Written Submission from Scottish Women’s Convention

Background

The purpose of the Scottish Women’s Convention (SWC) is to communicate and consult with women in Scotland to influence public policy. Through the Convention’s policy work, roundtable and celebratory events the SWC strives to have contact with women and relevant organisations. The SWC aims to provide an effective way of consulting with a diverse range of women in Scotland.

The Scottish Women’s Convention has a network of over 300,000 women throughout Scotland.

Introduction and Evidence Base

The SWC has consulted with women throughout Scotland using numerous communication channels including roadshows and thematic events, surveys, Satellite Groups and Conferences.

The response to the Scottish Government’s Equality Statement on the Spending Review 2011 and Draft Budget for 2012-2013 is informed by the voices of women participating in SWC activities. The main focus of the current roadshow programme is the cuts to public services and the impact these are having on grassroots women. The issues have also been explored by SWC Satellite Groups and discussed during the Women in Employment and Women and the Media Conferences.

Although some issues are specific to certain geographical areas, in the main, women throughout Scotland have concerns and opinions concerning key services such as transport, health, employment, education, childcare and housing.

Overview and Opening Comments

The SWC welcomes the Equality Statement, which accompanies the 2011 Spending Review and 2012-2013 Draft Budget. The Government’s commitment to equality, by retaining the budget for the promotion of equality at £20.3 million, is supported.

It is recognised that this Budget is set against the backdrop of a challenging economic climate and that the Government must focus on measures to accelerate economic growth and recovery.

There is no doubt that the UK Coalition Government’s economic reforms are having a detrimental impact on women. It is vital that resources in Scotland, both at local and national levels, are allocated to ensure that women are given equality of opportunity. There are a number of provisions within the Spending Review and Budget which do this, however certain areas must be given greater gender equality consideration.
This response to the Equality Statement will examine each Budget Portfolio in turn.

**Health, Wellbeing and Cities**

The increase in budget for this portfolio is welcomed. The importance of the retention of a health service that is universal and free at point of contact is continually stressed by women throughout Scotland.

The Government’s decision to abolish prescription charges is commended. Many women have taken the decision to forego medication as they have been unable to afford a prescription, or the money they would have paid was used to pay essential household expenses such as food or bills.

The commitment to protecting Free Personal Care is also welcomed by women, not only for the older women who benefit from this service, but also for those who care for them, the majority of whom are women. While the protection of Free Personal Care is important, it is necessary to ensure that provision levels and individual needs are taken into account when assisting the elderly in society. Home care is not currently meeting the needs of service users in a number of geographical areas, with care workers being forced to concentrate on targets rather than time spent with individuals.

“The person delivering the mail is often the person who spends the most time with them.”

The continuation of the Change Fund supporting Adult Social Care is also important. It is well documented that unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, save the economy millions of pounds each year. Any moves to shift the balance towards primary and community care are welcomed with carers being a primary focus of the Fund. The status of family carers as a positive economic resource must be reviewed in order to substantially improve the delivery of greater emotional, material and respite support.

The introduction of the Family Nurse Partnership under the Health, Wellbeing and Cities budget is a positive step. As Scotland has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Western Europe this measure to support and educate young women throughout the country is welcomed and encouraged.

The Early Years focus in this Budget is noted. It is important to stress that a substantial number of women living in rural Scotland do not feel maternity services in their areas are sufficient. For example women living on the Islands often have to access maternity units on the mainland, which means leaving behind family support networks 38 weeks into their pregnancy. Concern has also been raised that maternity staff are based off the Islands resulting in added anxiety throughout pregnancy. Women in rural Scotland have also expressed concern that the sparse availability of midwifery services and “distinct lack of health visitors” can lead to further isolation. Funding support for mental health organisations must be retained and the value of local support and outreach services
cannot be underestimated. Mental health issues require key focus so that sufferers do not become a “hidden group within society”.

Women in rural Scotland feel that the added aspect of living in a rural community can lead to more isolation in terms of health service ability. There exists a fear of a ‘postcode lottery’ in terms of treatment times and wider prevention and outreach initiatives. The added time and expense of travelling to bigger towns and cities for appointments is unfair and hospital closure threats in rural areas can exacerbate feelings of isolation. There is a lack of consistency with patient transport throughout rural communities – those with morning appointments must wait until the last patient is seen before they are taken home. Unreliable, expensive and often inaccessible public transport forces women to rely on this service.

The Scottish Government’s guarantee of no compulsory redundancies within the NHS in Scotland is welcomed. As women make up over three quarters of NHS employees, job losses would have a serious gender equality impact. One of the greatest concerns intimated by women throughout Scotland is the job losses that will occur as a result of sweeping cuts to public services. Reservations are raised, however, regarding the continuation of a pay freeze for NHS staff in full time employment who earn over £21,000. The escalating costs of fuel, energy, and food, coupled with the fact that women have the highest personal income in two-fifths of households in Scotland, means that the decision to freeze salaries could have a detrimental effect on women working in the NHS.

**Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth**

The SWC, in partnership with the Scottish Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology, held a conference on Women in Employment in February 2011. Women working in the private, public and voluntary sectors were given the opportunity to discuss issues facing them in the wake of increasing job loss threats and a challenging economic climate.

Women face a number of issues with regards to career opportunity, employment progression and work/life balance. Gender pay disparity and pension provision contributes to long-term economic hardship throughout women's lives. Attitudes towards women, caring responsibilities and a lack of confidence are seen as the three greatest barriers to women entering employment, while attitudes and gender prejudice, maternity leave and ageism towards women of childbearing age are the main barriers to progression in the workplace.

A wave of redundancies, specifically within Local Authority employment, has resulted in a substantial number of women having to readjust their financial positions. Concern has been expressed at the high levels of youth unemployment and the fear that this will lead to first, second and third generation unemployment within families.

Childcare is one of the key factors in women obtaining and sustaining employment. It is
impossible to consider the issue of employment without realising that the provision of accessible, affordable, wrap-around childcare is essential to ensure women re-enter and remain in the labour market.

The prohibitive cost of private nurseries often prevents women accessing employment. A high level of frustration is leveled at policy makers who believe the concept of universally available pre-school education and affordable, wrap-around childcare are referred to and evaluated as the same thing. Therefore while the commitment of 475 hours per year nursery education for 3 and 4 year old children is welcomed, this should not be considered a suitable alternative to accessible childcare.

It is crucial that the Scottish Government consider childcare provision when setting and reviewing any budgets relating to employment and sustainable growth.

**Education and Lifelong Learning**

“*Education reflects everything – we need to get it right for our children first.*”

The safeguarding of state funded nursery provision throughout Scotland is vital. This is often the only pre-school supervision available for lower income families, who are unable to afford the escalating costs of private nurseries and child minders.

The Curriculum for Excellence (CFE) has been discussed at some length by women. Many believe the CFE diminishes course choice availability and that, as cuts to public services take hold, there is increasing focus on the core academic subjects. This contradicts the aims of the CFE, to transform education by providing coherent, more flexible and enriched learning.

“*Young people are not being provided with the education system which they expect or deserve.*”

There is a belief that due to falling pupil numbers and a lack of teachers, particularly in rural areas, subjects will be removed from school timetables. This, in turn, will limit the choices available to young people. Cuts to music tuition and art specialists within schools are also “*wholly opposed*” by women throughout Scotland.

The continued funding of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) will hopefully encourage pupils from more disadvantaged backgrounds to remain in education.

Gender streaming in all aspects of education and lifelong learning is the greatest barrier for women. Young women continue to be steered towards ‘traditional’ roles, with little or no encouragement to pursue education and careers in sectors such as science, engineering and technology.

Concerns have been raised that the Scottish Government’s commitment to the creation of 25,000 new Modern Apprenticeships (MA) will further encourage gender streaming
and, in turn, occupational segregation within the labour market. Relatively few young women appear to have been provided with information about MA’s within their careers guidance and learning environments. Of those young women who have been advised or encouraged to undertake an apprenticeship, it has been in what is seen as a ‘traditionally female’ role, for example hairdressing or childcare.

Women believe the Government has the opportunity to promote non-traditional roles and hope that young women will have full and equal access to all of the proposed 25,000 MA places. It is also vital the learning and training opportunities offered to those 16-19 year olds not in work or part of a MA programme tackle occupational segregation. The commitment by the Government that Scottish students will not have to pay tuition fees is welcomed. This removes one of a number of the barriers faced by women attempting to access further and higher education.

As with the Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth Portfolio, childcare provision must be a key consideration when creating budgets for further and higher education. This is one of the major barriers to women undertaking training and development and the Scottish Government must take this into account.

**Justice**

Proposals to reform Legal Aid in Scotland should take into account those women who seek civil remedy in the courts, through interdict or non-harassment orders, against men who are violent towards them. Women have discussed this topic at great length and believe the lack of recourse to civil Legal Aid is unacceptable. This is particularly the case as the men who perpetrate these crimes are automatically entitled to criminal Legal Aid to seek basic representation in the courts. This disparity is a clear demonstration of gender inequality and should be looked at as a matter of urgency. The establishment of the Commission on Women Offenders, to be chaired by Dame Eilish Angiolini is welcomed. Many women have commented on the rising numbers of women in the criminal justice system and consider it “vital” that there is detailed examination of the reasons why women are sent to prison, particularly with regards to offences such as non-payment of fines. Comments have been made there is little benefit in sending women who receive shortterm prison sentences to HMP Cornton Vale in Stirling, as this will often remove them from their families and vital support networks.

“Women who are serving short term prison sentences are seldom a threat to the public and frequently have difficult life experiences. Alternatives to detention in a high security environment should be found”

The SWC look forward to the report of the findings of the Commission, to be published in February 2012.
Rural Affairs and the Environment

Women in rural communities consistently stress the importance of affordable, reliable, fast broadband services.

“The technology gap between urban and remote areas is widening and this is disadvantageous on a number of levels.”

The provision of high speed broadband is seen as essential across rural communities as it can open up pathways to learning, business, entertainment and much more. Many women feel it is unfair that because of sparse availability, cheaper broadband deals available in urban areas do not apply in more rural areas. Given the higher cost of living associated with rural areas, broadband is often seen as a luxury. This should not be the case.

The Scottish Government commitment to the rolling out of next generation broadband across rural Scotland is therefore welcome; however the target of 2020 means that many women will continue to miss out on the opportunities available online.

Infrastructure and Capital Investment

The provision of affordable housing and investment in an effective public transport system are two of the issues consistently discussed by women.

Transport

It is well known that women are more likely to use public transport than men. The Scottish Government commitment to sustaining funding for the Concessionary Travel Card scheme is welcomed. In areas of Scotland with good public transport links women unequivocally support the provision of free bus travel for the over 60’s and disabled people.

“You have got to be able to stay active – it is great to be able to go to other places and take an interest in things”

The free bus pass is especially important to older women who are more likely to be without a car, unable to drive and are likely to have much lower retirement income than men.

“Many older people’s world would shrink considerably without this service. It could also weaken important links they have with families”

While the Concessionary Travel Card scheme is supported, in almost every area of Scotland public transport is seen as limited, expensive and unreliable. This is particularly true of rural areas where bus services are so sparse that women are often unable to make use of free travel.
“Rural transport is just a nightmare. The timetable does not allow enough time to spend in the centre of town.”

Many rural women comment on the absence of bus services at weekends and in the evenings resulting in socialising and other activities being difficult, especially for young people. Buses which are available have little or no access for prams or wheelchair users, timetables are frequently ineffectual and fail to take into account shift or part-time workers, the majority of whom are women. Women believe that services need to be improved in order to justify everincreasing fares. As a result of poor public transport provision there is a huge reliance on private transport.

“A car is an essential rather than a luxury. Some people have to buy a car when they can’t afford other things.”

The rising cost of fuel and poor road conditions make the running of a car even more expensive in rural areas. The SWC would encourage the Scottish Government to use part of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment budget to introduce a fuel subsidy in rural areas. Women report that the cost of fuel is effecting incomes in terms of the cost of basic goods and sustaining local businesses.

Women living on the islands frequently express frustration at the lack of 'joined-up thinking' between bus and ferry providers. When ferries run late, the lack of bus services makes it almost impossible to travel to other parts of the island safely. Day travel and local discount rates are unavailable resulting in women having to purchase costly monthly returns or block tickets which are non-transferrable between families.

“Women are having to take crazy and lengthy routes to accomplish required daily tasks in a bid to avoid the ferry costs and save some money”

Women would like the Government to introduce the Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) to all island communities. This would go some way to addressing the apparent failings in ferry provision and cost.

**Housing**

There is a distinct lack of suitable, affordable housing throughout Scotland. Initiatives to build 30,000 new affordable homes over the life of the Parliament are welcome.

However there appears to be a massive reduction in the Supporting Economic Growth/Housing Supply area of this budget. The lack of investment in public housing combined with the high cost and limited availability of private lets means many families are forced to accept accommodation which is unsuitable for their needs.

The Scottish Government’s decision to end the ‘Right-to-Buy’ scheme is supported; however a major effect of this programme has been the significant decrease in the availability of quality social housing. There are a number of housing areas throughout
the country which are very unlikely to meet the minimum housing standards required by 2015. Some areas have deteriorated to such an extent that they have become “ghettos”.

A reduction in this part of the budget may exacerbate poor living conditions in the most deprived areas of urban and rural communities. This, coupled with a removal of funding to regeneration projects, will potentially have a very detrimental impact on the most disadvantaged communities in Scotland.

“Poor housing stifles confidence and opportunity in individuals and whole communities.”

**Summary**

As women make up the majority of the public sector workforce, are more likely to undertake caring responsibilities, use public transport, be streamed into specific subjects in school and face numerous barriers in attempting to access employment, gender considerations must be made in every area of Scottish Government budgets. Without a full analysis of the effects public spending, particularly in light of sweeping cuts to public services, the economic position and wellbeing of women will be undermined. The contribution made by women to the country’s economic growth must not be devalued.

Scottish Women’s Convention
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