowed women's voices to be heard, which is extremely important in policy and decision making processes.

One of the SWC's main activities is our International Women's Day celebration, which is held every year in the Garden Lobby and Debating Chamber on the Saturday closest to International Women's Day (8th March). This event sees over 350 women from throughout Scotland attend, with many more registering their interest in coming along.

As well as listening to inspiring speakers and joining in discussions, the women are also provided with networking opportunities at a buffet lunch and evening reception. Giving women access to areas which they may only see on television is one of the reasons that the SWC continues to hold International Women's Day within the Parliament.

"Coming along to the SWC International Women's Day is one of the highlights of my year. Being able to access the Garden Lobby and sit in MSP's seats on the Chamber floor is so exciting. The event allows many women to come to the Parliament who are unlikely to have been given the opportunity to do so otherwise. It's great to see the building full of women from all walks of life."

Question 3

How can the Scottish Parliament increase its engagement with the people of Scotland, especially those who are less likely to be interested in the Parliament?

Effective marketing and communication about the role of the Scottish Parliament and the ways in which individuals and communities can engage is vital. Many women have noted that at present, unless a person is aware of opportunities for involvement, they are unlikely to seek them out. The Parliament must take steps to ensure that information about its work, its representatives and the ways in which people can become involved are readily and easily available. The notion that Holyrood is 'the people's Parliament' will only be realised if those people are given the resources and information outlining how they can use the institution and the building itself.

"It's not the kind of thing that a lot of folk will go looking for themselves. If, however, they started to see more information in the places they go – whether that's a local library, the supermarket, community centre, schools or even workplaces – then they will be more aware of the ways they can get involved. Signposting to the website for more information is all very well and good, but how many people are likely to follow that up? There needs to be a lot more basic literature - even a leaflet through the door could make folk want to get more involved."

Question 4

Is it important that the Scottish Parliament is seen as separate from the Scottish Government [or from the UK Parliament (House of Commons and House of Lords), UK Government and local government]?

It is clear from discussions with women throughout Scotland that there is not always clarity as to the roles, purpose and responsibilities of each of these institutions. Particular confusion arises between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, with many seeing both as *"one and the same"*.

As part of the SWC's annual work programme, the organisation meets with women in their local communities, throughout the country, in order to discuss issues which are important within their areas. In the past, the Scottish Parliament has provided extremely useful leaflets for these events, which clearly outlined the difference between the Parliament and Government. Women commented on how informative this literature

was in making clear the role of each. This information has not, however, been readily available in recent years. The SWC saw firsthand its success and would encourage the reproduction of the booklets for distribution across communities. Similarly, during the Smith Commission process information was produced which outlined both reserved and devolved responsibilities. Women commented on how helpful this was in answering some of their most basic questions about, for example, which politicians to approach regarding which issues.

"It seems to be taken for granted the everyone should and will know the difference between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, or what the Scottish Parliament has power over and what Westminster has power over. That's not the case in reality, but again confusion won't be cleared up by expecting individuals to find out for themselves. The Scottish Parliament has a duty to inform people about what it does. That information has to be accessible and easy to read – complicated terminology and jargon is extremely off-putting."

Question 6

Do any of the checks and balances need strengthening to better enable the Scottish Parliament to hold the Scottish Government to account?

Following the 2014 independence referendum, the SWC consulted with women around the proposals set forward by the Smith Commission. This included whether there was a need for additional checks and balances to be put in place to allow for more Parliamentary scrutiny, as well as general openness and accountability. Women did not see the need a second Chamber of the Scottish Parliament, for example, to provide this. The importance of using Committees to scrutinise legislative and policy decisions was made clear.

"I don't see a need for a second chamber to add yet another layer in the top-down approach of managing a country. It would cost more money than would be beneficial. The existing Committee structure seems to provide many of the checks and balances that are needed."

One of the SWC's main concerns around the use of Committees in providing checks and balances is the lack of gender balance on each. At present the Public Audit Committee has the strongest female representation with four out of its seven members being women. The Equal Opportunities Committee is the second most populated by women, who make up three out of its seven members. In contrast, the Finance Committee only has two women members out of the ten in total. The Justice Committee is made up of eleven members, of which four are women. There is currently no mechanism available to enforce gender balance, which means that women are underrepresented at each of these important tables. The SWC urges the Commission on Parliamentary Reform to consider the introduction of gender quotas for Committees, in order to ensure that women's voices are heard as much as possible.

Conclusion

The Scottish Parliament overall is seen as an accessible and welcoming institution. It is, however, clear that specific issues could be improved upon in order to ensure that individuals and communities are able to engage as much and as effectively as possible with the institution.

“The more open and available the Scottish Parliament is as a whole, the more effective it will be overall.”

www.scottishwomensconvention.org

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

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