

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 19 June 2001
(Morning)

Session 1

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE **13th Meeting 2001, Session 1**

CONVENER

*Kate MacLean (Dundee West) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lee Bridges

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 19 June 2001

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 10:00]

The Convener (Kate MacLean): We have received apologies from Kay Ullrich. Jamie Stone and Jamie McGrigor have said that they will be a little bit late.

Item in Private

The Convener: Item 1 is to ask members to agree to take item 4 in private. Is that agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Reporters

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of reports from the committee's reporters. Elaine Smith has produced a paper, which I ask her to speak to.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): Members have received my written report. I hope that they have had a chance to read it.

Since I took over as gender reporter, I have worked on issues around women and the justice system. Routes out of Prostitution asked me to visit its project and I was keen to do so, as it is the only gender-specific social inclusion partnership. The Routes Out of Prostitution social inclusion partnership tries to prevent young women from becoming involved in prostitution. It also supports women to enable them to exit prostitution.

Routes out of Prostitution sees prostitution in the wider context of gender and gender discrimination. It has the objective of raising awareness of various forms of women's inequality in society, in particular issues of sexual violence, poverty and discrimination in the justice system. Routes out of Prostitution is clear that prostitution should be seen as violence against women and that it is about survival, not sexual behaviour. I thought it important to report to the committee on such an interesting project.

In my conclusions at the end of the report, I note that Routes out of Prostitution's key message is that women do not consider that they have a choice when they enter prostitution. The majority of prostitutes desperately want to get out.

Prostitution is not a career choice for women, nor does it operate in a vacuum. Prostitution must be considered in the wider context of gender inequality and discrimination. We must recognise the many different layers of inequality and discrimination that exist, which are often interconnected and interwoven.

Society finds addressing the subject of prostitution uncomfortable. A lot of ideological tensions exist around the nature of prostitution, which should be viewed in the wider context of violence against women and children and of gender discrimination. In the report, I note that it is part of the Equal Opportunities Committee's remit to tackle such issues, even though it may be uncomfortable to contemplate them.

I ask the committee to note the report, which informs it of the work of Routes out of Prostitution. It is important for us to make contact with the Justice 2 Committee, possibly through Kate MacLean, as that committee is taking a lot of evidence about women in the justice system. The Equal Opportunities Committee should express an interest in being involved in the Justice 2 Committee's deliberations.

I want to put on record our recognition that prostitution is part of a wider agenda of violence against women and children and gender discrimination. I further suggest that we give serious consideration to an inquiry into the whole issue of violence against women and children. We will come to that question later in the meeting. Such an inquiry would begin the process of connecting all the issues and would make gender inequality real and visible.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): I am interested in the Routes out of Prostitution project and I have spoken to Elaine Smith about it before. When this kind of project gets funding, whether from the lottery or from a local authority, there is a hoo-hah and the papers get involved and all the rest of it. Something needs to be done about the perception of projects that do important work with women. It is important that what Routes out of Prostitution does is not seen as a loony idea. Members will recall comments that have been made in the past about similar projects.

Perhaps we should look more widely at the issues around projects that work with women and young people in prostitution. We know that the projects are important, but we also know that if someone made an announcement tomorrow about further funding for such projects or about picking up on some of the issues that we feel are important, it would make the front page of the tabloids. Everybody we met would ask us, "What do you think of funding that? Isn't it terrible?"

How do we deal with some of the myths? How

can the committee support proactive funding to help women and young people in similar situations?

Elaine Smith: I understand that the Routes out of Prostitution project had a five-year funding remit. I would like similar projects to be rolled out across Scotland, as the issue affects not only Glasgow, where the project is based. As I said, we will come to the subject of an inquiry later in the meeting. Much of what Cathy Peattie said makes the case for a wide inquiry, which would mean that all the issues could be brought on to the agenda.

Linda Fabiani (Central Scotland) (SNP): The key point that Elaine Smith made is that people think that issues such as prostitution have a narrow field of reference, but prostitution affects every strand of society, as the entire family is involved. An inquiry would be worth while but we should consider carefully the terms of the remit so that we do not end up with the unwanted publicity that Cathy Peattie mentioned.

The Convener: As no other member wants to comment we will move on, but we will discuss the matter later in private when we talk about our future work programme.

Recommendation 17 in Elaine Smith's report requires action. Are members agreed that I will write to Pauline McNeill, the convener of the Justice 2 Committee?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Do any of the other reporters have reports to make? If not, we will move on. As members are aware, we have a vacancy for a reporter. We will discuss the subject in private under our future work programme.

10:07

Meeting continued in private until 12:20.

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