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'They've got an absolute army of women behind them': The formation of a women's cooperative constellation in contemporary Scotland

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‘They’ve got an absolute army of women behind them’: The formation of a women’s cooperative constellation in contemporary Scotland

Abstract

This study argues that a new women’s cooperative constellation has been established in Scotland around the issue of the Scottish Government’s proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act. This constellation includes women politicians, researchers, journalists, writers, and activists from all sides of mainstream political opinion in Scotland. The constellation works together to support its politician members, share information and form a supportive community. The constellation acts together to show support for those in the public eye, such as politicians or members being publicly attacked, to make them aware they have ‘an army of women behind them’. The role social media plays has been an important one for the formation and continuance of the constellation, particularly during the pandemic. It has been game-changing in allowing women to identify each other, communicate, arrange to work together and show public support for others. It has also been important in raising awareness of the issues, both with politicians and the general public because, unlike previously identified constellations, this network has needed to generate broad public awareness and support because they have not been working as Government insiders. However, all interviewees were aware that it was not enough to engage in online activism and that they needed to be ‘in the room’ with politicians in order to make any impact.

Keywords: Women’s cooperative constellation; velvet triangle; Gender Recognition Act; social media; feminist strategic partnerships

This article revisits the concept of the ‘women’s cooperative constellation’, otherwise known as ‘velvet triangles’ or ‘women’s strategic partnerships’, to argue that a new form of cooperative constellation has been created in Scotland around feminist campaigns relating to the Scottish Government’s proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA). The majority of previous studies of such networks of feminist women has focused on the achievement of policy change and gender equality. The case investigated by this study is different: here the constellation is focused on slowing down policy change and asking policymakers to think more carefully about how proposed changes will impact on the sex-based rights of women and girls.

This study argues that a women’s cooperative constellation has been formed in Scotland focused on campaigns around proposed changes to the GRA and associated legislation that is also perceived to impact on women’s sex-based rights, such as the Forensic Medical Services (Victims of Sexual Offences) (Scotland) and the Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Bills.

This Scottish constellation includes women researchers, politicians, journalists and creative artists, and grassroots activists. The findings of the project confirm that this new constellation follows several of the characteristics of previously identified constellations, such as informal ties between members, and similar ambitions and backgrounds relating to feminism, which allow members to work together despite political differences. It is also clear that, like previous constellations, the network is very fluid, with members moving from one role, such as activist or journalist, to another, for example, elected politician. However, unlike the majority of previous research on such constellations, this study emphasises the importance of women writers – whether they are journalists, bloggers or creative artists – as a distinct group in the constellation. This may be related to another important new finding – the role of social media in supporting and expanding the network. The use of social media allows the constellation to cover the whole of the country, to connect with other women activists and networks outwith Scotland, and to continue to campaign and grow during the pandemic lockdown. Nonetheless, the importance of offline activism and face-to-face meetings is emphasised as necessary for the constellation to continue to work towards its goals, whether these are with politicians or with other like-minded campaigners.

While previous studies of women's cooperative constellations have emphasised that women belong to these networks as individuals rather than as representatives of organisations, another key finding of this study is the way in which members of the network actually define themselves as being in opposition to some of the leading women's organisations in Scotland, deeming them representatives of the Scottish Government's agenda rather than representing women's concerns to Parliament. Women involved in this constellation instead look for support to other groups that have been established as part of a resurgence of the women's rights movement in the UK and elsewhere in the world.

Context

In 2018, the Scottish government opened a consultation seeking views on whether and how the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) of 2004 should be amended in relation to the law in Scotland – gender recognition being a devolved matter. This followed a 2016 report by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Select Committee on Transgender Equality, which made over 30 recommendations in a range of policy areas. It called on the UK Government to take action to ensure full equality for transgender people, emphasising the need to update existing legislation; provide better services, especially in the NHS; and improve confidence in the criminal justice system. However, the recommendation that was of particular concern to some of those concerned with women's sex-based rights was in reference to changes in legislation. The report recognised the original GRA of 2004 as having been pioneering, but suggested that its medicalised approach pathologized trans identities. Under the 2004 Act, people wishing to change their birth certificate to match their gender identity must present a diagnosis of gender dysphoria from two doctors and evidence of living 'in role' for two years.

It is not a requirement for an applicant to have undergone gender reassignment surgery or hormone treatment. The Select Committee recommended that the Act should be updated in line with the principles of self-declaration, meaning that a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) could be achieved more simply and quickly. In response to this report, both the UK and Scottish governments ran public consultations in 2018 on how best to reform the GRA. The Scottish government consultation also covered topics such as the establishment of new arrangements for dealing with applications for legal gender recognition and the minimum age at which applications for gender recognition could be made, with the possibility that this could be reduced to sixteen. In total, 15,5697 responses were received for the 2018 consultation, with 49% of respondents ordinarily resident in Scotland. In December 2019 a second consultation was launched by the Scottish Government, which received over 17,000 responses.

The original report of the Women and Equalities Committee and the government consultations galvanised a number of grassroots women's campaign groups into action. Indeed, the public consultations announced by Westminster and Holyrood were in part a direct result of these groups' campaigns, which made extensive use of social media to raise the question of how women's rights would be impacted by the proposed changes – the original 2016 report having focused solely on transgender people and their representative organisations. These new grassroots organisations were also set up because women concerned about the impact of reforms of the GRA found little support for their objections from either political parties or established women's rights organisations, either in the UK or Scotland. Woman's Place UK was established by a group of socialist and trade-union women in 2017 to ensure that women's voices would be heard in the consultation. Fair Play for Women also started, at first as a discussion group concerned about the impact of the proposed GRA reforms on the participation of women and girls in sport, but later expanding to include other concerns about the impact of new policies on women and girls. In Scotland, organisations such as Women and Girls in Scotland, For Women Scotland and Women's Spaces in Scotland were formed over the same period. In addition, unofficial groups of so-called 'gender critical' women have been formed within political parties, such as Labour Women's Declaration, Liberal Voice for Women and SNP Women's Pledge.

Previous studies of feminist politics in Europe in the 1990s and 2000s identified informal networks of feminists who worked together to achieve gender-equality goals. In this way, women could overcome their lack of formal power in what was essentially a masculine power structure within the EU (Woodward 2015). In the 1990s, Halsaa (1991) identified successful 'strategic partnerships' in Norway, between female members of political parties, women politicians, bureaucrats and members of the Norwegian women's movement, as essential in the achievement of specific policy goals relating to women's rights. Building on Halsaa's work, Woodward (2004) investigated women's cooperation to achieve gender-related policies within the wider context of the European Union. She describes a network of actors from the organisations of the state, civil society, and universities and consultancies. Woodward (2004)

characterised such networks as ‘velvet triangles’ – the softness of velvet representing the ‘considerable vagueness about inputs and loyalties’ (Woodward 2004, 84) – and emphasised their informal and biographical nature. Similarly, in an analysis of debates in thirteen Western democracies, Mazur (2002) demonstrated that what she called ‘feminist strategic partnerships’, consisting of women’s movement activists, ‘femocrats’ in women’s policy agencies and political women, were important for the achievement of their goals. Building on this work, Holli (2008) argued for a widened understanding of what she termed ‘women’s cooperative constellations’, suggesting that the original concept of triangles may have excluded groups of important actors, and that what was important was the co-operation, between any number of partners. For this reason, this study adopts her term of ‘women’s cooperative constellations’.

Different studies have identified slight variations in the groups of actors that made up these networks, but overall they encompassed women from academia, politicians, policy experts, women’s organisations and activism. Seibicke (2017) argues for the inclusion of women from the media in these networks. Politicians and policymakers provided access to government while the other groups provided information, advice, support and new ideas. While the academics and experts contributed knowledge, the femocrats and politicians were insiders with procedural knowledge, and those from the women’s movement had testimonial knowledge based on their first-hand experience (Locher 2002).

It is important to note that participants did not belong to the network as representatives of their organizations, but because of their expertise and commitment to an issue (Patternotte and Kollman 2013). Their identification as feminists committed to advancing women’s rights was strong enough to create alliances across party lines and national differences (Locher 2002). Cairney and Rummery (2018) suggest that regular contact between members of the networks helped produce trust and the development of shared aims. One characteristic that many studies identified was the fluidity of the network: women tended to move between the different groupings in the network, for example a policy expert taking up a role at a university or an activist becoming an elected politician. Feminist academics often engaged in activism as well as research, although it was less usual to find them moving to formal politics (Cairney and Rummery 2018). Patternotte and Kollman (2013) describe these networks as ‘incredibly porous’, noting that single actors wore multiple hats and operated, often simultaneously, in multiple arenas.

EU funding supported the international networking and regular contact of these women – for example funding the Women’s Workshop in Wales when domestic funding was not available (Minto and Parken 2020). However, the networks were also often supported by national governments that desired an academic underpinning for their gender-equality ambitions, leading to an interdependence between the networks and particular governments (Woodward 2015; Cairney and Rummery 2018).

Many scholars emphasise the importance of similar biographical experiences and personal ties between members of the networks, which provided elements of identification and shared common interests, but also meant that, as networks became established, they could also become exclusive (Woodward 2015). Chaney (2007) uses the term 'elite group' to discuss a network of around 25 women from local government, political parties, trade unions, the public sector, civil society and academia who pursued 'insider strategies' to achieve state feminism issues in Wales. Locher (2002) also suggests that, since they functioned within institutionalised elite publics, these networks did not work towards generating broad awareness and support for their issues because it was not necessary to achieve their aims.

While research on fourth-wave feminism, celebrity feminism, hashtag feminism and other social-media inspired feminist activism is flourishing, there is a relative lack of studies on the state of contemporary organised European feminism (Woodward 2015). Knappe and Lang (2014) note that, in recent years, European women's movements have been proclaimed dead, in abeyance or immobilised by generational struggle. There is thus an urgent need for a study investigating the formation and maintenance of contemporary women's cooperative constellations. One study that has investigated the possibility of a Scottish velvet triangle between policy makers, academia and interest groups is that by Cairney and Rummery (2018). They argue that feminist actors in Scotland were able to exploit the opportunity afforded by constitutional change and political reform from 1999 to create a velvet triangle committed to using evidence to pursue gender equality in areas such as childcare and long-term care. They identify members of this triangle as being female politicians, femocrats, third-sector organisations such as Scottish Women's Aid and Engender, and feminist researchers, for example members of the Scottish Women's Budget Group. However, they also argue that those within this network found that they needed to frame the benefits of particular policy initiatives within the ideological and strategic goals of the SNP government. They note: 'There is a huge difference between the Scottish Government's reputation for open and transparent consultation, which suggests that any actor can contribute to policy-making, and the reality of policy-making in systems which produce pre-consultation and more exclusive group-government relationships' (547).

There is only a limited amount of research into how social media can assist in the formation and continuation of such women's cooperative constellations, despite the fact that social media provides opportunities to network with other members across physical and political boundaries at low cost. Seibicke (2017) notes that the majority of studies on media access for feminist organisations and advocacy groups tend to focus on the traditional news media and how such groups struggle for the media's attention, despite the fact that they are no longer dependent on the mass media. However, social media offers low-cost communication channels that allow the spreading of information, interaction and the formation and strengthening of networks. It also allows networks to achieve mainstream media coverage, influence decision-makers and increase inclusion in political debate. For women who are under-represented in mainstream public discourse, social media allows the creation of

alternative publics that function as spaces for debate and politicisation (Seibicke 2017; Knappe and Lang 2014; Fraser 1990). As far as the UK debate on the subject of potential reforms of the Gender Recognition Act is concerned, the parenting site Mumsnet has been identified as functioning as a subaltern counter-public for the expression of gender-critical feminism, which has been censored from other parts of the Internet such as Twitter and Reddit (Author).

Methodology

Eighteen one-hour interviews were undertaken with women identified as members of a Scottish women's cooperative constellation around the issue of GRA reform and its impact on women's sex-based rights, including politicians, researchers, journalists, and activists. Interviewees were identified as members of the network by analysis of discussion on social media, identification of key players at meetings, conferences and webinars on the topic of the reform of GRA in Scotland and other related legislation, and newspaper, magazine, academic journal and blog articles on the topic. In addition, one of the first interview questions asked interviewees who they would identify as key members of the constellation, which enabled the initial selection of interviewees to be checked and amended. In particular, because of interviewees' responses to this question, a potential new grouping of the constellation – writers and artists – was identified. The interviews were undertaken via Zoom because of COVID-19 restrictions. In many ways, this was helpful because of the variety of geographical locations of the interviewees. It also enabled a flexibility in interview scheduling and rescheduling, which was important for the interviewees who were dealing with the burdens of childcare and home-schooling as well as working from home and shielding. The interviews were semi-structured, based on the literature review, and focused on questions relating to participants' own perceptions of the cooperative constellation, its formation, strengths and weaknesses, uses of social media and incidents of abuse.

Of the 18 women interviewed for this study, 3 were politicians, 4 were women's rights activists, 6 were researchers, and 5 were journalists and creative writers. However, it was very quickly evident that this division into specific groupings was problematic. As previous studies have shown, these networks are 'porous' and 'fluid', with individual actors wearing a number of different hats (Patternotte and Kollman 2013). Thus a journalist had experience as an elected politician, an activist was standing for election, researchers wrote newspaper columns, and politicians had been journalists. While some of the interviewees were members of organisations – most obviously, the politicians were members of political parties – they did not belong to the constellation as representatives of their organisations. Indeed, on this subject, members of the SNP and Labour Party belonged to the constellation in direct contradiction to official party policy. The 'writers' group was originally conceived as containing members of the media – journalists and newspaper columnists who had written on the subject of GRA reform, including personal opinion pieces, and followed Seibicke's

(2017) suggestion that the media should be included in such constellations. However, it was augmented by the inclusion of a number of creative writers and bloggers, who were identified by other interviewees as key voices in this cooperative constellation in Scotland. This augmentation reflects the changes in the media over the last decades, with the growth of online commentary, which is not subject to the editorial gatekeeping of the mainstream news media.

Interviews were undertaken in the spring of 2021. All interviews were undertaken with an undertaking that transcripts would be anonymised. Participants will only be identified in this study as belonging to one of the above groupings (if necessary) or simply as an interviewee. Anonymity is particularly important in this case because of the nature of the subject to be discussed: women's jobs and livelihoods have been threatened because of their opinions on the subject of GRA reform, and participating women were asked to disclose abuse they had suffered because of their involvement in the constellation. Many of the women involved in the debate around the GRA are concerned for their safety. Suissa and Sullivan (2021) detail some of the attacks on academics who attempt to discuss these issues, including no-platforming, shutting down of events, dis-invitations, blacklisting and attempts to get academics fired. Threats to their well-being and job security have been made against many of the higher-profile women involved in the debate in Scotland, from Joanna Cherry MP to the author J.K. Rowling, and – as will be discussed – to several of the interviewees.

The formation of the constellation

The majority of interviewees stated that they had become involved in the debate around GRA reform around 2014–15. For many, this had come from noticing debate on social media rather than in the mainstream news media. 'I think like a lot of people I hadn't really been aware of all the implications of it because I got my news from *The Guardian* and the BBC'. Several interviewees, including the journalists, noted the lack of mainstream news media coverage of the initial Scottish government consultation held in 2018: 'It was only when things started popping up on my social media, I was suddenly like, "What's this? What's happening?"' (Journalist).

The first response of many had been to research the matter further: 'I made sure that I did a lot of research and then I went and looked at all of the arguments'; 'So I did my homework very quickly and I peaked, as they say'. Several stated that their initial reaction had been to be pro-reform of the GRA: 'Trans people – well that's a vulnerable group... why wouldn't I feel solidarity with them?'; 'I would have said before that I was very much a liberal feminist, and very much on the side of thinking "got to be nice to people and let them get on with things"'. However, on further research, they had become concerned about how the proposed reforms would impact women's sex-based rights.

I thought I was being asked to be kind to a vulnerable group who couldn't bear living in the world as a man, because dominant masculinities are so horrible, and I had sympathy for that and I wanted those people to live without ridicule, without attack, without fear of those things. I hadn't realised the argument was trans women are literally women.

In particular, their attention was caught by the abuse of well-known feminists who had started to speak out on this subject: 'Get the L out, when they protested at Pride, and I saw some of the names that were involved there, and I started to think, "Oh, maybe there's something I ought to be looking at"; '... with [Linda] Bellos I did a real double-take because ... for women of my generation she's such a pioneer and hero of what I think of as intersectional feminism'. For some who had been girl guides or guiders, it was the response of the association to women who had challenged its new policy regarding the treatment of trans children in guiding. 'Seeing girl guide leaders being kicked out of the Guides, and the appalling responses that people were sharing [on social media] that they were getting back from Girl Guide HQ'.

It is clear that it was the debate on social media about proposals to reform the GRA that had stimulated the engagement of many members of the constellation. 'I have been on Twitter for quite a while, and I just suddenly became aware of this whole thing about self-ID and what it really meant'. However, once their interest had been stimulated, many then reached out to women they knew personally offline – or that they had seen discussing these issues online – in order to talk further. Even identifying themselves as 'gender-critical' to one other person was seen as taking a big step:

I went 'oh shit, I need to find people who I can speak to about this'. And so the only person I'd actually seen being vocal about this on social media was [name redacted], so I sent her an email one night after a couple of glasses of wine.

I ended up on Mumsnet, and there was a thread there of people saying 'Is there anything in Scotland? And a few of us were talking about that, and... [names redacted] had already set something up, so they got in contact and asked if I wanted to join in too.

Others made contact with women they already knew and respected to find out their opinions: '[name redacted] who is a very old friend of mine, we were friends as undergraduates, said to me, 'Are you aware of what's going on?'; '... people who I knew I could speak to about it. I wasn't going to speak to any person, because you know how it can be misunderstood.'

Some members of the constellation, however, had been pulled into the debate because of their work. This was true of the politicians and journalists and also some of the researchers, who had been contacted by the media for comments on issues such as the placing of transgender women in prisons. All of the interviewees mentioned being influenced by the work of SNP MSP Joan McAlpine, and in particular her 2019 tweet entitled 'Sex and the

census', which won *Holyrood* magazine's 'Tweet of the Year'. McAlpine had spoken out on Twitter after the parliamentary committee that she chaired scrutinised the Census bill and 'it became apparent that biological sex, which we need to monitor discrimination and plan things like health services, was being ignored. It is increasingly being replaced with "gender" or "gender identity", which is a self-defined thing' (interview with McAlpine in *Holyrood* 25 June 2019).

Other politicians had been drawn into the debate by being questioned by journalists or constituents:

And then Joan McAlpine was pursuing it in the parliament, and a couple of women came to see me, and ... I moved from well, 'this something that's going on, this all sounds entirely reasonable' to getting drawn into something that takes up way too much headspace for me now... and really, really, deeply concerns me (Politician).

Interviewees were clear that it was important for them to engage in this debate, despite worries about how others would react. 'It seemed like something that I couldn't with a clear conscience not continue to write about'; 'I have to start getting involved because this looks to me highly misogynistic, it looks like an all-out assault on women's rights'; 'Once you see, you can't unsee'. For some of the interviewees who were lesbian, there were particular concerns about how changes in the law might impact on lesbians: 'I noticed that there was this shift happening in the LGBT community towards talking about same-gender attraction, which was problematic to me in a number of ways.'

Words such as 'danger' and 'alarm' were used to describe by interviewees to describe their feelings about how the proposed changes might impact on women's sex-based rights. 'I just got angrier and angrier'. Another term that came up frequently to describe their movement towards a gender-critical point of view was 'journey'. For many of the interviewees, involvement in this debate was only the next step on their journey as feminists. Asked how they had become involved in the discussion around the GRA, their discursive answers unfolded a rich history of involvement in feminism in the UK and abroad over decades – Greenham Common, the fight for gay rights, Reclaim the Night, women's refuge provision, trade unionism, previous careers in local politics, and professional backgrounds relating to the support of women and children.

For many interviewees, the decision to speak out on the issue was met by immediate hostility. One posted on her trade union's private social-media page in support of an academic who was being attacked by a student newspaper. '[T]here was this tirade from three or four people getting more and more hysterical about how my post was going to damage and make trans people kill themselves'. Another posted support for a feminist who had spoken out on the subject on a professional online support group: 'I got this absolute flamethrower blast of anger and disgust'. It is interesting that many of the interviewees' first actions were to post on social media in what they perceived to be professional sites that were safe and supportive, or at least open to discussion and debate. It was also the abuse that others were receiving on

social media that triggered concern: ‘What really shocked me was I saw some trans women who objected to the self-ID element of GRA reform getting abused and threatened, and I thought “There’s something not right here”’.

Having a professional reason for joining the public debate, did not protect politicians or journalists:

I think the first time I really wrote about it was when Joan McAlpine was getting abuse, and getting abuse from people within her party. And so I think that was the first time I really wrote about the issue, and then it all kicked off... I started getting blocked, I was like ‘Oh my God, I’ve never even spoken to you or said anything to you, who are you? Why have you blocked me? This is so weird’ (Journalist).

Similar backgrounds?

As has already been demonstrated by some of the information above, many of the members of the constellation already knew at least some of the others, even if this was only through online communications. Some had already worked together on other campaigns or research. ‘We would meet periodically for a coffee, maybe lunch, and compare notes on what awful thing was happening in Scottish public administration in government this week’. Others had made contact with women they had seen posting about the situation on social media and arranged to meet in real life. They then took the next step of stepping publicly into the debate, through posts on social media, speaking at public meetings, writing letters to the editor of newspapers, and contributing to mainstream media discussion.

Previous research into these informal women’s networks has stressed the similarity of members’ biographical backgrounds. While it is true that the majority of interviewees had an interest in feminism and many had experience of campaigning on other issues relating to women’s rights, the Scottish constellation included women from a variety of backgrounds. Interviewees ranged in age from twenties to seventies, although it was agreed that the majority of women involved in the constellation in Scotland were over the age of forty. One interviewee, however, noted that she was in contact with a number of groups in Europe, including Poland and Hungary, driven mostly by people in their twenties and thirties, and suggested that it was the Scottish constellation that differed by being dominated by older women. While those who had physically met up with others and attended meetings tended to be clustered in the central belt, the constellation stretched over the whole of the country, aided by the use of social media to link women together. The majority of interviewees, but not all, had a professional background, but spoke of other women they were in contact with from a much wider employment demographic. Several of the interviewees were retired, and had actually made the decision to wait until this time before being involved in the debate because of concerns about the impact of being publicly identified as gender critical. There was a definite feeling amongst interviewees that older women were more able to speak out

than younger ones: 'Older women are more vocal because we can be, and because we have less shits left to give'; 'A lot of us just don't care any more because we've had thirty, forty, fifty years of friendships coming and going, and most of us have lost friends through this, but you just think that's the price you pay.'

These fears were not baseless. Several of the interviewees reported attempts to damage them professionally: 'Someone contacted headquarters wanting me sacked'; 'a couple of young men contacted my publisher and asked why they were publishing such a transphobe'. Several others reported being attacked online, either by strangers or by friends and family. One referred to a 'hounding' on social media that had gone on for many months:

It was one sole tweet that I made, and it completely exploded into a massive hounding.... It was actually so frightening the first morning when you wake up and you've got like 200 notifications. It was horrible, massively anxiety inducing.

I got a message saying, 'I hope you get raped, or better yet, killed. LOL'.... Someone posted a picture of my house and my home address. And this account was filled with things like 'Kill TERFs,¹ TERFs don't deserve rights, TERFs aren't women.

How does the constellation act?

Previous studies suggest that women's cooperative constellations work to achieve their goals through providing information, support and advice to politicians, campaigning together, and providing a supportive community for each other. It is clear that the Scottish constellation works in all of these ways. Individual politicians who have their own concerns about the Scottish Government's plans to reform the GRA are supported by other members of the constellation. Researchers and policy experts, such as the feminist policy collective Murray Blackburn Mackenzie, provide evidence and undertake research and analysis to be used in the Parliament. This is particularly necessary on this issue because SNP and Labour Party politicians within the constellation are acting in direct contradiction to the policies of their own parties. One politician stated that she worked to ensure that evidence to select committees came from both sides of the debate:

The evidence-gathering process for parliamentary committees tends to go through channels, established channels.... So that would be like Engender or Stonewall or COSLA. But what I did, and there's no reason why I shouldn't do this although it is quite unusual, is, I alerted some organisations that were active in this area that I had seen through social media.... And that meant that other academics and groups were able to submit. That was really important in order to get the balance of evidence.

Campaigns by individual women and groups such as For Women Scotland help to demonstrate public support for the politicians when they raise questions at Holyrood, while

¹ Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist

the output of bloggers and journalists publicise the issues raised and offer statements of support to individual women politicians. In this way, the Scottish constellation works differently to those previously identified, which tended to function within institutionalised elites, because they need to raise public awareness of the issues and support in order to achieve their aims.

I don't know that people like Joan [McAlpine], Joanna [Cherry], Johann Lamont, all of these kind of people, would have been able to stand up as strongly as they have, if not for knowing that they've got an absolute army of women behind them.

It was really important for her [a politician] to feel that, on the outside of the chamber, there was an organisation or a cohort of people that supported what she was doing, or I don't think she could have done it otherwise.

For example, when Johann Lamont spoke on her motion asking for the replacement of the word 'gender' with the word 'sex' in reference to women's ability to ask for a medical examiner of their own gender in the Forensic Medical Services bill, the hashtag #sixwords trended on Twitter. The six words were: 'for the word gender substitute sex'. The hashtag raised the profile of the debate taking place at Holyrood, but also offered supplementary evidence as many women spoke out online about their own experience of enduring such examinations after being raped. This evidence of support was also appreciated by the politicians involved: 'It was really powerful.... It makes you realise you're not on your own'. Social-media engagement was noted to be particularly important given the limited amount of discussion at party political level: 'It strikes me that the thing that was completely and utterly absent from it was any discussion formally at a party political level where a lot of these things start normally' (Politician).

However, all interviewees were clear that engagement on social media could only go so far, and that face-to-face meetings and events were essential.

You've got to be in the room. There's something that happens in a room that you cannot achieve... pressing send is not activism.

Direct contact with politicians mentioned by interviewees included the lobbying of individual politicians as constituents, the direct submission of research findings to politicians and political parties, and responses to Parliamentary committee inquiries. Members of the constellation also helped to arrange events, including at the Scottish Parliament, to educate politicians and the general public on the issue. Speakers such as the Canadian feminist Meghan Murphy; co-founder of the Vancouver Women's Library Bec Wonders; and Dr David Bell of the Tavistock Centre were invited by members of the constellation to address MSPs. Interviewees were keen to stress how important such formal, face-to-face events were for helping to educate politicians on some of the implications of the proposed reforms.

A pivotal point for me was... [name redacted] organising a meeting in the parliament, and somebody else invited me to another set of meetings, and I can remember being unbelievably hesitant about going (Politician).

It really opened up one of the most constructive conversations in quite literally the Scottish Parliament building, which I think was incredible (Activist).

It was also noted that Labour and SNP politicians cooperated on the arrangement of these meetings – as with previous studies, the goals of the women’s cooperative constellation could override political differences.

I think I have collaborated with, worked alongside, agreed with, women from right across the standard political spectrum in Scotland: Tories, SNP, Lib Dems, Greens, all of them, because there are gender-critical women in all of those, struggling to greater or lesser extents (Activist).

Face-to-face meetings were also important for those outside Holyrood. Attendance at meetings allowed members of the constellation to feel comforted that they were not alone and that there were others who agreed with them in Scotland. ‘It helps with that “I think I am going insane” thing when you are meeting these women who are like “No, you are right to be concerned”’.

Nonetheless, social media was still perceived to be important to maintain this feeling of community, particularly for those who were unable to attend meetings in person and – as COVID-19 hit – as a substitute for physical meetings. Social media has also been essential for making links with other networks – both elsewhere in the UK and further afield.

I think social media has been a bit of a game changer in that we have these kind of networked counter-publics that have sprung up quite organically over time where women, through following, engaging with each other’s tweets, messaging each other, have absolutely created a very strong grassroots network; it works.

Criticism of established women’s organisations

A further clear theme that arose frequently in the interviews was criticism of the funded and established women’s organisations in Scotland and the UK, which were perceived as either running scared of the debate around GRA reform or actively working against gender-critical women in their support of the Scottish government’s plans. These are the organisations, such as Engender, Rape Crisis Scotland and Zero Tolerance, referred to above by the politician who tried to bring in voices from the other side of the debate to respond to Parliamentary inquiries. Rape Crisis Scotland, for example, supported the Government’s original refusal to replace ‘gender’ with ‘sex’ in the Forensic Services bill, and was heavily criticised on social media and by newspaper columnists for so doing. Interviewees stated that they felt let down

by these organisations, who they perceived as not representing their views. Thus they had started their own organisations, such as For Women Scotland or Women and Girls in Scotland.

They have silenced the women who they're supposed to represent who have different views, and are actively doing that. They cannot represent all women as they say they do. They have made a decision to represent a particular viewpoint ... they've become part of the Government in a way that they operate to design and endorse and implement these policies instead of being objective and sitting outside of it.

Engender describes itself as 'Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation' ([Engender](#)) and sits on a high number of advisory and strategic groups to the Scottish Parliament (<https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/written-questions-and-answers/question?ref=S5W-35024>). In an open letter to Joan McAlpine, Engender and other Scottish women's organisations stated that they did not represent women and girls, nor made any claim to ([Engender | Engender blog | Women's sector letter to Joan McAlpine MSP](#))

Several interviewees suggested that these organisations' support for the Scottish Government's plans was driven by fears of funding being cut:

With all of them, they're all organisations that I have respected and admired the work they have done, but part of me thinks – and I wonder if I'm being cynical here but probably not – “are you just doing this because it is an easy path to funding? Are you doing this because you are scared that if you don't, you will become targets and people will campaign for the government to remove your funding?

So, I understand to some extent why women's organisations have always had to struggle for funding, but they've become a wee bit too corporate now in my view, and too much beholden to government funding.

Other interviewees pointed the finger of blame at the Scottish Government itself for opening a Pandora's box of troubles without thinking through all the implications of the introduction of self-ID.

The reason you've got two vulnerable groups duking it out on Twitter is because there's no political leadership whatsoever.

I really do blame the Scottish Government for it. I think their handling of it all has been atrocious. I blame the Scottish Government for failing to manage the situation and raising hopes on one side without thinking things through properly.

A Scottish Women's Cooperative Constellation

It is clear that a new women's cooperative constellation has been established in Scotland around the issue of the Scottish Government's proposed reforms of the Gender Recognition Act, and in particular around the issue of Self-ID. This constellation includes women

politicians, researchers, journalists, writers, and grassroots activists. Members come from all sides of mainstream political opinion in Scotland and both sides of the independence/union debate. The urgency and importance given to the issue of the impact of GRA reform on women's sex-based rights by members allows them to collaborate and work together across party lines. This study agrees with Seibicke (2017) in including members of the media in the cooperative constellation, but goes further in also including creative writers and bloggers. This is a reflection of the changes that social media has wrought in the public sphere, by-passing the gatekeeping of newspaper editors and allowing women's voices to be more easily heard. However, the role of creative writers as public voices on contemporary issues may also be a particularly Scottish element, and the influence of J. K. Rowling in this particular debate must also be acknowledged.

The study also agrees with previous studies of women's cooperative constellations in finding the network extremely fluid. Members move from grouping to grouping, or wear a multitude of different hats – researching, writing, campaigning and standing for election as politicians. Again the impact of social media is clear here, allowing women to easily share their research and writing on the subject, and raising their profile sufficiently to enable mainstream media coverage and invitations to speak at meetings, including at the Scottish Parliament.

The constellation works together to support its politician members, to share information and to form a supportive community. Interviewees testified to the concerns they had 'coming out' as gender critical, either online or to family, friends and colleagues – concerns that are clearly justified given the evidence of abuse and threats to their livelihood and even their lives that some had received. The constellation acts together to show support for those in the public eye, such as politicians or members being publicly attacked, to make them aware they have 'an army of women behind them'.

The role social media plays has been an important one for the formation and continuance of the constellation, particularly during the pandemic lockdown. It has been game-changing in allowing women to identify each other, communicate, arrange to work together and show public support for others. It has also been important in raising awareness of the issues, both with politicians and the general public because, unlike previously identified constellations, this network has needed to generate broad public awareness and support because they have not been working as Government insiders. However, all interviewees were aware that it was not enough to engage in online activism and that they needed to be 'in the room' with politicians in order to make the impact they wanted. Face-to-face meetings also offered the support of being in the presence of others who agreed with their viewpoint.

A clear, and concerning, theme throughout all of the interviews was the unhappiness with which interviewees regarded many of the established women's organisations in Scotland. They were perceived to be in a feedback loop with the Scottish Government, representing the opinions of only a section of Scottish women, and with no interest in alternative points of view. Some interviewees suggested that this position was a necessary one, given their

reliance on the Government for funding. Instead, the constellation included organisations that had been born out of women's frustration at not being listened to, such as For Scotland Women, and UK-based organisations such as Woman's Place UK. The constellation is in contact with other constellations in England and overseas.

Some interviewees also pointed a finger of blame at the Scottish Government, suggesting that plans for the reform of the GRA had not been completely thought through, meaning that two different, vulnerable, groups were now fighting against each other. Previous studies have found that Women's Cooperative Constellations have been useful for national governments, giving them support and a legitimacy for their plans relating to women and equality. However, this Scottish constellation is in direct opposition to Government plans. It is clear that the constellation includes many capable women, with an energy and an appetite for working collaboratively and strategically. It is unfortunate that this energy is not currently being utilised by either the established women's organisations in Scotland or its Government.

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