

Scottish Women's Convention response
to the Scottish Government's
consultation on:

Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy



February 2025

Premise

The Scottish Government have made commitments to embed equality and human rights throughout decision-making. To achieve this aim, a Strategy has been developed which outlines a framework to be used by governments and the wider public sector. It will cover until the year 2030, however will also outline long-term methods to improving mainstreaming. The Strategy focuses on issues such as:

- Removing systemic barriers;
- Improving how decisions are made;
- Establishing the culture, mindset and practice that ensures that the Scottish Government and public sector embed equality and human rights in policymaking and service delivery.

Views collected through the consultation process will guide Scottish Government and public sector work surrounding mainstreaming, with relevant information considered when developing the Strategy further.



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

Proposed Vision and Objectives

Do you agree with the vision?

Yes.

The proposed vision aligns with the wants of women, particularly the focus on the establishment of 'strong communities' through human rights realisation. This approach places the reduction of systemic inequalities as a priority across Scottish institutions, an issue which disproportionately impacts women. Across SWC work, we hear of the continued disadvantage faced by women throughout their personal and professional lives, as a result of patriarchal mindsets. Work which actively aims to reduce the influence misogynistic barriers have across society is welcomed, and we are encouraged by the proposals made throughout the Strategy. Arguably, overreliance on mainstreaming in place of tangible policy action, can limit improved equality. However, mainstreaming should enable altered mindsets across governments and policy creation. We would therefore support Scottish Government approaches which aim to embed equality and human rights across decision-making.

Do you agree with the objectives?

Yes.

We support the proposed objectives included within the Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy. The removal of systemic barriers is key to women's full and valued participation in public society, as is effective review of decision-making processes. We would also commend the Scottish Government on commitments which improve transparency surrounding decision-making, with women regularly highlighting the lack of accountability as a major contributor to distrust in national governments. We believe that the proposals made facilitate a wider cultural change, which will enable the delivery of improved services for all people in Scotland.

Six Key Drivers: Strengthening Leadership

Do you agree that strengthening leadership is a key driver for mainstreaming equality and human rights?

Yes.

As stated within the Strategy, full participation of leadership teams is key to the facilitation of mainstreaming. Women have regularly pointed to hierarchal structures as architects of discrimination, explaining that without appropriate mechanisms in place, it is unlikely substantive change will occur. They have often stated that improved diversity within organisations can assist in this, stating that women must be represented within decision-making roles.

Within the Scottish Parliament 46% of MSPs are women, a visible improvement since 2017, where they made up only 35%¹. While this evidences progress, there have been worrying reports of women actively avoiding the public sphere or leaving politics. This has been attributed to increased levels of misogynistic abuse faced by public officials and the rise of extreme right-wing politics². At the SWC, we hold great concerns surrounding this, proposing that without visible representation of women at executive levels, mainstreaming is unlikely. Therefore, while a mainstreaming Strategy will assist in creating long-term change, more immediate action is required to enable women's voices to be heard at a government-level. We would propose the acknowledgement of this issue within the development of the Strategy, believing that targeted intervention can assist in enabling effective mainstreaming.

- “I think it's before you even stand as a woman. I think lots of people take that into consideration; ‘what abuse am I going to get?’”
- “Encourage more women to stand for election!”
- “The lack of women in the council up [North] is also a big issue, so its men making these decisions. They are making these decisions when they've never had that life experience, and I think we need more women on councils, and we need them in Parliament.”

Six Key Drivers: Developing Accountability and Transparency

Do you agree accountability and transparency are a key driver for mainstreaming equality and human rights?

Yes.

Accountability and transparency are vital in enabling a human rights approach to be mainstreamed in Scotland. In recent years, human rights have been a regular topic of debate, with multiple Programme for Governments making repeated promises. Yet, little progress has been made in this area, with human rights and equalities remaining an afterthought to decision-making. This has resulted in considerable frustration from women, with many expressing “disappointment”. There has been acknowledgement from some that the Scottish Government hold ambitions in this area, however, the lack of tangible change limits this sense of goodwill.

- “I think it's an aspiration of the Scottish Government to have more women in power”

When questioned on ways to improve this, women have pointed to increased political will and accountability mechanisms. They have explained that clear guidelines would

¹ Engender. (2023). Sex and Power in Scotland 2023. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SP2023NEW.pdf>

² ElectHer and Engender. (2024). Women's Equal Representation in Scotland: Towards a Collective Theory of Change (Phase 1 Interim Report). Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/605b6fadc9a8d051017ec2d8/t/66a7ac2d7e8c71260fbefea0/1722264621575/Womens+Equal+Representation+in+Scotland.pdf>

assist in holding governments to account, as would the establishment of specific accountability roles. Therefore, we believe that the focus on accountability is supported by women in Scotland, as is the established internal Scottish Government mechanisms. This work must be continuous however, being regularly reviewed and revised, altering alongside the needs of the modern populace, highlighting the importance in comprehensive training across all levels of governance.

- “...it’s about a paradigm shift, whoever is setting the strategic priorities for the country, we need to be having these conversations about how these things are reported, accountability is really important, but it’s not about doing more, it’s about doing better.”
- “Until there is a fundamental shift towards greater transparency, accountability, and public engagement, it is unlikely that the voices of ordinary people will be genuinely listened to by decision-makers.”

Have we captured the core elements of accountability and transparency within the context of mainstreaming?

No.

The proposals made relating to accountability and transparency lack the sufficient inclusion of lived experience. While the listed internal and external mechanisms will greatly assist the Scottish Government in embedding human rights and equality throughout decision-making, we believe that there should be specific mention of lived experience groups. Those with lived experience of intersectional disadvantage hold a unique perspective, providing quality reviews of institutional processes. Including those with lived experience, would also provide levels of transparency, enabling non-parliamentarians an insight into the internal workings of government procedures.

What actions would you recommend, to ensure greater accountability and transparency contributes to mainstreaming?

We propose the establishment of a specific stakeholder working group, exclusively made up of rights-holders as a valuable method to ensure additional accountability. Group members must be effectively trained in human rights and equalities, ensuring that quality assessments are made. Additionally, the proposals made place intersectionality as central to debates. We would mirror this view and believe that an intersectional methodology must be considered during selection of group members. To assist in this process, the Scottish Government could utilise the expertise of third sector organisations operating in Scotland, who already embed lived experience throughout their work. In this scenario, we would highlight that due to short-term, insecure funding practices, third sector organisations would likely struggle to provide sufficient support. Therefore, we recommend improved financial resourcing across the third sector.

Also, we point to the proposed Human Rights Bill as a further asset in developing accountability and transparency across governments. Within this Bill, the Scottish Government suggested the creation of a Human Rights Scheme, placing a duty on

Scottish Ministers to publish actions taken which relate to overarching human rights requirements³. Through this process, accountability mechanisms are clearly laid out, and we would therefore suggest incorporation of the Human Rights Bill within the Mainstreaming Strategy.

Furthermore, we would highlight the reduction in open dialogue surrounding the Human Rights Bill in recent months, as potentially detrimental to the development of mainstreaming. The establishment of Human Rights within Scots Law would enable improved accountability, through clear legislative frameworks. While we acknowledge the mention of the Human Rights Bill within the proposed Strategy, both concepts must work together in order to embed human rights throughout Scottish processes.

Six Key Drivers: Utilising Evidence and Experience

Do you agree that utilising evidence and experience is a key driver for mainstreaming equality and human rights?

Yes.

As an organisation which exclusively handles lived experience data, we are heartened to note the inclusion of lived experience as a key driver. We believe that lived experience plays an important role in policy development, providing decision-makers with the reality of Scottish life, as well as the impact of legislation. This data has traditionally been overlooked, viewed as an addition to quantitative data collection methods. We strongly believe that lived experience should be embedded as a central consideration throughout governance and therefore support the inclusion of experience and evidence as a key driver.

We would, however, highlight the need for further development of the proposals. Direct commitments are lacking surrounding the creation of a specific lived experience panel, as are details of the role a panel would play in the continuation of mainstreaming. As stated previously, it is vital that throughout recruitment of the lived experience panel, an intersectional lens must be taken, ensuring a wide range of experiences are considered. Furthermore, comprehensive training and support should be given to maximise the effectiveness of the panel. This must go alongside training for the wider Scottish Government, to ensure that panel findings are fully considered. Lived experience data is often dismissed and therefore, underutilised. So, we highly recommend increased consideration of this driver, with lived experience playing a vital role in the enablement of mainstreaming.

What actions would you recommend, to ensure that utilising evidence and experience as outlined above will contribute to the achievement of mainstreaming?

³ Scottish Government. (2023). A Human Rights Bill for Scotland: Consultation. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/consultation-paper/2023/06/human-rights-bill-scotland-consultation/documents/human-rights-bill-scotland-consultation-june/human-rights-bill-scotland-consultation-june/govscot%3Adocument/human-rights-bill-scotland-consultation-june.pdf>

To enable the effective utilisation of evidence and experience, we would highly recommend working alongside third sector organisations who hold extensive expertise in this area. Third sector organisations operate within and across communities, garnering extensive networks and awareness of local and national issues. Through these organisations the Scottish Government could gain access to a wide network of stakeholders. Any action taken must be accompanied with improved financial remuneration, with many third sector organisations highlighting their poor funding situation.

Additionally, women we have consulted have expressed some frustration when working with government departments. They have pointed to the concept of 'consultation fatigue', whereby their views are continuously gathered, however they see little to no tangible action within communities. Some women have explained that this has contributed to a sense of "hopelessness", eroding trust between the public and Government. Managing fatigue is a difficult task, particularly when resources are scarce. We would however again point to the effective utilisation of third sector organisations who often have strong relationships across communities. Through proper resourcing of the third sector, an increased number of organisations may provide the expertise required to enable mainstreaming throughout Scotland.

- "I regularly complete local authority surveys, but don't see outcomes which reflect my concerns."
- "It's difficult sometimes to see change which can be linked to women's experiences. For example, repeated surveys on what women would prioritise around transport, lighting and public spaces – no changes."
- "There is a difference between being listened to and having your issues dealt with, one does not always follow the other."
- "I believe they do listen to people's opinions, but don't always take them into consideration."

Six Key Drivers: Enhancing Capability and Culture

Do you agree that enhancing capability and culture is a key driver for mainstreaming equality and human rights?

Yes.

Improving capability has regularly been referred to by the SWC as vital to the enabling of mainstreaming. As stated in the proposals, this will require good investment by government officials, both in training and financial terms. Only through increased understanding and capacity building, can the wider culture be changed to centre human rights and equality. Women have regularly pointed to significant cultural shifts as being required to reduce discrimination and inequality. Generally, increased education is provided as an enabling process, linking with the overall driver of enhancing capability

and culture. It can be said that the two elements of Driver Five are closely related, with improvements in both being required to facilitate change in the other.

Do you agree that this Strategy will provide a foundation to influence a culture of mainstreaming equality and human rights within Scottish Government and the wider public sector?

We agree that this Strategy should, in theory, assist with creating a culture of mainstreaming. The proposals attached have outlined an ambitious project for government bodies, while emphasising the importance of equality and human rights mainstreaming. The SWC will however, re-emphasise our call for proper resourcing of the proposed works. It is highly unlikely significant change can be enabled without appropriate finances, and as such to influence culture, capacity building must be of focus.

Six Key Drivers: Improving Capacity

Do you agree that improving capacity is a key driver for mainstreaming equality and human rights?

Yes.

The inclusion of improved capacity as a key driver is welcomed. Throughout our response, we have highlighted the need for increased funding alongside general mainstreaming activities. This funding should be provided for public and third sector alike, enabling full commitment from major contributors. We are gladdened to note the awareness of the Scottish Government in this need, with multiple points made within the consultation document which accurately represent the requirement for improved capacity. In particular, discussions surrounding staff burn-out reflect conversations had with women across Scotland. Many have highlighted their frustration at increased workloads, alongside rising living costs and budget cuts. Therefore, improving capacity can be noted as a significant driver in the enabling of mainstreaming in Scotland.

How will the Strategy support real change?

Do you think the proposed approach of a collated Action Plan will drive change?

Yes.

The collation of recommendations made across Scottish Government processes will drive change to an extent. As highlighted within the proposed Strategy, there is no singular location where current commitments towards equality and human rights mainstreaming can be found. Therefore, by grouping initiatives together, rights-holders, as well as government officials, can effectively work towards equality for all. Also, it is vital that this Action Plan be continually updated with modern practice and recommendations, to ensure longevity of the proposed programme.

Do you think that there is a need for a cross-public sector toolkit to support mainstreaming of Equality and Human Rights?

Yes.

We strongly support the creation of a toolkit to assist the public sector in delivering mainstreaming strategies. Within the proposed Strategy, there has been a clear emphasis on building capacity and capability, issues which consistently arise when discussing equality and human rights mainstreaming with public officials. A toolkit is an effective method in which to assist officials in their mainstreaming obligations, however, this approach should not be overly relied upon. In cases where equalities and human rights have been disregarded, it is key that accountability mechanisms do not only refer individuals to the toolkit. Instead, an effective review process must be carried out, with targeted training and guidance provided. Furthermore, training should be given across sectors to ensure that individuals are provided with the knowledge to use the associated toolkit. Without suitable training, it is unlikely that mainstreaming will be achieved effectively.

Reporting

What are your views on establishing additional reporting requirements?

Additional stand-alone reporting requirements should not be created.

We agree with the statements made within the Strategy surrounding reporting requirements, in that an additional report would be unnecessary. Currently, multiple reports are created as a result of the many human rights and equalities obligations at a government and national level. Additionally, the proposed Human Rights Bill will likely introduce additional reporting requirements for public authorities, providing further detail on progress towards human rights embedding. We would, however, highlight that current reports are of poor quality and inconsistent across the public sector. Therefore, we believe that through the release of the proposed Strategy, increased knowledge will assist in improving current reporting practices. This will ultimately contribute to a comprehensive mainstreaming landscape, improving general accountability. We would then recommend a review period after the implementation of the Strategy, which may result in an additional reporting requirement becoming necessary.

Overall Reflections

To what extent do the drivers capture the full range of activity required to mainstream equality and human rights?

Captures most of the range.

The Drivers proposed capture many of the processes needed to mainstream equality and human rights. In particular, Utilising Evidence and Experience, Enhancing Capability and Culture, and Improving Capacity, are key in ensuring the implementation of the Strategy. We believe that many of these areas, are strongly linked, with improvements being required universally. This change must be accompanied with effective accountability mechanisms, which includes the voices of a range of people, centring women's voices as central to review processes. We would finalise our response with the emphasis of increased resourcing – while proposed plans are comprehensive and address many essential areas, it is crucial they are adequately funded to ensure success.

Conclusion

Having listened to women, our three key recommendations on this topic are:

- Create a lived experience panel, to assist in the development and review of mainstreaming in Scotland.
- Ensure all public service staff receive comprehensive training on equality and human rights mainstreaming.
- Properly fund third sector organisations, through long-term funding agreements, increasing capacity for evaluation.

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's consultation on **Equality and Human Rights Mainstreaming Strategy**. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to this topic and its effects on women's equality.

For further information or to share your views, please contact:

Email - info@scottishwomensconvention.org

Telephone - 0141 339 4797

Website – www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Facebook, X & Instagram - @SWCwomen

