

Sikh Women Speak: The Report

The Voices Of Sikh Women In Scotland



Dedication

To the women who could not find themselves in the pages of policies and reports.

Foreword

Around the world, empowered women are achieving visible progress. We know the power of positive role modelling; how vital it is for girls growing up to see the success of their contemporaries, and through education, experience and example, for it to come within their grasp.



The present population of Sikh women in Scotland is unknown (an example of the non-representation of Sikh women in the civic space).

Sikh Sanjog realised that as a community of women living in Scotland we were practically 'invisible'. So, on 4th March 2020, Sikh Sanjog held the first ever Scottish Sikh Women's Conference. Bringing together 100 Sikh women, we listened to their thoughts and ideas, the barriers - internal and external - that they have encountered in their lives, and still face today.

The intention was to bring together Sikh women from across Scotland, to better understand how they see themselves as Sikh women, whether born and raised in Scotland or New Scots: how they are seen by family, community, society and mainstream service providers. Women sharing their past and their traditions with their children and families, figuring out what they might take forward into future generations.

We very much welcome this report as a first step towards telling the stories of Sikh women in Scotland and making our experiences visible.

We would like to thank the Walter Scott Giving Group for funding this work.

Trishna Singh OBE, Founder/Director of Sikh Sanjog

Glossary

- Sikhi** Term used to denote the Sikh faith, deriving from sikhna (to learn). An alternative to the Anglophone 'Sikhism'.
- Gurdwara** Sikh place of worship, plural gurdwara
- Patka** Head covering worn by young boys
- Pagh** Turban
- Dastar** Turban, dastar is used to describe both male and female head coverings, but while pagh is used interchangeably for men, women's head coverings are almost always called dastar.
- Keski** Head covering worn by girls and women.
- Izat** Translates as 'honour'. In the South Asian context, a tremendous amount of weight is given to the notion of family honour, often related to how a family unit is viewed by other relatives or the wider cultural community.
- Seva** Selfless service. A key tenet of Sikhism, all Sikhs are encouraged to dedicate time and energy to doing selfless service, whether in the form of prayers, other devotional acts, or working to help those in need.

NB: for clarity, Sikh women are referred to in this report as "they", in order to make the distinction between the research team that is comprised of 4 Sikh women ('we') and the wider community of Sikh women who shared their experiences.

Introduction

The Sikh Women Speak project developed from a need for Sikh women in Scotland to have a voice in society and lead change. Too often the needs of Sikh women are overlooked in the public sphere. This is exemplified by the lack of statistics on the number of Sikh women in Scotland. The intersectional challenges faced by Sikh women mean we are more likely to need to use public services and face challenges in the workplace. Furthermore, Sikhi is seldom discussed in mainstream religious studies, and generally people have little awareness of Sikh customs and practices. This makes employment, seeking health care, and engaging with the justice system significantly challenging. Up until this point, making Scotland aware of Sikhi and the practices of Sikhi fell on our shoulders. Given the history of Sikhs in Scotland dating from as far back as 1855, the inclusion of the needs of Sikh women in Scottish policies and public services can no longer be ignored. It is time Scotland took responsibility to learn about a significant religion that resides on its land.

The significance of this report being written by Sikh women, and being the first of its kind worldwide, is monumental. The founding principles of Sikhi are based on equality, and this report aims to ensure this equality is returned to the narrative and Sikh women lead the voice in bringing Sikh issues to the table of government. This report aims to make the Scottish Government aware of its responsibilities to its citizens and acknowledge the changes needed to allow Sikh women to thrive. We have identified areas that need urgent attention to ensure Sikh women are not left behind and our needs are included in the fabric of Scotland.



A Brief History of Sikh Women in Scotland

The first recorded Sikh settler in Great Britain was Maharajah Duleep Singh who was exiled to Great Britain in 1849. However, it is his daughters Bamba, Sophia and Catherine Singh, who are most known for their work with the suffragettes in 1909. The Sikh community have been in Scotland for over 170 years with around 20,000 Sikhs currently residing in Scotland (1) and yet, very little Scottish Sikh history has been documented.

While Sikh women in England have been written about by Sikh academics (by Parminder Kaur Bhachu and Kalwant Bhopal among others), Scottish Sikh women remain underrepresented. What has been documented of Sikhs in Scotland focuses often on men, with few Scottish Sikh women's stories being told. This is not for lack of Scottish Sikh women's achievements, rather the issue is recording and documenting our successes, and furthermore giving us a platform. Here are just a few examples of prominent Scottish Sikh women, each from a different generation, who have each forged a path of success in their own way.



Trishna Singh

Until 30 years ago in 1989 when Sikh Sanjog was established to support women of the Sikh community in Edinburgh. Sikh Sanjog, formerly known as Leith Sikh Community Group, addresses exclusion and isolation which women are facing due to traditional nomadic lifestyles. This is thanks to Scottish Sikh woman Trishna Singh, founder and director of the only Sikh family support charity in Scotland. She has over 30 years' experience of working in the Voluntary sector and graduated from the University of Glasgow with a degree in Community Learning and Development in 2007. In recognition for her services to the community, she is the first Sikh woman in Scotland to receive an OBE in 2014. Trishna's wealth of experience combined with knowledge of ethnic communities have contributed vastly to Scotland in both statutory and voluntary areas. This includes encouraging and training over 100 Sikh and Black and ethnic minority women into employment, supporting hundreds of Sikh and Black and ethnic minority women and their families during vulnerable times, and politically challenging policies for the better of Sikh and black and ethnic minority women.



Rupa Mooker

Since graduating from the University of Glasgow (UoG) in 2000 with a Bachelor of Laws (LLB Hons), Rupa Mooker has worked for equality, diversity and inclusion within the Scottish legal profession. She has specialised in employment law since 2003 at MacRoberts LLP and practised exclusively as a solicitor until she became Director of People & Development in 2017. Rupa actively seeks ways to increase the number of women from Black and ethnic minority communities into senior positions and raise representation within the Scottish legal sector. In her current role, and as a member of the Law Society of Scotland's Equality and Diversity Committee, Rupa has been able to share her thoughts on such matters at a number of conferences including the UoG '100 years of women in law' and various events organised by ENEI (Employer's Network for Equality and Inclusion) and SEMLA (Scottish Ethnic Minorities Lawyers Association) as well as on BBC Radio Scotland. Rupa uses her experience to help others and is proactive in mentoring students from a minority ethnic background, bringing them into the firm, and encouraging them to apply to vacancies and providing feedback. She believes that such seemingly small steps go a long way to breaking down and overcoming barriers.

(1) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-36293177>



Pam Gosal, MSP

Pam Gosal became the first Sikh woman Member of Scottish Parliament following the May 2021 elections. Her story has many facets. Pam left school with no qualifications after losing both her father and sister as a teenager. She stepped up to run the family business for many years – unusual for a South Asian woman at the time – returning to education at a later stage to pursue a degree in Law. She followed this up with an MBA in Business, and now a recently submitted PhD, alongside her political ambitions. Pam has, without realising she says, become a role model for young women. With a strong focus on the importance of role models who look like us, she now wants to pass on her wisdom and experience, to help young women achieve greatness.

Nisha Singh

Nisha Singh is only 18 years old and is Scotland's first female Sikh DJ. Nisha has been pioneering this breakthrough with her determination to change social attitudes within her own community. Sharing her story at the Scottish Government and at other national organisations and events, Nisha hopes to spread her diverse music taste of Punjabi and UK music to as many people as possible and but more importantly spread the message of hope to other young girls similar to her – to motivate and encourage them to also go after their passions. Nisha assisted in the creation of the organisation Intercultural Youth Scotland (IYS), and is now a youth practitioner and social media manager on the IYS team. Along with this she is in her second year of university studying Software Development for Business, and DJ's weekly at "The Block", the IYS youth group, and other IYS events and performances.

There are many more Scottish Sikh women out there who have achieved so much in their respective industries, and there are many more stories to tell. We hope the Sikh Women Speak report is the start of this.

Meet the Sikh Women Speak Team



Kirndeeep Kaur, LLB (Hons), LLM, PgDip

Kirndeeep Kaur comes from a legal background, with a Masters in Human Rights Law. Kirndeeep's interests are in women's rights and state responsibility. As a Scottish Sikh, Kirndeeep is very proud of her heritage and regularly campaigns on human rights issues affecting the Sikh community within Scotland. "For too long, Sikh women in Scotland have remained within the shadows of society. Services which should be for all Scottish citizens are not, because they were never made with the needs of Sikh women in mind. This needs to change so that generations of women to follow are given access to everyday services that many others take for granted."



Dr Diljeet Kaur Bhachu, BA (Hons), MSc, PhD, FHEA, FRSA

Diljeet is an academic researcher and educator with a PhD in Music focussing on Music Education. Diljeet also works as an arts producer, and is a professional musician, and within the arts she advocates for more nuanced representation of South Asian artists and art forms. Diljeet has been actively involved in the trade union movement since 2014 and is a member of the STUC Black Workers' Committee. "Sikh women themselves are diverse communities of peoples - Scotland needs a more intersectional and nuanced understanding of Sikh communities, especially through women's voices that are so often overlooked."



Ramandeeep Kaur, MA (Hons)

Ramandeeep is a Politics Graduate with over 6 years' experience in Financial services. Ramandeeep has a keen interest in women's rights and campaigning on issues affecting the Sikh community. She participated in the Young Women Lead 2020 programme and produced the report on underrepresentation of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic women in employment. Ramandeeep is also a Trustee of the Young Women's Movement Scotland. "It is extremely important that Sikh Women own the narrative in making change in Scotland to make sure Scotland serves us just as much as it serves our white counterparts, and we are not left behind".



Sinita Kaur Potiwal, BA (Hons)

Sinita is an Event Management graduate with over 8 years' experience with weddings and catering in particular. Sinita has managed Social Enterprise Punjabi Junction over this time in various environments including cafe, markets and festivals, and catering events, including more recently all its social media and new e-commerce site. Having grown up within a traditional Sikh community in Scotland, she has experienced the disadvantages Sikh women continue to face today. Taking control of her life, Sinita has been able to achieve a higher education and a successful career. These are two areas Sinita would like to become a norm for all Sikh girls and women having worked with both at the Social Enterprise and seeing first-hand how young Sikh girls and women can so often be left behind.

The Research Process

Methodological underpinnings

This research sits within a grounded theory framework (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006), drawing on both qualitative and quantitative approaches to build an in-depth picture of Sikh women's experiences and views, building the dataset – and our knowledge and understanding of Sikh women in Scotland – as the project progresses. All four researchers are insiders to the research context, and a number of the women who participated in the research are known to the researchers and Sikh Sanjog.

Position statement

As a team of Sikh women, our lived experience and expertise on being Sikh women in Scotland informed the research process. We were also able to adopt the position of trusted peers with the women who participated in our workshops and focus groups, through our shared understandings of being Sikh women in Scotland. This allowed us to access honest accounts of being Sikh women in Scotland, whilst holding safe and supportive spaces for Sikh women to share their stories.

Methods

We took a staggered mixed methods approach, accruing more data using different approaches over the course of the research. Each phase guided the next, from our initial survey, to the in-conference workshops, to our follow up online sessions.

Q4. What does being Sikh mean to you?

Q5. With whom and where do you feel comfortable talking about sensitive issues? E.g. family, school, university, with friends, gurdwara, home...

Please check this box if you intend to attend Sikh Women Speak on Wednesday 4th March 2020 in Edinburgh.

For information about our privacy policy please visit www.sikh-sanjog.com

For more information about #SikhWomenSpeak, go to www.sikh-sanjog.com or look up #SikhWomenSpeak.

Age (please circle): 16-17, 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, 46-55, 56+, Prefer not to say

Which of the following descriptors do you most identify with? (please circle)

| | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Scottish Sikh | British Sikh |
| Sikh | Other (specify below) |
| Prefer not to say | |

What is your current status? (please circle all that apply)

| | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Employed | Student |
| Unemployed | Self-employed |
| Housewife/caregiver | Volunteer |
| Prefer not to say | Other (specify below) |

Sexual Orientation (please circle):

| | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Heterosexual/Straight | Lesbian |
| Bisexual | Pansexual |
| Asexual | |
| Self-describe:..... | Prefer not to say |

First 3 letters of your postcode:.....

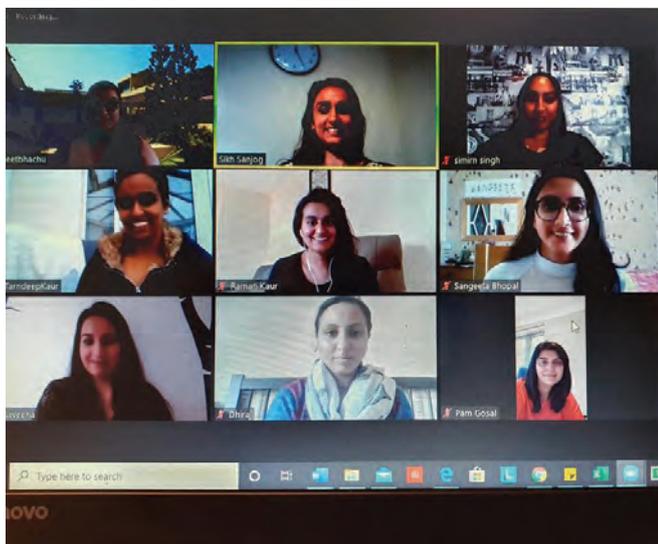
Phase 1: Survey

In the early stages of the project, a survey was distributed to Sikh women across Scotland. It was available online, as well as in a physical format, and the research team attended Gurdwaras across Scotland to encourage Sikh women to participate in filling out the survey. The survey collected demographic data (age, location, occupation) as well as open-ended data on Sikh women's experiences in Scotland. This data informed the workshops held at the Sikh Women Speak conference in March 2020.



Phase 2: In-person Workshops

Workshops were held at the Sikh Women Speak conference in March 2020 with 100 attendees. Each member of the research team and some guest facilitators led 90-minute sessions on different thematic areas that were informed by the survey findings: Education and Heritage; Justice; Mental Health; Employment. Pre-devised prompting questions were agreed by the research team and were used to guide conversation in the workshops. These workshops were not recorded – participants contributed their ideas directly via large thematically divided flip chart pages, and each workshop facilitator contributed summarising notes after the workshop. Notes included observations made by the facilitators, in addition to contributions made by participants. Participants were able to move between themes, contributing to all four areas if they wished.



Phase 3: Online Workshops

In Summer 2020 the research team conducted online workshops, to build on the findings of the conference workshops. This allowed more Sikh women in Scotland to take part in the research – several women who couldn't attend the conference were able to contribute through online workshops. These workshops were recorded via the Zoom video conference application. A similar process of note-taking and observations was used. Workshops were advertised as specific to each theme, i.e. participants were aware they were attending a workshop on a specific area, and that they could attend multiple workshops to contribute to discussions on different themes. Prompts for these workshops were drawn from the initial findings of the in-person workshops.

Limitations

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our plans to engage with more Sikh women in Scotland in person had to be put on hold, with online alternatives where possible. In making this change, we have encountered new barriers in the form of digital accessibility and recognise that what we have captured in this report are the experiences of some, but not all, Sikh women.

Legal and Policy Framework

Domestic and International Legal Framework on race and gender

Scotland has a legal obligation to ensure that women and girls from different races are treated equally, compared to men and their white counterparts. This does not mean however that the practice is equal, rather the goal or objective is achieved for both.

The legal obligation is shown in a number of different instruments. The Race Relations Act 1965 c.73 made it illegal for anyone to be discriminated against because of their race in public places. This was then extended to include housing, employment and the service provision (Race Relations Act 1968 c.71), then later to include indirect discrimination against a racial group (Race Relations Act 1976 c.74). Under the Race Relations Act of 1976, individuals who felt that they had been discriminated against could take their complaints to the courts or industrial tribunals. However, there was still no law against racial discrimination by the police in the conduct of their work. In 1999 the Macpherson Report concluded that the Metropolitan Police force was 'institutionally racist' (Home Office, 1999). A new Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 was passed which brought the police into the scope of race relations legislation and placed a duty on public authorities to actively promote race equality. Furthermore, the legal obligation also arises through the Equality Act 2010 and subsequent Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012. As race and gender are protected characteristics, the Equality Act places a strong obligation on public authorities and those carrying out public functions to proactively reduce race and gender discrimination and advance race and gender equality (Section 149). Thus, if someone were to be discriminated against because of their race or gender this would be unlawful under the 2010 Act.

The obligation on most public authorities in Scotland to proactively reduce race discrimination and advance gender equality is now contained within the public sector equality duty, outlined by the Equality Act 2010, with the specific duties created by the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012. These aim to help listed authorities in Scotland meet the needs of the general equality duty. The Scottish government also placed specific duties on public authorities, also known as the Scottish Specific Duties, requiring a listed authority to publish a mainstreaming report on the progress it has made in integrating the three needs of the General Equality Duty (GED) to: (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimization; (ii) advance equality of opportunity, and (iii) foster good relations (EASDSR 2012).

The legal obligations outlined above are supported by international legal instruments which convey a strong obligation on state parties to eliminate intersectional discrimination. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) requires states to take action on eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms including eradicating racial hatred and incitement to hatred, combatting prejudices which lead to racial discrimination, and guaranteeing the enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights without discrimination on grounds of race, colour, or national or ethnic origin. More specifically in relation to women, the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) places an international obligation on state parties to eradicate discrimination against women in all its forms, which includes intersectional discrimination (2). Similarly, the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), respectively hold that ‘each state party to the present Covenant undertakes to guarantee that the rights enunciated in the present Covenant will be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.’ (3) Article 3 of both treaties prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex and Article 26 of the ICCPR creates a freestanding right to equality and non-discrimination on the same grounds as Article 2(1) of the ICCPR.

Policy Framework

In 2016, the Scottish Government published the Race Equality Framework for Scotland 2016–2030. The Framework sets out the Scottish Government’s approach to promoting race equality and tackling racism and inequality between 2016 and 2030. The Framework sets out a national race equality action plan which provides recommendations for change at institutional levels in a wide range of areas including housing, education, employment and enterprise. The plan outlines 6 themed visions around community cohesion and safety, participation and representation, education and lifelong learning, employability, employment and income and health and home. However, this policy remains the only one in place, and does not recognise the specific needs of women from different ethnic backgrounds other than white.

The only two key equality policies that do make reference to the specific needs of women, are the Equally Safe policy, which sets out the Scottish Government approach to eradicating violence against women and Scotland’s first pay gap policy. However, reference to women from ethnic backgrounds other than white is seldom mentioned in the Equally Safe Policy, with the only reference to the specific needs of such women in the equally safe strategy being that in relation to forced marriage.

In order to ensure that the needs of Sikh women in Scotland are accommodated, government policies must be improved to provide meaningful recognition of the needs of women from ethnic backgrounds other than white.

(2) Although there are no specific provisions in CEDAW recognising women’s intersectional identity, the CEDAW Committee, which provides authoritative interpretations of the treaty articles, makes repeated references to intersectional discrimination and draws to the states’ attention that women of a minority race or ethnicity disproportionately live in poverty.

(3) Article 2(1) and Article 2(2) of the ICCPR and ICESCR

Findings and Recommendations

Culture, Heritage and Identity

At our conference, and in subsequent online workshops, we explored themes of Culture, Heritage and Identity, focussing on issues such as representation, societal awareness, and opportunities to explore our own heritage.

Finding: Sikh women in Scotland feel their cultural heritage is under-represented and not accommodated for in society, work and education.

Our survey found that two thirds of respondents felt their culture and heritage was not celebrated enough in Scotland. Examples of this included recognition of, and allocation of holidays for, important Sikh celebrations such as Bandi Chorr and Diwali (celebrated in October/November) and Vaisakhi (celebrated in April). This has an impact on both school pupils and Sikh people in employment, as they are not given leave to mark dates of religious significance. Furthermore, family and community-led preparations are central to these religious festivals, and so employers and schools should recognise the need for employees and pupils to be granted leave to participate in these celebrations fully.

Feelings of under-representation extended to the heritage sector, where there is some limited representation of Sikhi, but it may not always be well-publicised or reach the Sikh community.

“I don’t know any museums in Scotland which celebrate Sikh heritage and representation of Sikhs in workplaces, and in the media is very limited.”

This ties in with the wider issue of education, and the representation and inclusion of Sikhi in schools which will be discussed later in this report. There have also been a number of UK-wide and global campaigns to seek better recognition of Sikh culture and heritage. Like many cultures, there are particular customs within Sikh communities within all major life events. Of the most serious of course is bereavement, a challenging time in any community.

“when a family member passed away, I had to take a lot of time off, but my boss did not understand why”

Flexible working is a current topic under debate and would allow workers the scope to meet the expectations of both their jobs and their personal lives. At the time of writing this report, the UK Government’s Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has launched a consultation to make flexible working a default arrangement, a move that would benefit Scottish Sikhs.

Recommendation 1: We call on the Scottish Government and the cultural and heritage sectors to develop and deliver a campaign to celebrate Sikh culture and heritage in Scotland.

Recommendation 2: We call on the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and the Scottish Trade Union Congress to implement guidance and campaign for schools and employers to provide flexible working and flexible leave for pupils and workers to take leave on days that are of cultural and/or religious significance, moving away from the default Christian calendar of holidays.

Finding: Sikh women feel there are community divisions along lines of caste

On embarking on this research, we knew through the existing work carried out by Sikh Sanjog that caste is an ongoing issue for Sikhs in Scotland. This was reaffirmed by survey respondents, who noted caste discrimination as one of the main 3 issues affecting them. In general, 70% of those surveyed felt that Scotland’s Sikh communities are divided.

At present, Glasgow is the only Scottish city with more than one Gurdwara - there are four in the city, and their affiliations with different governing organisations, as well as observations on the communities who attend each Gurdwara, indicate, at the very least, informal organisation on the basis of caste. Caste endogamy is still widely practiced within arranged marriages and encouraged in general to young people seeking partners. This is visible in matrimonial services and in South Asian dating apps and websites.

These customs and issues have been well documented in a study of Sikhs in Southall, England, in the 1980s, and reflecting on current practices in Scotland, little has changed (Bhachu, 1985). Professor Bhachu's research focuses on one particular caste group but notes how the emergence of institutional structures paved the way for gurdwaras and communities to be divided in this way.

The following were listed in response to the survey question: "what are the main 3 issues affecting you?"

"Caste discrimination within my own community"

"Castes still being an issue"

"Wanting to have one voice for Sikhs not division in Gurdwaras."

We also witnessed an instance of direct caste-based discrimination perpetrated by a conference attendee, involving assumptions and comments being made about a particular caste group within the Sikh community.

The UK Government ran a consultation on adding Caste to the Equality Act 2010 as a protected characteristic, however it concluded that caste discrimination could be covered by existing racial discrimination legislation and therefore casteism could be dealt with by case law. Both the National Advisory Committee for Women and Girls (NACWG) (4) and Human Rights Consortium Scotland (HRCS) Human Rights Consortium Scotland, (2021) (5) have recommended that Equalities legislation is devolved to Scottish Government, which would enable better protection for those experiencing caste discrimination in Scotland, since the UK government has opted not to adopt caste as a protected characteristic.

Recommendation 3: We call for Equalities legislation to be devolved to the Scottish Government, so that caste discrimination can become a protected characteristic.

(4) National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG). (2021). 2020 report and recommendations.

NACWG. https://onescotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/562006_SCT1120576152-002_NACWG.pdf

(5) Human Rights Consortium Scotland, (2021) Human Rights and Devolution: Devolution as a Vehicle for Human Rights Protection and Progress.

<https://hrcscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Final-Devolution-and-Human-Rights-Dev-as-a-vehicle-for-HR-protection-and-progress-Sept-2021.pdf>

Education

A key theme in workshop discussions was education, both within Sikh spaces and in mainstream society and the education sector.

Finding: Society doesn't know enough about Sikhi

Conference attendees discussed in depth the role of formal education and schools in raising societal awareness about Sikhi, primarily through religious education components of the curriculum. Many of the women noted that they would often be asked to speak to classes in their children's schools as 'experts' as teachers did not have adequate knowledge. There have also been prominent incidents of bullying in British schools related to the visibly different appearance of young Sikhs, particularly young boys who keep kesh (uncut hair). It is more common for young Sikh boys to tie a patka or pagh to cover their distinctively long hair. This is also an issue for young Sikh girls who wear dastar or keski, similar types of head covering to the pagh and patka respectively.

It was also felt that more could be done to raise awareness of Sikhi, and the Scottish Sikh community:

"More people should know about the Sikh community in Scotland"

Through increased knowledge of the Sikh community and awareness of their practices, Scottish society will be a more welcoming place for Sikhs, especially younger Sikhs of school age. It is still common in Scotland for Sikh faith symbols, language, festivals and places of worship to be mistaken as related to other faith groups. Nuanced education will not only improve awareness of Sikhi, but also allow Scottish society to identify other faith groups with more care.

Recommendation 4: We call on Education Scotland to set a benchmark for all Scottish pupils to have a minimum knowledge of Sikhi by the end of compulsory education.

Finding: Scottish pupils do not have in-school access to qualifications in Panjabi

Whilst Scottish pupils are able to access GCSE qualifications in Panjabi, this tends to happen via private tuition. Attendees at our conference noted the value of Panjabi language skills in helping to foster intergenerational relationships in the Sikh community, as well as engagement with Sikh faith. At present, there are significant language barriers to engagement with Sikhi, as the majority of services are delivered entirely in Panjabi, both in terms of prayers and accompanying dialogue from religious leaders and gurdwara committees. Panjabi as a language is not only spoken by Sikhs – it is the mother tongue of all communities from the Panjab region in South Asia – it crosses national and religious boundaries.

According to data collected in 2017, Panjabi was one of the top 5 home languages spoken by pupils at home, other than English (6). Considering that the 2011 Scottish Government Census recorded that South Asian communities made up just 3% of the Scottish population, this suggests an increase in both the presence of South Asians in Scotland, and in particular growth amongst school-age pupils. While the other most common languages spoken at home are Polish, Urdu, Scots, and Arabic, Urdu is the only one to be offered as a modern language subject in Scottish schools.

There is an SQA Qualification available in Urdu. The full list of modern languages currently available in Scottish schools are Cantonese, French, Gaelic (Learners), German, Italian, Mandarin (Simplified), Mandarin (Traditional), Spanish and Urdu. According to SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages, Urdu uptake has increased in recent years, demonstrating demand for the language (7). This could provide the basis for expecting a similar success rate in other South Asian languages. At the time of writing this report, the Scottish Government intends to replace the SQA, and so this is an apt time to consider the introduction of a Panjabi qualification under the new Scottish qualifications framework.

Punjabi language education in Scotland is currently provided by volunteers through Gurdware and Sikh community organisations. Curriculum for Excellence aims to give every Scottish pupil “opportunities for developing skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work” and “opportunities to maximise their individual potential, benefitting from appropriate personal support and challenge” (8). Introducing Punjabi qualifications within the Scottish Qualifications framework will enable not only young Sikhs, but other South Asians and indeed pupils from all backgrounds to learn a language that is useful in an increasingly diverse Scotland.

Recommendation 5: We call on Education Scotland to undertake or commission research with Scotland’s Punjabi-speaking communities to determine demand for Scottish qualification(s) for Punjabi language.

(6) Data from the Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland No 8 (Scottish Government, December 2017, Summary statistics for schools in Scotland no. 8: 2017 edition - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

(7) Language Trends Scotland 2012–2019 <https://scilt.org.uk/Portals/24/Library/statistics/Language%20Trends%20SCO%202012-2019%20finalV2.pdf>

(8) <https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/scottish-education-system/policy-for-scottish-education/policy-drivers/cfe-building-from-the-statement-appendix-incl-btc1-5/what-is-curriculum-for-excellence>

Employment

Common themes that arose from the conference workshops on Employment were low self-esteem, cultural and family barriers, lack of representation, lack of resources and a lack of Sikh cultural understanding on the part of employers.

Finding: Sikh women do not feel supported when returning to work after leaving the workforce for a long period of time due to child-care requirements or other family-based responsibilities.

Sikh women reported that they had low self-esteem due to low or zero confidence in their own abilities and knowledge. Some of the women attributed this to being out of work for long periods of time (due to having children or other family commitments), which had a knock-on effect on their mental and emotional health. Many of the women stated they were “just house-wives”. Like many women across society, they did not recognise the transferable skills they have developed through their experiences as caregivers and homemakers and demonstrated a lack of self-confidence in their employability. For example, they looked after the household accounts and budgets, they multitasked, they took care of family needs, they met their own deadlines, they problem solved, they faced conflict and resolved it and much more. Upon realising this many of the women felt better – they realised that they too could go out and apply for work using their transferable skills.

By enabling these Sikh women to meet others like them, and discuss these issues, our conference acted as an intervention to help the women become empowered about their skillsets. However, the responsibility of making this change does not lie with small grassroots charities. The role of “homemaker” must be positively acknowledged by employers, and viewed as valuable and transferable. Employability initiatives and organisations must be more pro-active in reaching Sikh women and encouraging them to apply for work using their transferable skills and knowledge. Only then will this encourage, empower and provide the confidence in Sikh women to see their skills, knowledge and experience as qualified. This does not stop with Sikh women – these issues exist for all women.

Recommendation 6: We call on The Fair Work, Employability and Skills Directorate within the Scottish Government to work with employability initiatives and organisations, and education providers, to instigate a cultural shift in how ‘homemaking’ is viewed by employers.

Recommendation 7: We call on the Fair Work, Employability and Skills Directorate within the Scottish Government to work with women’s support organisations to develop a programme of workshops for women who have been homemakers to explore their potential as workers in other domains.

Finding: Sikh women face a number of cultural barriers both in seeking work and the workplace.

Cultural barriers were the most discussed theme around the table in both employment workshop sessions. Women felt they often had to be selective when considering a job. They stated many employers did not understand the cultural nuances such as women wearing dastars or traditional clothing in the workplace.

From a young age many Sikh women have had a different upbringing compared to their male counterparts. They are expected to behave in a certain ‘respectable’ and ‘honourable’ way and also face additional barriers – which unfortunately can continue into their adult lives too. Women and girls also face disproportionate pressure to maintain family ‘honour’ – commonly referred to in communities as ‘izat’.

Some of these pressures are further amplified due to the gendered roles in some Sikh families where men do not necessarily take on household and child rearing duties, so women are left to juggle both domestic life and work commitments which can cause a great strain on mental health. In many cases, women will leave work, as discussed in the previous section. It is because of these restrictions that many Sikh women find it even more difficult to find employment - they have to find 'appropriate' work which not only satisfies themselves but also their families. Some Sikh women who attended the conference mentioned they also had language or literacy barriers which either prevented them from seeking work or required them to be selective with their choices. These barriers also tended to affect their understanding of company policies/rules and vice versa.

"it's easier to work as a cleaner... you do not need to talk to anyone."

Comments like this identify another issue of women not believing they are worth the time or effort. Although many of these barriers can be identified as internal community barriers, employers can show compassion and understanding in individual circumstances. They can be flexible where possible and support women, so they do not give up on themselves and their abilities. To ensure appropriate cultural awareness training is given to staff, employers should seek specialist expertise from the plethora of Sikh organisations in the UK. Staff who are from a particular background should not be given the burden of training others on their culture.

Recommendation 8: We call on all major employers to carry out Sikh culture awareness training to better understand the culture and predicaments which Sikh women face. This must be compulsory to all levels of management, so they are able to understand and pass this information on to their staff.

Finding: Sikh Women are under-represented in management positions in the workplace

Following the conference workshops that highlighted a lack of pathways into management positions, participants in online focus groups were asked, "why would you not apply for a manager job?". The response was framed around the lack of representation in higher positions.

"There are no Sikh women managers... I do not know Asian women who are managers or bosses" [Focus Group Participant]

The number of Sikh or South Asian women in leadership or managerial positions is typically significantly lower than their white counterparts. The lack of role models who "look like them" mean that many Sikh women in Scotland cannot see themselves in such positions and therefore do not apply for these roles.

Targeted training courses offered by the Scottish Government in partnership with career skills development organisations towards women from South Asian background will enable these women to feel confident and equipped to apply for senior roles. Courses should at the very least offer lessons in leadership building, presentation and communication. This can then count towards a professional qualification recognised by employers when applicants apply for managerial positions.

Recommendation 9: We call on all major employers to encourage merit-based promotion, acknowledging that everyone is capable of fulfilling the responsibilities and duties of a senior role. The Scottish Government must offer training courses/workshops targeted at South Asian women, to ease the transition to managerial roles.

Justice

Finding: Members of the Sikh community continue to face racial profiling from national organisations such as Police Scotland.

Racism within Scottish society remains an important issue for Sikh women living in Scotland today. 10% of women surveyed stated that racism was an issue that most affected them in society today. The rise in racism following the Brexit vote and an increase in dangerous rhetoric from world leaders, has meant that many women felt they were living in fear. This has resulted in lower reporting of racist crimes by Sikh women. Language barriers with police officers and the lack of representation of Sikh women in the police force have also contributed to the lower reporting rate.

“I feel that they (police) can’t understand. I was born here. I have been educated here. But the lack of people who look like me in the police force means that I don’t feel comfortable reporting crime. I feel that there is a huge lack of cultural awareness in the police force.” [Focus Group Participant]

The lack of Sikh representation within the police force was reported to have contributed to a feeling within the community where the police and justice system were seen as “for them and not us”. Often coming from a background where police brutality is the norm, some Sikh women surveyed felt that the practices shown in the media of police officers use of force and singling out black men was no different. This cannot exist in a society that must ensure all of its citizens feel safe.

“My son was walking down the street with this white friend. The police stopped them and asked to speak only to my son. My son had done nothing wrong. He was walking with friend. I don’t know why they do this to us”. [Focus Group Participant]

Collective action must be taken across government and society to root out institutional racism. In order to achieve this, we recommend the creation of a national independent taskforce aimed at reviewing practices within police institutions to ensure that cultures reflect a just and fair society. The taskforce, commissioned by the Scottish Government, will focus on 3 key areas – internal culture within the police (review and implement new practices), people strategy (there must be a drive to recruit more people from diverse backgrounds to ensure that the police force is representative of the society it serves) and police operations (review of police training and handling of crimes such as hate crime, stop and search and domestic abuse).

Recommendation 10: We call on the Scottish Government to commission a national independent taskforce on institutional racism led by organisations at the forefront of anti-racism work in Scotland.

Finding: Sikh women in Scotland feel that there is a significant lack of awareness or understanding of their culture in the police force and other justice services.

Many Sikh women approached in this report felt that the current justice system was not set up to understand their needs or context. The lack of cultural awareness training in the police force meant that at times highly dangerous situations faced by Sikh women, were misunderstood by officers. Many officers confused different cultural and religious practices. Instead damaging stereotypes, for example where women remain silent in situations and men do the talking, were reinforced by various members of the judicial system. This was particularly problematic within rural communities.

“The police do not understand our culture or religion. They think that we are Muslim, or because they have set up links with mainly Muslim organisations then they do not need to do anymore. Serving one community is not enough. There needs to be cultural awareness training that recognises other communities too.” [Focus Group Participant]

“At a recruitment event at my Gurdwara, I spoke to the police officer who was there. She told me that they do not receive any cultural awareness training. She didn’t seem to think that this was an issue – I was very shocked.” [Focus Group Participant]

The creation of mandatory cultural awareness training during the induction training of police officers, members of the judiciary and victim support workers is crucial. This will mean that Sikh women feel supported in raising issues to the police. Cultural awareness training will allow tailored and effective approaches to resolving issues faced by Sikh women which require police assistance. The training must form part of the equality and diversity policy of each body/institution. The training must be resourced from an external culture specific organisation so that stereotypes are not reinforced, and a true reflection of that culture is portrayed to the attendees. This will lead to a more inclusive justice system that works for the people it protects. The providers must be paid to avoid such training being viewed as tokenistic and to recognise the work of the provider.

To ensure this training is given its due significance, re-fresher training must then be given at regular intervals. Again, this must be provided by an external culture specific organisation. Interfaith events within the different institutions would also increase the level of cultural awareness.

Recommendation 11: We call for mandatory cultural awareness training for police officers, members of the judiciary and victim support workers.

Finding: Victim support services do not meet the needs of Sikh women living in Scotland

After the trauma experienced by the commission of the crime, appropriate support for victims is crucial in helping victims recover. It is part of a well-established process which recognises the emotional and practical strain that crimes can have on their victims. Victim support services provide emotional and practical support, information, referral to other services and advocacy for the rights of victims.

However appropriate support of this kind is lacking for many Sikh women living in Scotland. In crimes of domestic abuse and violence, a lack of cultural awareness means that the home situation of many Sikh women is misunderstood by victim support providers. Coupled with the lack of appropriate external support services, especially in rural communities, that such women can be referred onto, this means that victims fall through the cracks and do not receive the support which they are entitled to and which would be received by others from another community. Language barriers also pose as an issue with many women reporting that they did not feel that could be supported, where they could not even tell people how they felt, let alone what they needed. Although there are interpreters, this was not easy to access and many victims were not informed that such interpreters even existed. There is a particular lack of appropriate victim support for Sikh women living in rural communities. Perhaps the most harrowing revelation was the lack of confidence in the police and overall justice system.

“I do not feel comfortable talking to the police or anyone like that (support services or judicial bodies). They are not for us. They do not understand us.” [conference attendee]

The lack of confidence meant that when such women were victims to crimes e.g., Hate crimes, they wished the whole experience to be over with and declined victim support service when offered by the police. There is also a lack of understanding of what victim support services can offer.

“I was offered the victim support service. But I said no. I didn’t really understand it and I did not want to tell them anything that could be used against me. I just wanted it over with” [Focus Group Participant]

Appropriate cultural awareness training should be given to victim support providers so that they are aware of the cultural situation that Sikh women face, especially those who report crimes of domestic abuse and violence. There must also be greater connection between victim support agencies and more culture specific organisations which provide support to victims of domestic abuse and violence. There is a need for work to be done to raise awareness of what support services can offer, but this must be paired with improvements to provision to instil confidence in Sikh women that they will be supported appropriately.

Recommendation 12: We call for better provision of more appropriate victim support services for Sikh women who have experienced domestic abuse, violence or any other crime.

Finding: Sikh women in Scotland feel that engagement with them is tokenistic and not taken seriously.

Engagement with Sikh women on proposed policy or legislative changes is far and few between. Survey respondents stated that most institutional and government engagement with the Sikh community is done via male dominated Gurdwara governance and does not represent Sikh women's needs. This means that the specific needs of Sikh women in Scotland are not met. Also, many women surveyed at the focus group were not aware of the democratic process and how they could input in changing policy and legislation. They felt that this was something done to them, over which they had no control over.

"I did not know that you could do that (input on policies or legislation). If change happens like that, why have they not asked our opinions? I was born in this country too." [Focus Group Participant]

"I went to a Scottish Government consultation on Hate Crime and I was the only person from the Sikh community and the only the female from a south Asian background in the group. I felt that my voice as a Sikh person in Scottish Society was not being taken seriously, but rather tokenistic, because there seemed to be no meaningful attempt to engage with other Sikh women." [Focus Group Participant]

Sikh women must be involved at the very outset of policy and legislative change. There must be increased community engagement with Sikh women in Scotland. Instead of only engaging with Sikh women through the local Gurdwaras, focus groups could also be held in wider community centres and hubs. More resourcing should be allocated to Sikh specific community charities and organisations to facilitate civic engagement. Establishment of information sessions outlining the democratic process and opportunities for involvement should be provided to Sikh women, so that Sikh women become more informed about their democratic rights and opportunities to input in policies and legislation that affect them as not only Sikhs but as Scottish citizens. There must also be more advertisement of the opportunities to participate including in community centres and hubs and social media.

Recommendation 13: We call on the Scottish Government and other civic bodies to engage more meaningfully with women in the Sikh community on policy and legislative changes.

Health

Finding: Sikh Women feel unable to share their experiences with healthcare professionals due to fear of judgement and lack of understanding.

It was highlighted that there is a severe lack of understanding by current health professionals on the cultural context of Sikh Women in Scotland. This was displayed by Sikh women in our online focus groups expressing anxiety when approaching health care professionals as they felt they would be “judged”, and “could not talk openly” with their GP for fear that the GP would not understand their living circumstances.

The Sikh women who attended the conference expressed a deep disappointment with the current postnatal and prenatal care given to new Sikh mums. Multi-generational households are very common in Sikh families and this context often means women are not able to speak openly at home about monumental personal challenges they go through after giving birth. Therefore, home visits are challenging, and many women felt they were not able to give their healthcare providers honest answers. Many Sikh women have missed out on urgent postnatal care they needed.

It is necessary for healthcare professionals, especially those working in communities and visiting peoples’ homes, to be aware of the cultural contexts they are entering, and the issues that may shape the experiences of their patients. The Scottish Government must resource proper cultural awareness training that achieves this depth of understanding. The execution of the training programme must be heavily informed by Sikhs living in Scotland. The training must be mandatory and count towards the practitioner’s overall training or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) plan.

Recommendation 14: We call on the Scottish Government to commission cultural awareness training for all NHS members of staff; with specific attention to elderly care homes, maternity, postnatal, and mental health practitioners.

Finding: Sikh Women face barriers in accessing appropriate and culturally aware mental health services.

Many Sikh women reported that that they are not fully understood by therapists and counsellors in the current system. The lack of therapists with lived experience of the South Asian community was a major issue raised across the conference and the focus groups.

Many attendees referenced the South Asian Therapists website made by the Pink Ladoo campaign, suggesting that Scotland needs a similar local service. While a UK-wide network does exist – The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network – there are few South Asian therapists listed in Scotland. South Asian specific mental health organisations have identified that the mental health context of South Asian women differs greatly from those of white ethnicity (Memon, Taylor, Mohebbati et al, 2016). The family structures, experiences of racism, immigration waves, and other deep-seated experiences that make up the fabric of South Asian communities are not understood by those with no lived experience, therefore the advice provided by mental health providers, both public and private, is not always applicable or appropriate. A recent survey of 470 Panjabi individuals found that the most commonly reported support structures were family, friends and faith, while state and private healthcare were reported at a much lower rate (Singh, 2021) (9).

It is essential that South Asian women are given the option to be referred to a South Asian therapist within the NHS. This must be an option – it must not be assumed that all South Asian women would like to see a South Asian therapist. The Scottish Government must provide resources in the form of funding to South Asian specific mental health awareness and service-providing charities and organisations.

(9) This trend was also evident in a recent research study conducted by Sikh Sanjog on the impacts of covid-19 on the Sikh community in Scotland.

Multiple women in both the focus groups and during the conference stated they were forced to leave the public mental health provision and seek private care, as the NHS system was too stressful and “fragmented”. One online focus group participant stated, “growing up in that system is no [way to grow up]”, having been exposed to the NHS mental health care service from a young age due to family, and stated that this led to a decay of her own mental health through to adulthood. Another individual had such a negative experience with the mental health service in Scotland, that she was forced to seek private care as the public system was causing her situation to worsen. She noted the financial barriers of accessing private healthcare.

“Trying to get help from your GP is horrific, it’s really, really terrible and I am somebody who is from this country [UK], speaks this language [English] and understands this culture [British/Scottish] and getting publicly funded help for your mental health is really, really difficult and it is a huge barrier [...] I wasn’t given help. I was sent to generic open days where they assess your situation and refer you on, I had to get my situation assessed 3 to 4 times. Having to speak about the things that have brought you to this situation is really difficult [...] I nursed myself through it, I got a brief counsellor and they dotted me around, not a great experience. I found it massively difficult to gain professional help.” [Focus Group Participant]

A more joined up approach is required to ensure people are not “victims of the process”, that is, women who have reached out to their GPs and subsequently been discouraged from seeking further help. This approach should ensure the NHS assigns one therapist/counsellor to a particular case and sees this through to completion, unless the patient requests a change in therapist.

Recommendation 15: We call for the Scottish Government to sponsor South Asian specific counselling services to address mental health issues suffered by people in the Sikh Community and wider South Asian context.

Recommendation 16: We call on the Scottish Government to review the current mental health provision and case referral process.

Summary of all recommendations

Culture, Heritage and Identity

Recommendation 1: We call on the Scottish Government and the cultural and heritage sectors to develop and deliver a campaign to celebrate Sikh culture and heritage in Scotland.

Recommendation 2: We call on the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and the Scottish Trade Union Congress to implement guidance and campaign for schools and employers to provide flexible working and flexible leave for pupils and workers to take leave on days that are of cultural and/or religious significance, moving away from the default Christian calendar of holidays.

Recommendation 3: We call for Equalities legislation to be devolved to the Scottish Government, so that caste discrimination can become a protected characteristic.

Education

Recommendation 4: We call on Education Scotland to set a benchmark for all Scottish pupils to have a minimum knowledge of Sikhi by the end of compulsory education.

Recommendation 5: We call on Education Scotland to undertake or commission research with Scotland's Panjabi-speaking communities to determine demand for Scottish qualification(s) for Panjabi language.

Employment

Recommendation 6: We call on The Fair Work, Employability and Skills Directorate within the Scottish Government to work with employability initiatives and organisations, and education providers, to instigate a cultural shift in how 'homemaking' is viewed by employers.

Recommendation 7: We call on the Fair Work, Employability and Skills Directorate within the Scottish Government to work with women's support organisations to develop a programme of workshops for women who have been homemakers to explore their potential as workers in other domains.

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Recommendation 9: We call on all major employers to encourage merit-based promotion, acknowledging that everyone is capable of fulfilling the responsibilities and duties of a senior role. The Scottish Government must offer training courses/workshops targeted at South Asian women, to ease the transition to managerial roles.

Justice

Recommendation 10: We call on the Scottish Government to commission a national independent taskforce on institutional racism led by organisations at the forefront of anti-racism work in Scotland.

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Next Steps

There are a number of next steps that have arisen from this research. Significantly, there are a number of issues to be further explored within Sikh communities in Scotland. There is also much more research needed into the outward facing issues that have been discussed in this report. A number of our recommendations require further consultation with Sikh women and Sikh communities, for example around language qualifications and appropriate cultural awareness training. As we have stated throughout this process, our findings relate to the Sikh women who we were able to engage with, but this only scratches the surface of the depth and nuance of Sikh women's experiences in Scotland.

Work within Scotland's Sikh Communities

Our research into education and heritage related issues also uncovered a number of internal areas for Sikh Sanjog to pursue within Scottish Sikh communities. These relate to gender inequality in our communities, in particular how gurdwaras are run. At present, women are highly under-represented within Sikh community governance, and it is still common for forms of seva to be divided along gendered lines. It is common, for example, in the preparation of Langar for certain tasks to be labelled "bibiyaa da kamm" – women's work – such as rolling and cooking roti. There is also stigma around carrying out religious duties while menstruating, and a lack of training available for women to take on specific seva activities that require expertise.

In addition to gender inequality, there was also a desire for more Panjabi and Gurmukhi language education to be available for adults, as most existing provision is for children and young people. Language barriers present a growing issue for Sikhs of second generation and beyond, due to English being the primary language spoken in the home.

Our research into mental health related issues also uncovered a number of barriers within the community that need to be addressed. It is clear mental health is still very much a taboo subject within the Scottish Sikh community and many are labelled derogatory terms or isolated from society. Across the society generally, more work needs to be done to prioritise mental health, however for Sikhs in particular, intergenerational trauma originating from partition, waves of immigration which brought many Sikhs to Scotland have had a toll on the mental health of older generations.

As mental health is not talked about in a positive way, many of these deep-seated generational pains are not addressed and are often passed to children. Therefore, it is extremely important that the Sikh community as a whole acknowledges the importance of talking about mental health in an open and constructive manner. The work we are looking to do here will sit alongside what we are recommending to the Scottish Government.

In our presentation of Employment issues in this report, we described a number of issues related to family pressure on women and girls to become caregivers or opt for work that fits into family expectations. Our recommendations seek to tackle the barriers Sikh women in these circumstances may face, but we will also pursue work to internally tackle the underpinning gender inequality within Sikh communities, so that Sikh women will feel empowered to pursue any line of work they desire.

There is also further work to be done within Sikh communities to create more opportunities for women to be trained to undertake forms of seva that have previously been carried out almost exclusively by men.

Conclusion

In this report we have presented a number of important recommendations that, if implemented, will result in huge positive change for Scottish Sikh women. We strongly believe that taking a nuanced approach to addressing the culturally-specific needs of Scottish Sikh women will benefit all people in Scotland, in paving the way to embrace the needs of people from all cultures and backgrounds. We once again would like to thank the women who participated in this research through sharing their valuable lived experiences. We know that this is just the beginning, and that there are many more Scottish Sikh women whose stories are yet to be told and heard.

We call on the Scottish Government, and the other named bodies, to accept, support, and act on the recommendations made in this report, to ensure that the voices of Sikh women are heard within Scottish society.

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Useful Links

<https://southasiantherapists.org/>

<https://www.baatn.org.uk/>

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