The Women's Health Plan 2021-2024:
Progress and Next Steps

***12th November 2024***

# Background

The Young Women’s Movement is Scotland’s national organisation for young women’s feminist leadership and collective action against gender inequality. Our vision is a fairer Scotland where young women and girls are **meaningfully heard, valued and supported** to lead collective action and enact transformational change throughout society, systems and structures. Our research is **imagined and led by young women, for young women**.

# The Women’s Health Plan

The Young Women’s Movement have been working with The Women’s Health Plan to ensure the voices and lived experiences of young women from across Scotland are incorporated, using evidence from our research report entitled: [*Status of Young Women in Scotland 2023: Young Women Accessing Healthcare*](https://www.youngwomenscot.org/research-reports/the-status-of-young-women-in-scotland-2022-2023-experiences-of-accessing-healthcare/)*.* The Young Women's Movement looks forward to continuing to work with The Women's Health Plan in its next phase.

This briefing highlights the engagement and research we have been undertaking with (and on behalf of) young women and girls, highlighting the issues that most affect them whilst growing up and living in Scotland.

# Accessing healthcare

In our 2023 report, young disabled women with long-term health conditions, including mental health diagnoses and neurodivergence, were **49% more likely to rate their experiences of accessing healthcare negatively.**

Young women we worked with talked about not being able to get appointments, due to **long waiting lists** as well as difficulties accessing appointment services.

Participants expressed their value of and appreciation for the NHS, but some young women also reported **feeling guilty for accessing healthcare services** at all, knowing how much pressure is facing the NHS, especially throughout and since the Covid-19 pandemic.

*“The guilt puts me off trying to access things as does all the bad experiences that my friends have had as does all the news stories about how broken everything is […] it feels like such a big task that I don’t have the energy for […] it feels like too big of a thing to tackle, trying to access healthcare.”*

[group discussion participant]

# Recommendations

1. **Alternative ways to access healthcare** must be developed and implemented across healthcare services to ensure disabled young women and girls are able to **engage digitally**, such as through e-consultation and online registration, making appointments online, and telephone or video appointments, as recommended by The Women’s Health Plan.

# Discrimination – feeling ignored or not believed

Across every theme we explored within our research on experiences of accessing healthcare, **young women told us that they are not taken seriously in healthcare settings**, they are often dismissed, and their experiences are minimised. More than half of our survey participants felt strongly that their negative experiences were because they were young (55%) and because of their gender (62%). They also talked about the discrimination they experienced being compounded by intersecting factors:

*“When at an appointment with a specialist I was patronised, dismissed and spoken down to by a male doctor. The way he spoke to me made me feel like I had made up how bad my problem actually was and that I was making things up. He spoke to me like I was a small child and not a young adult.”*

[survey respondent]

Recently, [the British Medical Journal highlighted](https://www.bmj.com/content/378/bmj.o1974.full) that women are more likely than men to experience what’s known as **medical gaslighting**, when a medical professional can wrongly attribute a patient’s symptoms to psychological factors such as stress or anxiety or downplays a patient's symptoms. A small sample of participants explicitly used the term ‘gaslighting’ to describe their experiences of accessing healthcare, however, a large majority of young women who engaged with this research described experiences that could be considered gaslighting.

*“I get angry thinking about how much easier my life could have been if I'd been taken seriously when I was a teenager, especially because I don't think they would have reacted that way if I hadn't been a brown teenage girl.”*

[Survey respondent]

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## Recommendations

1. **Improving training for medical professionals** is essential, especially on how conditions present differently in young women. The medical profession needs to dismantle misogyny and operate intersectionally to consider the experiences of all young women and people of marginalised genders.
2. **Embedding an intersectional, feminist approach to data collection**, disaggregating data by gender in order to reduce health inequalities, as recommended by The Women’s Health Plan.

# Menstrual and reproductive health

Young women **want more research into and understanding of women’s health**. They want to be given a wider range of options for managing their menstrual health, as opposed to always being prescribed ‘the pill’. Many participants noted that their concerns around their menstrual health were ignored or belittled as ‘normal’.

*“It turns out I had been living with PCOS for years undiagnosed because doctors wouldn't take me seriously – telling me my horrendous periods were due to my age.”*

[group discussion participant]

## Recommendations

1. **Increased research into menstrual and reproductive health.** More time and money must be devoted to researching ways to combat menstrual and reproductive health issues, such as endometriosis and PCOS.

# Conclusion

Young women in Scotland face substantial obstacles when accessing healthcare. They have told us that they are often not taken seriously or believed. The Young Women’s Movement believe we must **strive as a collective to create an inclusive, compassionate, and responsive society** for young women and girls to thrive and prosper in Scotland.

To work towards ensuring a more equal society for people of all genders, the Scottish Government should ensure that **quality intersectional gender analysis and sex-disaggregated data** is used across the healthcare system in Scotland.

# For further information

Contact: Saffron Roberts, Research and Policy Coordinator, The Young Women’s Movement
Email: saffron@youngwomenscot.org

# About us

The Young Women’s Movement is Scotland’s national organisation for young women’s feminist leadership and collective action against gender inequality. We value the power, and recognise the necessity, of working both intersectionally and intergenerationally to achieve change. Young women, girls and non-binary people who recognise themselves within this movement are at the heart of everything we do by participating, co-designing and leading our research and programmes.