

THE YOUNG  
WOMEN'S  
MOVEMENT



# Young Women Demand *The Roundtable*

Engaging and empowering  
young women in democracy

20 January 2026, Glasgow



## ***Introduction***

This roundtable marked the official launch of the Young Women Demand campaign and brought together sector leaders, activists, journalists and researchers alongside members of the Young Women Demand Steering Group.

Chaired by Talat Yaqoob, the discussion centred young women's lived experience, exploring the barriers to democratic participation and identifying how Young Women Demand can mobilise collective action ahead of the 2026 Scottish Parliamentary elections and beyond.

## ***Around the table***

- **Amanda Amaeshi** | Trustee, The Young Women's Movement & NACWG Member
- **Mariam Ahmed** | CEO, Amina MWRC
- **Dr Mhairi Crawford** | CEO, LGBT Youth Scotland
- **Kelly Given** | Columnist, The National
- **Annie Johnston** | Former Head of Operations, SISU & Young Women Demand Steering Group Member
- **Dr Elli Loose** | Research & Engagement Manager, John Smith Centre
- **Tara Lillis** | Chair, STUC Women's Committee
- **Suki Wan** | Policy & Engagement Lead, THRE

The discussion drew on the expertise and collective insights of the contributors from across different sectors, as well as members of the Young Women Demand Steering Group. Several key themes emerged during the roundtable that reflect the issues raised and the areas identified as priorities for the campaign.

# 1

## *Barriers to young women's democratic participation*

**Accessibility** was a recurring theme of the roundtable discussion, and participants noted that political language and formal processes can feel deliberately exclusionary and difficult to navigate, creating a feeling that politics is not designed for young women's engagement. The discussion highlighted how this can contribute to young women feeling distant from formal democratic processes, which may be mistaken for apathy.

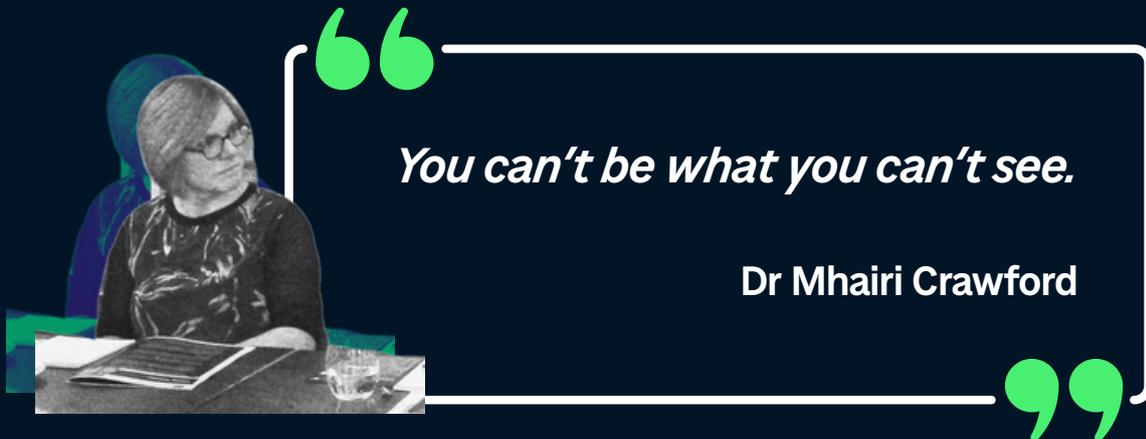
**Education** was also a key discussion point, and the experience of roundtable attendees was that politics is often treated as a 'taboo' subject in schools, with limited space for open discussion. One contributor reflected that, by not allowing space for political discussion in education, "we leave a void of information that the internet then fills" (Kelly Given).

Participants proposed curriculum reform as an opportunity to address gaps in political education and learning around healthy relationships, areas the roundtable members felt are not consistently covered in mainstream education.



Concerns were also raised about the lack of representation of young women in politics and the absence of visible role models. Participants recognised that the prevalence of online abuse directed at women in public-facing roles is a significant deterrent to participation.

To counter this, contributors stressed the importance of publicly calling out misogyny to foster collective solidarity. This led to the recommendation that stakeholders must be willing to be brave in increasing the visibility of women in public and digital spaces to encourage greater involvement of young women.



Feelings of fear and shame alongside a lack of confidence were frequently pointed to as barriers to democratic participation. Contributors recognised that young women continue to face social stigma when expressing opinions or speaking out in public and political spaces.

Young women at the roundtable described a common fear of “saying the wrong thing” or not being “clever enough” to have an opinion, as well as concerns about being perceived as “pushy” or “too opinionated” if they shared their views.

The discussion acknowledged that these internalised responses are shaped by patriarchal norms that continue to influence how young women’s voices are received and judge

# 2

## ***Social media as a double-edged sword***

The roundtable discussion explored the role of social media in political engagement, recognising both risks and opportunities.

On the risks, contributors raised concerns about online abuse, targeted harassment of young women, algorithm-driven content, and the dominance of polarising and far-right narratives. Trust in online information was described as fragile, particularly in a “post-truth landscape” where facts and evidence were seen to have less influence on public opinion than emotionally driven or highly personalised content.

During the discussion, a key insight emerged about how Artificial Intelligence reinforces existing societal inequalities, and that *“As long as algorithms are running social media, it will not be a safe space for young women.”* (Talat Yaqoob)

Social media regulation was suggested as a potential solution, with the view that that the focus should be on addressing algorithmic harms rather than solely banning platforms.

The roundtable participants acknowledged that social media provides collective spaces for sharing ideas, movement building, and reaching audiences who may not engage through traditional political channels.

***If we are appearing as a collective, then we can cut out our own corner of the internet.***

**Emily, YWD Steering Group**



# 3

## *“Thinking is considered a luxury”*

One of the young women around the table shared the idea that thinking is now considered to be a luxury, referring to the privilege of being able to turn off the news or choose not to engage in political issues.



*Thinking is the new luxury - something you shouldn't engage in unless you have the right resources to back up your opinions. I think that we need to tell people that you don't need a toolkit to start. You just need your own opinion, and you just need to have critical thinking.*

Naomi, YWD Steering Group



Roundtable participants discussed how society rewards speed and efficiency over critical thinking, and how the time and energy required to verify information can be onerous and prohibitive.

This challenge was illustrated by the frequent difficulty of “finding five sources to back up one tweet”.

Contributors agreed that when critical thinking becomes resource-intensive, it risks excluding young women from democratic participation and limiting engagement to those with the privilege of time, mental energy and support.

# ***Mobilising young women - the role of Young Women Demand***

The roundtable discussion moved from discussing the barriers to engagement to the role of the Young Women Demand campaign and how we can focus its efforts to collectively engage more young women and girls in democracy.

## ***1. Creating and sustaining safe spaces***

The importance of safe, supportive spaces for political discussion was a strong theme throughout the roundtable. Contributors highlighted the need for spaces where young women can be politically engaged and have conversations with one another without fear of judgement or abuse.

Protecting the wellbeing of young women and girls while encouraging democratic participation was considered essential.

***The enemy of community is austerity.***

Talat Yaqoob



The attendees reflected on the erosion of civic infrastructure, with contributors noting that austerity has reduced access to community spaces that previously allowed people to come together, supporting collective conversation and debate.

There was discussion about the need to move beyond the “third sector bubble” and engage in spaces that do not feel overtly political as an entry point for young women’s engagement.

Universities and colleges were identified as important hubs, alongside a reminder that face-to-face engagement remains crucial and should not be underestimated.

Contributors also highlighted workplace engagement, particularly through trade unions, as a valuable pathway for young women into wider civic and democratic engagement.

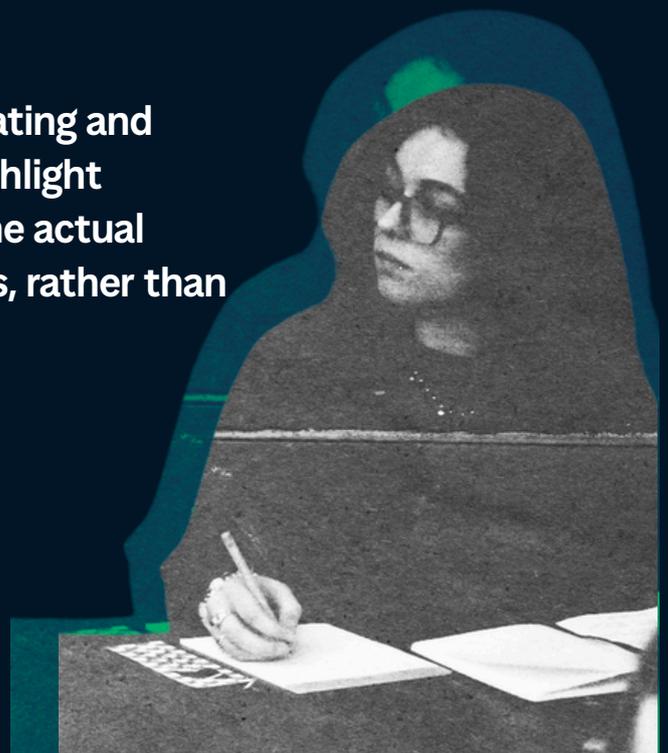
## ***2. Reclaiming the narrative***

Roundtable participants considered how narratives about young people, gender and politics are formed and reinforced. One attendee referenced research by the University of Glasgow (2025), which found that that only 26% of young men describe their views as “on the right.”

They cautioned against the promotion of self-fulfilling narratives that assume young men’s political views and suggest widespread political polarisation among young people.

Contributors reflected that such oversimplified narratives can obscure complexity, discourage productive dialogue and inadvertently strengthen extreme positions.

**They emphasised the importance of creating and promoting alternative narratives that highlight collective action, shared concerns and the actual diversity of young people’s political views, rather than reinforcing unhelpful divisions.**



### ***3. Where we find hope***

Participants acknowledged current feelings of frustration and disengagement among young women, while also emphasising the importance of historical context.

They highlighted previous moments of successful youth and women-led political change, such as votes at 16 and women's suffrage, as reminders that progress has been made through sustained efforts and that change is possible.

*"We need to get better at sharing our previous wins, because we need to be reminded that we have won before, because actually, that's a reflection of why we feel a little bit demotivated now - because we win something, then we move on quickly.*

**Talat Yaqoob**



The speakers at the roundtable shared the belief that when young women show up during a time when it might feel hopeless and impossible to make change, this resilience will equip them with the strength and determination to overcome any future obstacles.

*What gives me hope is the resilience of everyone. That even though things don't always go the way that you want it... people are still fighting it, and that's never going to go away.*

**Joely, YWD Steering Group**



## 4. Systemic change and accountability

Roundtable participants discussed the need for long-term systemic interventions to allow for meaningful participation of young women and reflected a need for practical mechanisms for accountability.

*There's no confidence in the system actually being able to take on people's voices and adequately reflect them in policy making. There's anxiety and almost a sense of hopelessness about it, because it's so far removed*

Dr Mhairi Crawford



Youth advisory boards were recognised as a positive step for “bridging the gap” in young women’s political engagement. However, contributors stressed that these forums require robust accountability, including clear feedback loops and transparent reporting on actions taken.

The concern is that tokenistic participation, where young women are invited into spaces without clear routes to influence decision-making risks undermining trust in the establishment.

Participants also discussed the responsibility of political parties to provide meaningful protection and support for women within their movements who experience online abuse and digital violence. The discussion highlighted a perceived gap in party-level accountability, with calls for clearer structures of responsibility.

*I think that political parties need to either have a steering group within them or appoint somebody in their headquarters that specifically deals with online spaces for their movement... this is a huge part of the reason that we're not seeing enough young women going into political spaces.*

**Kelly Given**



## **Conclusion**

This roundtable provided a space for open and thoughtful discussion, highlighting the urgency of addressing the barriers young women face in democratic participation and the opportunity to do so collectively. The discussion emphasised the need for accessible information, representation, safe feminist spaces and meaningful accountability where young women's voices are included in political spaces.

Young Women Demand has a significant role in turning these insights into action through strengthening political literacy, amplifying young women's voices and creating practical entry points for participation. The themes identified from the roundtable discussion will help to shape the next phase of the campaign as we work alongside partners and decision makers in the lead up to the next Scottish parliamentary election, and through continued engagement with the incoming government to advance young women's rights.

***To find out more about Young Women Demand,  
visit our website and get involved:***



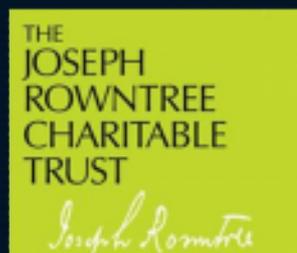
***Sign and share the manifesto***



***Register to vote in the 2026 Scottish  
Parliament election***

## **References**

Barnes, Eddie and Loose, Elisabeth (2025). Youth Poll UK 2025. Documentation. John Smith Centre, University of Glasgow.  
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