

# 'PART OF THE JOB?'

Women councillors' experiences of sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence in Scottish Councils

“...he [male councillor] just went aggressive [...] He didn't hit anything, but the aggression, bodily and voice-wise, was so bad we [the participant and another woman councillor in the room] both felt unsafe.”

“They're very dismissive of online bullying and harassment, but every single female councillor I know has experienced it. Every single one.”

“And it's rather interesting as well that it's the women leaders that are getting the bulk of the abuse, not the male council leaders...”

## Acknowledgements

**Engender Project Team:** Noomi Anyanwu, Hannah Brisbane, Jessie Duncan

**Researchers:** Dr Leah McCabe and Prof. Meryl Kenny from the University of Edinburgh

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This project was also informed by an Advisory Group comprising women councillors from across Scotland and the political spectrum. We are extremely grateful to each member of this group for sharing their time and insights with us throughout this research project.

We are also thankful to the many stakeholder organisations we consulted in developing the report recommendations.

*"I think every woman I know has experienced some form of violence... So I think that every woman councillor in Scotland has experienced it. I really do... But I think it's just part of the job. It is part of the job."*

- Interview Participant

*"But everyone just says it's part of the job. And there's nothing we could do. Just totally ignored it... But meanwhile, we're all looking over our shoulder and looking out for it to happen."*

- Interview Participant

*"It happens a lot. It happens on a daily basis."*

- Interview Participant





## Executive Summary

This report provides an insight into the endemic sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence that women councillors in Scotland are experiencing in their roles and the serious, profound impacts this is having on them as individuals, on their communities and our democracy.

The findings are based on research conducted by Dr Leah McCabe and Prof. Meryl Kenny from the University of Edinburgh between February and August 2025. This involved a survey open to all current and former women councillors in Scotland, to which a total of 59 women responded. The researchers also interviewed 16 participants directly to gain a more in-depth understanding of women councillors' experiences and their impacts.

What the research found should be of urgent concern to those who care about the safety and representation of women in public life and the ability of our democratic institutions to deliver for our population. **90% of women councillors surveyed told us that they had experienced sexism, misogyny or gender-based violence at some point during their career as a councillor. Almost three-quarters (72%) had experienced at least three different forms of violence, including sexual harassment, physical or psychological violence. All minority ethnic, lesbian and bisexual respondents and almost all (89%) respondents under the age of 55 had experienced at least three forms.**



Our findings also highlight the far-reaching nature of this violence. The picture that emerges is of a permissive culture within many of our elected bodies that fails to respond to sexist and misogynistic microaggressions, which in turn establishes a lack of accountability that enables more serious acts of violence in the long term. Whilst many instances of violence stemmed from members of the public, respondents most frequently cited enduring sexist, misogynistic or violent behaviour from fellow male councillors. Such incidents appear to commonly occur within the council environment – including in council meetings and committee sessions – and beyond it, such as in online spaces.

The research demonstrates how the infrastructure that currently exists to address these issues is increasingly inadequate, given the scale of the problem, and is routinely failing women who are at risk of harm. Women councillors indicated being mostly familiar with the reporting procedures available to them for addressing these behaviours. Yet, many still chose not to report. Most commonly, this was due to a lack of confidence in these processes. Some interview participants also expressed deep dissatisfaction with these processes following poor experiences with reporting bodies, including the police, political parties or the Standards Commission (the body

responsible for upholding councillors' standards of behaviour in Scotland). They described how existing procedures often fail to adequately address the complex nature of the gendered violence women councillors experience, especially when the perpetrator is another councillor. Many felt that this is contributing to a culture of impunity in local councils, in which male councillors feel they can get away with sexist and abusive behaviour.



Local councils are responsible for delivering services that disproportionately affect women's lives, including childcare, social care and public transport. Local government is also a major employer of women across sectors, including social care and education, where women make up the majority of the workforce. However, our research shows that women's participation in local democracy and critical decision-making about these public services is regularly being undermined or altogether blocked by frequent incidents of sexism, misogyny and violence against women councillors. Almost a third (30%) of women councillors would not recommend being a councillor to other women, with this figure rising to 45% among those under 55.

With next year's local elections on the horizon, urgent and comprehensive action is needed to prevent violence against women in local democracy in Scotland, and to hold perpetrators accountable. Our findings indicate that it is time for the Scottish Government to commission a comprehensive, independent review of the safety of women councillors. A full list of recommendations for relevant stakeholders, including the Scottish Government, local authorities, political parties and the Standards Commission, can be found at the conclusion of this report.

## Support Services

This report discusses incidents of sexism, misogyny and different forms of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment and physical violence. Please take care when reading and make use of the following services if you require support or advice:

- The **Rape Crisis Scotland** helpline is open every day from 5pm to midnight and provides free, confidential initial and crisis support and information for anyone who has been affected by sexual violence on **08088 010 0302**. They also offer text support on **07537 410 027** and email support via [support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](mailto:support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)
- The **Scottish Women's Rights Centre** helpline is available on **08088 010 789**. It is open on Mondays and Wednesdays from 10am to 12:30pm and provides free legal information and advice across Scotland.
- **Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline** is available by calling **0800 027 1234**. The helpline is open 24/7 and supports anyone affected by domestic abuse or forced marriage, as well as their family members, friends, colleagues and professionals who support them. The helpline is free to phone and provides a confidential, sensitive service.

## Terminology

**Gender-based violence** is any form of violence directed against a person (or group of people) because of their gender.

**Microaggressions** are everyday slights, snubs and insults that communicate hostile, derogatory, or discriminatory messages towards someone because they belong to a marginalised group. Gendered microaggressions serve to normalise a culture of permissiveness towards sexism and misogyny that enable more serious incidents.

**Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs)** are paid to councillors with certain additional roles, such as Council Leader, committee chair and vice chair, and so on.

**Violence against women and girls (VAWG)** is a form of gender-based violence which disproportionately affects women and girls and is predominantly perpetrated by men. Such violence can take many forms, including sexual violence, domestic abuse, so-called 'honour-based' abuse, online abuse and many more.

**Violence against women in politics (VAWiP)** is a form of gender-based violence which is directed at women in politics with the aim of excluding or deterring them from politics because they are women. Common forms include online abuse, rape threats and sexual harassment.



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## Introduction

Violence against women in politics (VAWiP) is an issue that has gained increasing attention in recent years in the wake of the #MeToo movement and the death of Jo Cox MP in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Women from across the political spectrum have spoken out about the harassment and abuse they face, often on a daily basis, both online and in political institutions. Many have also cited it as the main reason they decided to step down from politics altogether.

For many years now, Engender has been working to dismantle barriers to women's representation and participation in politics through our Equal Representation project. Over the course of this work, several current and former councillors have shared with us their experiences of serious sexism, misogyny and, in some cases, gender-based violence. Sometimes these behaviours were perpetrated by members of the public; however, often the main perpetrators were their fellow male councillors.

Women working at the local level are particularly vulnerable to experiencing VAWiP because local politics receives less national scrutiny and attention from the media and the general public. At the same time, local elected representatives typically have less access to additional security measures, such as party staff or private security, than their colleagues in national parliaments.<sup>2</sup>

These issues are deeply concerning, especially because women are underrepresented in local politics compared to the national level, making up just 35% of all councillors elected in Scotland in 2022. And yet, most of the existing research on VAWiP predominantly focuses on women politicians in national parliaments or on VAWiP which is perpetrated by members of the public, as opposed to someone inside politics, like a colleague.



**1** Inter-Parliamentary Union (2026) Violence Against Women in Parliament. Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/VAWParliament>; Krook, M L (2020) Violence Against Women in Politics. Oxford University Press.

**2** UN Women (2018) Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report Meeting and Recommendations. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/9/egm-report-violence-against-women-in-politics>.

**3** King's College London (2020) Women political leaders: the impact of gender on democracy. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/research/women-political-leaders-the-impact-of-gender-on-democracy>.

This report aims to shine a light on women councillors' experiences of sexism, misogyny and VAWiP in Scotland, which we found is endemic, but often hidden from public view. With nine in 10 respondents to our survey of women councillors reporting they had experienced at least one form of VAWiP during their career, it is clear that this is an issue that requires urgent attention.

Critically, this is not just a woman's issue; councils in Scotland deliver vital services that affect everyone's daily lives, from education to public transport and much in between. Women's increased participation in politics has been shown to improve the provision of public services and the quality of democracy.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many participants in this research told us that their primary motivation for becoming a councillor was to improve their local communities.

However, many councillors told us that their experiences of sexism, misogyny and VAWiP had forced them to become quieter or less prominent, had led to other forms of exclusion or had resulted in them leaving politics altogether, limiting their participation in local politics.

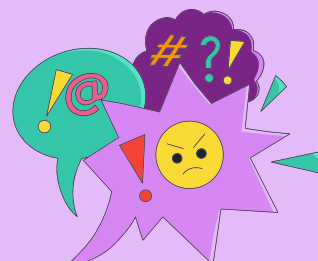
As we move closer to the 2027 local council elections, it is vital that the gendered power imbalances, lack of accountability and inadequate support systems we heard about are addressed if we are to encourage more women to enter politics, and retain those already there.

## Summary of Key Findings

90% of respondents said they had experienced sexism, misogyny or VAWiP at some point during their career as a councillor.

### Microaggressions

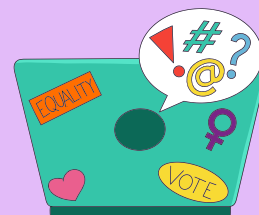
- **98%** of those who had experienced sexism, misogyny and violence said they had experienced **microaggressions** as a councillor
- Of those who had experienced this, almost **two-thirds (65%)** said they **did not report** their experience
- **Top reasons for not reporting included:**
  - I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously
  - I did not feel supported by the organisational culture
  - There was no clear structure or process for reporting
- **Respondents who did report mainly did so to:**
  - Party leader/business manager
  - Council officer
  - Chief Executive



Of those who reported their experiences, **none indicated there were any consequences for the perpetrator**

### Cyberviolence

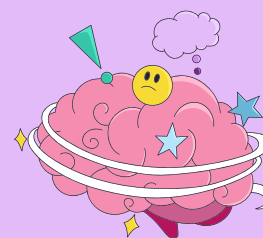
- **77%** of those who had experienced sexism, misogyny and violence said they had experienced **cyberviolence** as a councillor
- Of those who had experienced this, **two-thirds (66%)** **did not report** their experience
- **Top reasons for not reporting included:**
  - I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously
  - There was no clear structure or process for reporting
  - I didn't know who to report to
- **Respondents who did report mainly did so to:**
  - Police
  - Council officer(s)



Of those who reported their experiences, **57% said there were no consequences for the perpetrator**

### Psychological Violence

- **64%** of those who had experienced sexism, misogyny and violence said they had experienced **psychological violence** as a councillor
- Of those who had experienced this, **50%** said they **did not report** their experience.
- **Top reasons for not reporting included:**
  - I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously
  - I didn't know who to report to
  - I wasn't aware of the support available
  - There was no clear structure or process for reporting
- **Respondents who did report mainly did so to:**
  - Council officer(s)
  - Party leader/business manager
  - Chief Executive



Of those who reported their experiences, **88% said there were no consequences for the perpetrator**

## Sexual Harassment

- **40%** of those who had experienced sexism, misogyny and violence said they had experienced **sexual harassment** as a councillor
- Of those who had experienced this, **81% did not report** their experience.
- **Top reasons for not reporting included:**
  - I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously
  - There was no clear structure or process for reporting
  - I did not feel supported by the organisational culture
- **Respondents who did report mainly did so to:**
  - Council officer(s)
  - Party leader/business manager
  - Chief Executive
  - The Ethical Standards Commissioner



Of those who reported their experiences, **three-quarters (75%)** said there were no consequences for the perpetrator

## Economic Violence

- **Nearly a quarter (23%)** of those who had experienced sexism, misogyny and violence said they had experienced **economic violence** as a councillor
- Of those who had experienced this, **83% did not report** their experience
- **Top reasons for not reporting included**
  - I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously
  - I didn't know who to report to
  - I did not feel supported by the organisational culture
- **Respondents who did report mainly did so to:**
  - Leader of the party group/business manager
  - The Ethical Standards Commissioner
  - COSLA
  - Committee clerk



Of those who reported their experiences, **100%** said there were consequences for the perpetrator

## Physical Violence

- **11%** of those who had experienced sexism, misogyny and violence said they had experienced **physical violence** as a councillor
- Of those who had experienced this, **50% did not report** their experience
- **Top reason for not reporting was:**
  - I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously
- **Respondents who did report mainly did so to:**
  - Police
  - Party leader/business manager
  - Chief Executive
  - Council officer(s)



Of those who reported their experiences, **67%** said there were no consequences for the perpetrator

## About Councils in Scotland

Scotland is divided into 32 local authorities which are responsible for delivering a wide range of public services. These include education, social care, housing, transport, environmental services, and local economic development.

Each local authority is governed by a council which is made up of councillors elected by voters in the area they represent. The number of councillors varies depending on each council area's size and population. For instance, Glasgow City Council has 85 councillors while Clackmannanshire Council has 18.

Councillors are typically elected every five years to represent their local area, which is known as a "ward". There are usually three or four councillors elected to represent each ward. As elected representatives, councillors are not employees of the council. This means they receive an "allowance" rather than a salary for their work. An independent review of councillor remuneration has found that its relatively low level of 'pay' creates barriers to elected office for women and people from underrepresented backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

Each council is led by a Council Leader and comprises various committees that oversee specific policy areas and functions, such as education, planning and so on. Councillors can be appointed to leadership roles such as committee chairs, cabinet members, or spokespeople for particular issues. Those undertaking these additional roles receive a "Special Responsibility Allowance" (SRA).

As councillors are not employees, they are also not always covered by council-wide staff policies, such as sexual harassment, domestic abuse or anti-bullying policies. They also do not have access to HR or whistle-blowing protections.

Under the Ethical Standards in Public Life etc. (Scotland) Act 2000, all councillors must act in accordance with the [Councillors' Code of Conduct](#). This Code of Conduct sets out the behaviour expected of them in carrying out their duties. It is the councillors' responsibility to ensure they are familiar with the Code and that their actions comply with it. They are also expected to act in accordance with any guidance issued by the

Standards Commission, which is the independent body responsible for adjudicating complaints of alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct.

Each council also has the authority to establish Standing Orders for council and committee meetings. These vary across councils; however, some include rules on conduct, such as showing respect to colleagues and council officers and refraining from using abusive or offensive language. Councillors are expected to act in accordance with the rules, standing orders and regulations of their council.

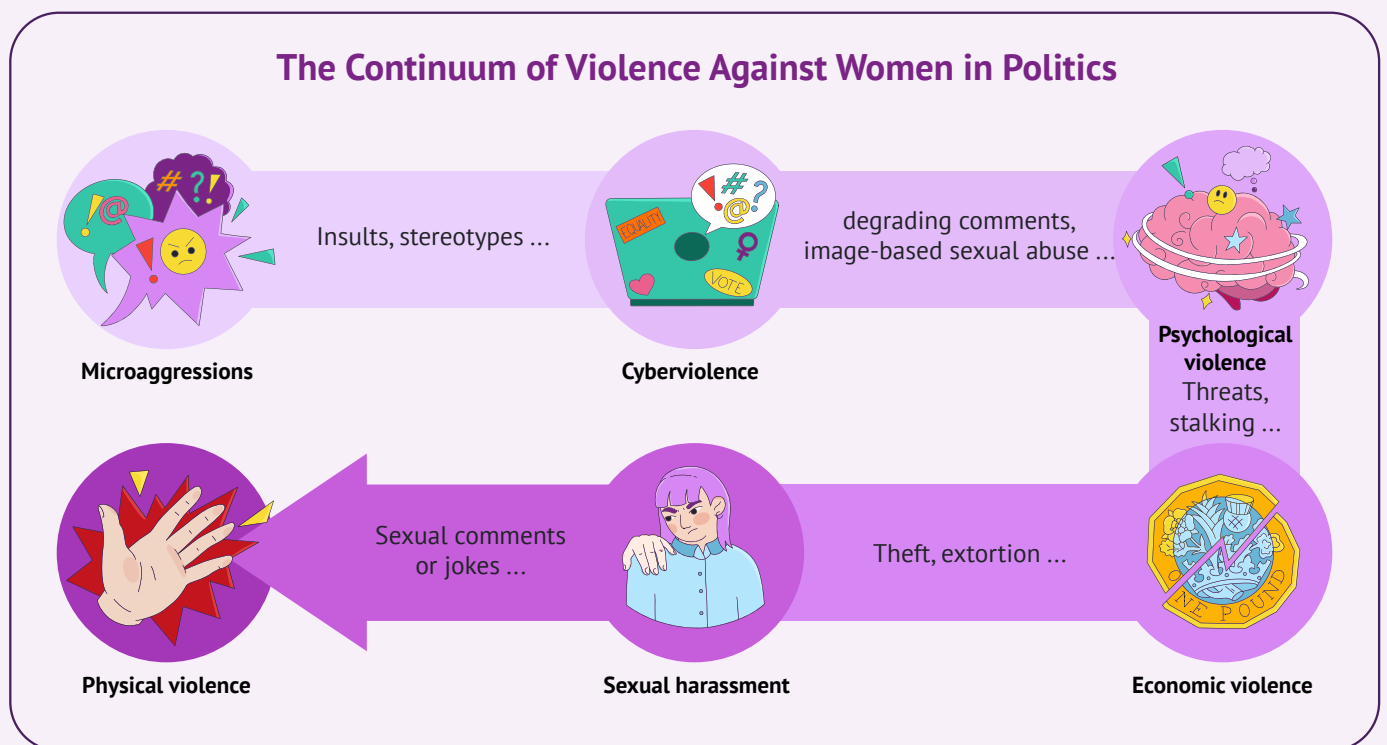


<sup>4</sup> Scottish Local Authorities Committee (SLARC) (2024) Councillors' remuneration and expenses: recommendations. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/recommendations-councillors-remuneration-expenses/documents/>.

## About Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWiP)

Both men and women in politics can experience violence; however, evidence shows that women, particularly those from marginalised groups, face abuse that is more aggressive, sexist and sexual.<sup>5</sup> The term **violence against women in politics (VAWiP)** is used to highlight violent acts that aim to exclude or deter women from being politically active because of their gender.<sup>6</sup> It also draws attention to the gendered forms of abuse women in politics face; for example, research suggests men in politics are more likely to be criticised for their ideas or actions, while women face personal attacks, derogatory comments, and even rape threats.<sup>7</sup>

There are many different forms of VAWiP, including physical, psychological and sexual violence. It is predominantly perpetrated by men and can occur in private and public domains, including online spaces.<sup>8</sup> All forms of VAWiP exist in a “continuum”; this concept is used to highlight how common and socially tolerated forms of violence against women (including non-physical forms) inform and reinforce more extreme forms.<sup>9</sup> For example, cases of VAWiP involving rape or assassination do not occur in isolation; typically, they are preceded by threats and more subtle forms of violence. Research shows most women in politics will experience these subtle forms, which include sexist jokes, snubs and insults.<sup>10</sup> Such acts are often dismissed or downplayed; however, they subordinate, undermine and silence women,



5 Phillips, H (2023) What is the problem? Representations of gender and violence towards politicians in UK parliamentary debates. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*. 8:2. Available at: <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/view/journals/ejpg/8/2/article-p448.xml>; Krook, M L (2020) *Violence Against Women in Politics*. Oxford University Press.

6 Krook, M L (2020) *Violence Against Women in Politics*. Oxford University Press.

7 Bardall, G et al. (2020) How is Political Violence Gendered? Disentangling Motives, Forms, and Impacts. *Political Studies*. 68:4. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0032321719881812>; Hibbs, L (2025) 'More Visible and Vulnerable to Attacks' – Violence Against (local) Women Politicians and the Local Costs of Doing Politics. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*. 46:4. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1554477X.2025.2572265?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

8 UN Women (2018) *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report Meeting and Recommendations*.







9 Kelly, L (1987) The Continuum of Sexual Violence. In: Hanmer, J and Maynard, M (eds) *Women, Violence and Social Control*. Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-18592-4\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-18592-4_4).

10 UN Women (2018) *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report Meeting and Recommendations*.

and establish a culture of permissiveness that creates the conditions for more extreme forms of violence to occur.

All forms of VAWiP represent a significant threat to democracy, equality and human rights, yet it is too often dismissed as “the cost of doing politics” or “part of the job”.<sup>11</sup>

For the purposes of this research, we asked current and former women councillors in Scotland about their experiences of the following forms of VAWiP:

Forms and examples of VAWiP	
	<b>Microaggressions</b> Slight, snubs, insults, stereotypes, undermining
	<b>Psychological violence</b> Threats, character assassination, stalking
	<b>Sexual Harassment</b> Staring, persistent contact, making gestures, sexual comments or jokes
	<b>Physical Violence</b> Physical attacks, unwanted touching, sexual assault
	<b>Cyberviolence</b> Degrading comments on social media, image-based sexual abuse, online bullying, and inappropriate email communications
	<b>Economic Violence</b> Theft, extortion, obstructing access to financial resources and opportunities (such as promotions or working hours)

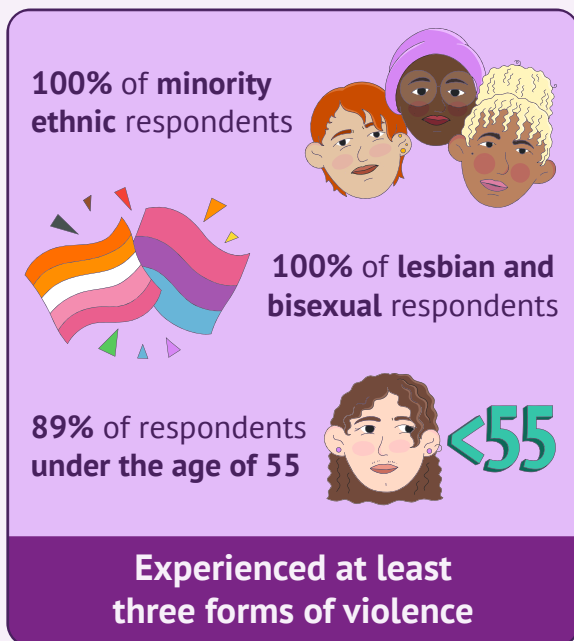
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<sup>11</sup> Krook, M L (2020) Violence Against Women in Politics. Oxford University Press.

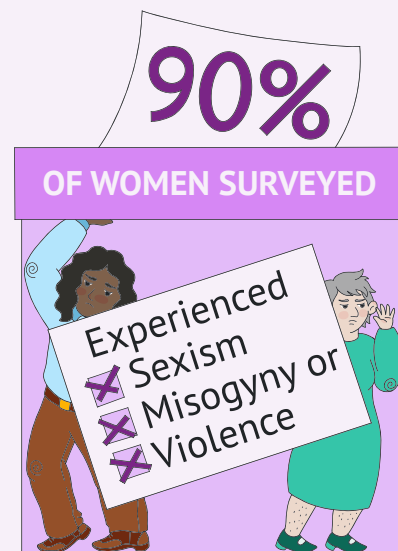
## Sexism, Misogyny and VAWiP in Scottish Councils

As the title of this report suggests, participants in this research indicated that sexism, misogyny and VAWiP are highly prevalent in Scottish councils, with multiple interviewees describing it as “part of the job”. Indeed, **90% of survey respondents said they had experienced sexism, misogyny or violence at some point during their career as a councillor.**

Of those who had experienced VAWiP, almost three-quarters (72%) had experienced at least three different forms of this violence.<sup>12</sup> This figure includes a total of three respondents who had experienced every single form of VAWiP covered by the survey. **All minority ethnic, lesbian and bisexual respondents and almost all (89%) respondents under the age of 55 had experienced at least three forms.**



Almost half (49%) of respondents felt that sexism, misogyny and violence towards women councillors has increased over the last 10 years, while a further



third felt that it had remained constant. Across the survey and interviews, participants under the age of 55 were particularly more likely to say it had increased. Only 19% of all survey respondents felt that it had decreased.

## Gender Inequality in Scottish Councils

The root cause of all forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) is gender inequality. Unfortunately, this inequality is still pronounced in Scottish politics, with men overrepresented at every level, particularly those who are white, middle-class and non-disabled as a form of ‘default’ norm.<sup>13</sup>

VAWiP is rooted in maintaining this overrepresentation and penalising women for transgressing traditional gender roles that associate men with the public sphere (including political arenas) and women with the private sphere (like the home).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, VAWiP serves to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes about women’s supposed “unsuitability” for politics by trying to make them look “too emotional” or “too weak” in comparison to men who are more likely to be made to look “strong” and “rational”.<sup>15</sup>

12 N.B., Violence against women exists in a continuum, meaning different forms can overlap and manifest in the same incident. For example, an incident of sexual assault may also involve physical or psychological violence. Therefore, respondents with experience of multiple forms of VAWiP may have experienced all three forms in the same incident.

13 Engender (2025) Women’s Political Journey: Exploring the election process and women’s experiences of abuse, exclusion and bias, including vital recommendations for improvement. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/10072025-Womens-political-journey-report---RGB-no-bleed.pdf>.

14 UN Women (2018) Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report Meeting and Recommendations.

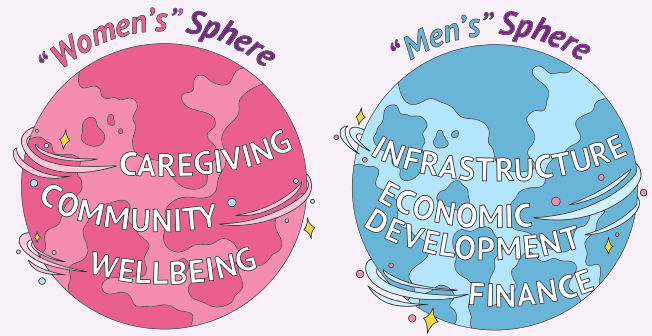
15 Håkansson, S (2024) The Gendered Representational Costs of Violence Against Politicians. Perspectives in Politics. 22:1. Available at: [doi:10.1017/S1537592723001913](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592723001913).

## The impact of intersecting discrimination

Women from marginalised or minoritised groups challenge the status quo of men's overrepresentation on multiple fronts beyond just their gender. Women who are from racialised communities, who are lesbian, bi or trans, who are disabled or from working-class backgrounds challenge the 'default norm' as women, and via other aspects of their identities. This can provoke stronger reactions against their presence in decision-making spaces or positions of power.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, marginalised women in politics typically face higher rates of violence, including violence that is compounded by intersecting forms of oppression, such as racism, ableism, classism, ageism, homophobia and transphobia.<sup>17</sup>



One of the most commonly cited examples of this is research by Amnesty International, which analysed over 900,000 tweets mentioning 177 women MPs in the run-up to the UK General Election in 2017.<sup>18</sup> This research found that Diane Abbott, Britain's first Black woman MP, received almost half (45%) of all the abusive tweets identified in the study. The nature of these tweets, many of which included threats of sexual violence, was not only sexist and misogynistic but also overwhelmingly racist. Even with tweets directed at Diane Abbott removed, the other Black and minority ethnic women MPs in the study received 35% more abusive messages than their white colleagues, despite there being eight times as many white women MPs in the research.



We asked women councillors how equal they found their council:

- **77% of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that men and women councillors are equally represented in terms of overall numbers.**
- **68% disagreed or strongly disagreed that men and women councillors are equally represented on committees.**
- **63% disagreed or strongly disagreed that men and women councillors are equally represented in leadership roles.**

These perceptions of gender equality correspond with data about women's underrepresentation in Scottish councils; no council has achieved gender-equal representation (women representing at least 50% of councillors). Furthermore, women councillors in Scotland are overrepresented on committees that handle "feminised" or "soft" policy areas, usually associated with caregiving or community wellbeing, and which are often perceived as less prestigious or influential. By contrast, they are underrepresented on committees responsible for "masculinised" or "hard" policy areas, such as strategic decision-making, infrastructure, finance or economic development. Indeed, Finance and Resources / Policy and Resources committees are the most male-dominated of all, with 71.39% male representation, indicating a persistent masculinisation of financial and strategic governance spaces.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Krook, M L (2020) *Violence Against Women in Politics*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>17</sup> UN Women (2018) *Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report Meeting and Recommendations*.

<sup>18</sup> Amnesty International (2017) *Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse Against Women MPs*. Available at: <https://medium.com/@AmnestyInsights/unsocial-media-tracking-twitter-abuse-against-women-mps-fc28aeca498a>.

<sup>19</sup> Turbitt, J (2025) *Women's Representation in Local Government Committees: A Gendered Analysis Across Scotland's Councils*. [Forthcoming].

## Women councillors' representation on council committees in Scotland in 2025

	Committee Areas	Women's Representation Rate
<b>Feminised Policy Areas</b>	Education and Children's Services	39.7%
	Social Work/Health and Social Care	43.2%
	Equalities/Fairness/Diversity	41.5%
<b>Strategic/ Technical Policy Areas</b>	Finance and Resources	28.6%
	Infrastructure	27.8%
	Transport	26.9%
	Planning and Licensing	30.2%

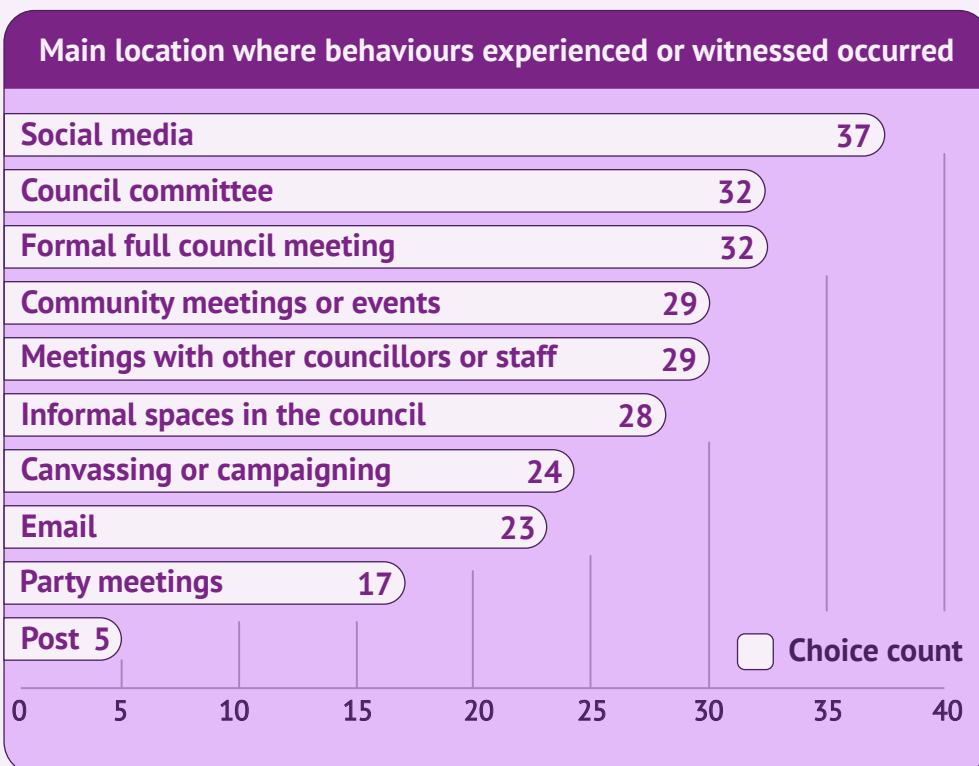
Women's representation is not only about the numbers. We also asked participants about the culture, accessibility and inclusivity of their councils. Most respondents agreed that there are failures in each of these aspects:

- **75% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that men and women councillors are equally respected.**
- **51% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the council's working environment and facilities are inclusive and accessible.**

Many interviewees discussed the normalisation of these behaviours caused by an underlying culture of misogyny, in which women politicians are being systematically undermined and overlooked by other councillors, political parties and council staff. In response to a survey question about the motivations behind the behaviours they had experienced or witnessed, the majority of respondents specifically referenced sexism or misogyny. Some responses highlighted how other forms of discrimination, particularly ageism, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia and transphobia, intersect with sexism to drive these behaviours. Other respondents also described how partisan politics is used as a tool to carry out violence and undermine women.

Less than half (46%) of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that gender equality is considered and mainstreamed across the work of the council. We also heard about women councillors leaving local politics because of online toxicity, the culture in politics, misogynistic comments, and poor working hours. The retention of women is particularly low in local politics. Only when gender equality is taken seriously can we ensure that women not only stand for elected office but also want to stay there and have their voices respected. Ensuring a more equal and inclusive working environment is also a prerequisite for preventing VAWG more broadly.

## Locations and Perpetrators of Sexism, Misogyny and VAWiP



The most common locations where women councillors experienced or witnessed VAWiP were:

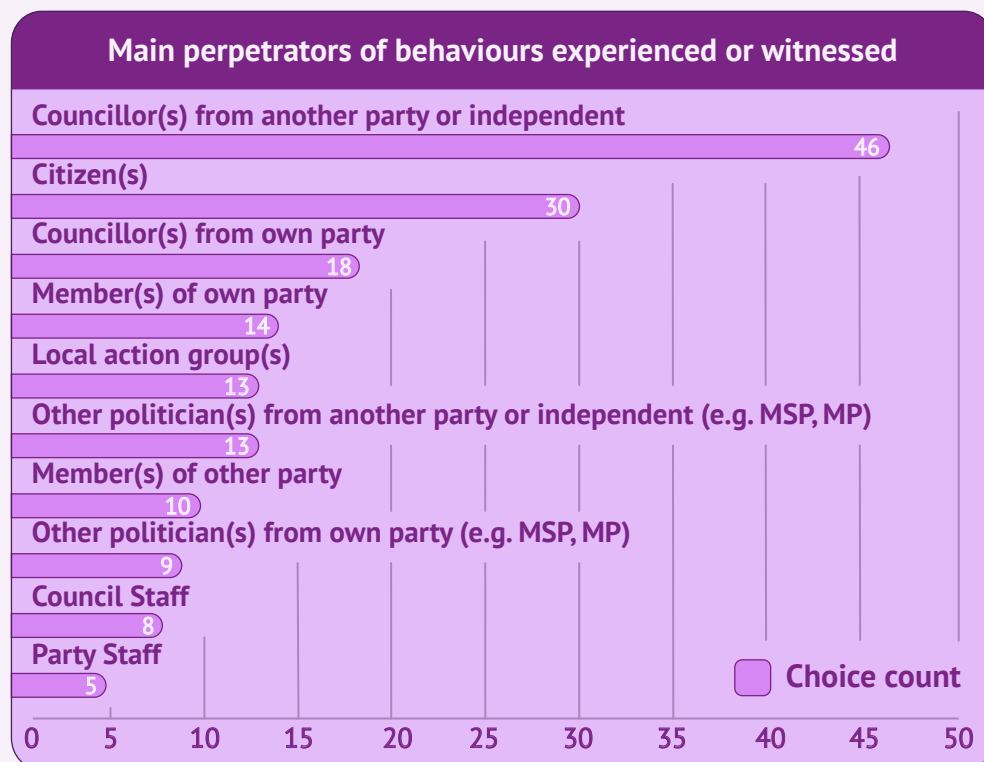
- Social media
- Formal council meeting
- Council committee

Respondents could tick multiple options for this survey question. As the data shows, every option was selected by at least five respondents, demonstrating the pervasiveness of VAWiP across the council environment.

The most common perpetrators of sexism, misogyny and VAWiP experienced or witnessed were:

- A councillor from another party or independent
- A citizen
- A councillor from the respondent's own party

Once again, every option provided was selected by at least five respondents, further demonstrating how widespread this violence is for women councillors.



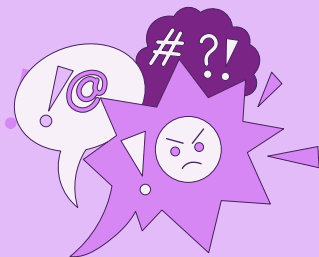
It is also particularly significant that the most common perpetrators were councillors from another party or independent, as existing research on VAWiP has mainly focused on violence committed by members of the public. This is relevant for reporting procedures, which may be more complex when VAWiP is committed by a fellow politician.

Citizens were the second-most-commonly selected option in the survey and the most commonly mentioned perpetrator in interviews. Citizens include constituents, members of the general public and anonymous individuals online; cyberviolence was the second most common form of VAWiP experienced by survey respondents.

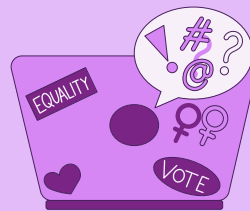
## Forms of VAWiP

In a survey of current and former women councillors in Scotland, 90% said they had experienced sexism, misogyny or violence at some point during their career as a councillor.

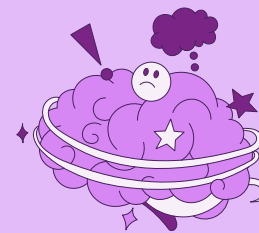
Of these respondents:



**98%**  
Experienced  
microaggressions



**77%**  
Experienced  
cyberviolence



**64%**  
Experienced  
psychological violence



**40%**  
Experienced  
sexual harassment



**23%**  
Experienced  
economic violence



**11%**  
Experienced  
physical violence

## Microaggressions

Microaggressions<sup>20</sup> were the most common form of VAWiP experienced by participants. Indeed, **almost all (98%) survey respondents who indicated they had experienced VAWiP at some point during their career had experienced microaggressions.** Of these respondents, almost three-quarters indicated they had experienced microaggressions more than five times, while 90% said they last encountered these behaviours within the last 12 months.

Microaggressions against women (gender microaggressions) include subtle everyday expressions of sexism. Common examples include sexist jokes, assuming women are less capable than men and catcalling. They may be carried

out intentionally by those seeking to undermine women and maintain unequal power relations, or unintentionally by those who have been socialised to see them as normal, socially accepted behaviour.<sup>21</sup> Such acts are not always perceived as violence; however, when they occur regularly, they systematically marginalise women and reinforce gender inequality in the same way as other more overt forms of violence.<sup>22</sup>

Gender microaggressions are so normalised that they are often dismissed as harmless or trivial; however, it is important to recognise them as a “socially tolerated” form of violence against women that enables cultures of permissiveness and more overt and severe violence to occur. Research also shows they can have a significant impact on women’s mental health and wellbeing.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The term ‘microaggression’ originated in the context of racial discrimination in 1970s America to describe insults and dismissals made by non-Black people against African Americans. It has since been expanded to encompass everyday slights, snubs and insults that communicate hostile, derogatory or discriminatory messages towards someone because they belong to a marginalised group. Sue, D W and Spanierman, L (2020) *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>21</sup> Gartner, R E (2021) A New Gender Microaggressions Taxonomy for Undergraduate Women on College Campuses: A Qualitative Examination. *Violence Against Women*. 27:14. Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33406377/>.

<sup>22</sup> Krook, M L (2020) *Violence Against Women in Politics*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Sue, D W and Spanierman, L (2020) *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

One interviewee described the sexist attitudes she encountered from male councillors at the beginning of her career as a councillor:

*"I remember starting as a councillor it was very apparent. There were some male councillors who didn't think you had the right to be even in the room. What did you know as a wee woman, being here, type thing. So there was very much a lot of that attitude."*

- Interview Participant

Other examples of microaggressions that participants shared included:

### Sexist jokes and comments from other councillors

*"These comments/jokes cross many lines of discrimination and there seems to be a lack of awareness in some councillors that they are offensive."* - Survey Respondent

### Sexist language

*"I mean you can watch back debates, you can watch back committees, and the tone and the disrespect and the language used is really bad. And it's not even political. It's just based on gender, which is the lowest form of debate."*

- Interview Participant

### Assumptions about traditional gender roles

*"About having my children and how that impacts my job. None of my male colleagues are ever asked about this."* - Survey Respondent

*"I went to the same committee council where someone talked to me, and then was like after, 'Well you have to leave because you need to make dinner for your husband.'" - Interview Participant*

*"I remember being told, 'Well you've got children. You need to go home and be with your children' type thing. Do you think they would have said that to me if I was a man that had children, that I should go home and just be with my children and worry about them during this pandemic? You would not have said that."* - Interview Participant

### Assumptions about women's perceived inferiority

*"I have to prove myself more than my male colleagues to gain respect from officers."*

- Survey Respondent

*"... I witness a lot of behaviour of men, like putting down the [senior member of the council], who's a woman; putting down chairs of committees; shouting and bawling over people. And being so rude, it's beyond belief. And even informally being referenced as if I'm their daughter. It's just a bit crazy."* - Interview Participant

Microaggressions also target women from marginalised groups on the basis of their multiple, intersecting identities. Interview participants from minority backgrounds described being particularly affected by microaggressions in response to their gender, race, religion, age, sexuality, class and disability.



One minoritised woman described being mistaken by councillors and council staff for one of her colleagues who was also from a minoritised background, despite looking nothing alike. She expressed her frustration at constantly needing to correct people, explaining that it wears you down as you're not recognised as an individual. She also described feeling constantly undermined and overlooked by other councillors, political parties and officers, reflecting that men don't even know they're doing it.

In the survey, we asked respondents in an open-text question whether their experiences of microaggressions had been affected by other forms of discrimination. Age was the most commonly mentioned factor. The impact of age was also raised in interviews.

*"I am told often about how young I am to be a Councillor. There are several male Councillors who are very similar age to myself and they don't get these comments. There have been comments regarding my knowledge I have on particular subjects 'oh you do know what you are talking about.'" - Survey Respondent*

*"Been dismissed as "wee lassie" (aged [mid-thirties])..." - Survey Respondent*

*"... there was a couple of occasions where this person that was presiding over a meeting said, this 'young lady', and not giving me my title... So everybody else is Councillor this, and Councillor that and it was like, "oh, young lady, it's your turn." And I was like how sexist, how dismissive, how misogynistic!" - Interview Participant*

It was not only younger councillors who had experience of age-related microaggressions:

*"Age because men are more intimidated and threatened by strong women who have had a life and are experienced." - Survey Respondent*

Despite the pervasiveness of these behaviours, almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents who had experienced microaggressions said they did not report these. The most common reasons respondents gave for not reporting included:

- I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously
- I did not feel supported by the organisational culture
- There was no clear structure or process for reporting

The high frequency of these acts was also noted as a barrier to reporting by survey respondents and interviewees:

*"I think it's all the time, particularly as I said, those microaggressions, the low-level cultural stuff that, you know, if I challenged it, I would do nothing else." - Interview Participant*

*"There are so many I would never stop reporting them." - Survey Respondent*

Those who did report microaggressions mainly did so to:

- Leader of party group and/or business manager
- Council officer(s)
- Chief Executive

**All respondents who said they reported their experiences of microaggressions said there were no consequences for the perpetrator.**

## Cyberviolence

Cyberviolence was the second most common form of violence experienced by survey respondents; **77% of those who indicated they had experienced sexism, misogyny and VAWiP said they had experienced cyberviolence.** Of these respondents, the majority (85%) had experienced it more than three times, and 82% said the last time it occurred was within the past 12 months. The regularity and intensity of this violence were also reflected in the interviews, where nearly all participants described experiencing or witnessing online abuse.

Cyberviolence includes degrading comments on social media, threats of physical harm (including death and rape threats), online bullying, image-based abuse and inappropriate email communications. As with other forms of VAWiP, it is rooted in challenging women's participation in political and public life by silencing women and reinforcing gender inequality.

Participants with experience of cyberviolence mostly spoke about incidents perpetrated by citizens or anonymous individuals. These cases mainly involved online posts, comments, trolling, and "pile-ons" on social media, including from members of the local community in local community Facebook pages or from members of the wider public on X/Twitter. Some participants also received online abuse via their council email address and phone number. One survey respondent shared her experience of AI-generated videos falsely depicting women councillors in the area as apathetic towards their community.

Some participants described how online abuse directed at them was exacerbated by other male councillors. One participant shared that a male

councillor from another party blamed her on social media for taking a particular council decision, despite being one of many councillors who voted that way. She described being “named and slated on social media by my colleagues”, which she believed the public picked up and acted on. When asked whether the harassment was motivated by gender, she responded, “I think women do get it worse.”

Several participants noted that online abuse increased when contentious issues were being debated and voted on. In particular, multiple participants had experienced an increase in online abuse following decisions to increase council tax. During the course of this research, one councillor spoke to the BBC about her experiences of an “overwhelming” increase in online abuse, which involved threats of physical violence, following a council tax increase.<sup>24</sup> Around this time, COSLA also issued a statement noting the “unprecedented rise in abuse and intimidation towards elected members, particularly those from underrepresented groups.”<sup>25</sup>

Many participants felt that this abuse was exacerbated by gender:

*“The threat was really bad during budget time. And you noticed that it was more the council leaders who are women that got it than men.”*

- Interview Participant

*“And it’s rather interesting as well that it’s the women leaders that are getting the bulk of the abuse, not the male council leaders...”*

- Interview Participant

*“You know, when somebody says, ‘Oh, she could do with a slap’... I don’t think they’d have said that to a bloke online.”*

- Interview Participant

*“[It is] incredibly prevalent, and, I think, particularly directed at women.”*

- Interview Participant

Cyberviolence is also exacerbated and compounded by other intersecting forms of discrimination. One participant from a minority ethnic background shared with us her experience of racist online

comments that said, “Someone like you shouldn’t be in politics because you don’t represent Scotland.”

On the impact of intersecting abuse, she explained that,

*“... obviously, the more intersections you have, people just start picking at that. So a lot of harassment I’ve received online does pick up on that”* - Interview Participant

Another participant felt that her age was also an exacerbating factor in the abuse she received:

*“So, anytime I post anything, it’ll be full of comments mainly about my age, and that I’m a woman: ‘Stupid young woman’, ‘stupid and she doesn’t know anything’... They’re [abusive comments] all on the line of either directed at me and my political party, or they are along the sexist line of ‘stupid wee girl.’”* - Interview Participant

Many participants felt that online abuse was getting worse, both in tone and in quantity. Some particularly mentioned the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, far-right and misogynistic influencers, lack of accountability in online spaces, and increased polarisation in politics as contributing factors.



**24** BBC News (2025) Councillor ‘threatened’ over record 15.6% tax rise. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4g0ky1223po>.

**25** COSLA (2025) Raising the Standard: A Call for Civility in Public Life. Available at: <https://www.cosla.gov.uk/news/2025/may/raising-the-standard-a-call-for-civility-in-public-life>.



## CASE STUDY

During this research, a right-wing YouTuber was charged by police with an online communication offence after targeting a woman councillor with online racist, Islamophobic and misogynistic abuse.<sup>26</sup> This abuse followed a clip from an old video of the councillor, deliberately shared out of context, in which she had discussed the lack of diverse representation in Scottish politics. The YouTuber's video and social media posts triggered a barrage of racist and sexist abuse against the councillor, which received cross-party condemnation. This incident represents a clear example of VAWiP being used to marginalise and silence women, especially minoritised women, to maintain the status quo of (white) men's overrepresentation.



Two-thirds (66%) of respondents with experience of cyberviolence did not report their experiences. The most commonly cited reasons for not reporting were:

- There was no clear structure or process for reporting
- I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously
- I didn't know who to report to

Those who did report their experiences mainly did so to:

- Police
- Council officer(s)
- Council Leader



<sup>26</sup> Greater Govanhill (2025) How do we counter the rise of far right rhetoric in our communities? Available at: <https://www.gretergovanhill.com/latest/how-do-we-counter-the-rise-of-far-right-rhetoric-in-our-communities>.

<sup>27</sup> Krook, M L (2020) Violence Against Women in Politics. Oxford University Press.

**Among respondents who reported their experiences, 57% indicated there were no consequences for the perpetrator.** Indeed, interview participants with experience of cyberviolence felt that it was often dismissed by those they reported it to, including male councillors, council officers and even the police.

*"They're very dismissive of online bullying and harassment, but every single female councillor I know has experienced it. Every single one."*

- Interview Participant

*"They've got no idea how much – and it is not just myself, and it's not just my colleague, it's so widespread. And they just dismiss it."*

- Interview Participant

## Psychological Violence

**Almost two-thirds (64%) of those who had experienced a form of sexism, misogyny and VAWiP during their career had experienced psychological violence.**

Psychological violence refers to acts that harm someone's mental health or emotional wellbeing, such as rape threats, death threats, intimidation, character assassination, social ostracism and stalking.<sup>27</sup> Such acts can occur both in and outside of political settings, and are increasingly common on social media. Psychological violence degrades and demoralises women by causing them to feel fear or harming their credibility; many participants with experience of this violence told us they did not feel safe in their council as a result.

Participants experienced psychological violence from both members of the public and other councillors. The psychological violence from other councillors often included intimidating behaviour, which occurred prior to votes or during full council meetings and debates, council committee sessions and community council meetings. This included incidents of male councillors shouting, staring, stalking and making threats of physical and sexual violence. Participants characterised these behaviours from male councillors as deliberate attempts to disrupt or silence them in council settings.

*“... he [male councillor] just went aggressive [...] He didn't hit anything, but the aggression, bodily and voice-wise, was so bad we [the participant and another woman councillor in the room] both felt unsafe.” - Interview Participant*

One participant shared with us an incident in which a male councillor made a rape threat against her during a council debate. Another described a “creepy” incident in which a male councillor printed out photos of her children.

Many participants also mentioned threats of rape and other forms of physical and sexual violence made against them online, including on social media and via emails to their councillor inbox. Often these perpetrators were anonymous; however, they sometimes could be identified as constituents or citizens from outwith their council area.

Respondents from marginalised backgrounds highlighted that the psychological abuse they received was often compounded by other forms of discrimination, including racism, ageism, religious hatred and classism. Some of these respondents had similar experiences of their character being smeared and competency as a councillor questioned by male councillors and members of the public on the basis of their gender and other intersecting identities.

Of those who indicated they had experienced psychological violence, there was an almost even split between respondents who reported their experiences (47%) and those who did not (50%). The most commonly selected reason respondents gave for not reporting their experience was:

- I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously

After this, the following options were selected by the same number of respondents each:

- I didn't know who to report to
- I wasn't aware of the support available
- There was no clear structure or process for reporting

Those who did report their experiences of psychological violence mainly did so to:

- Council officer(s)
- Leader of party group and/or business manager
- Chief Executive

In some cases, women who reported their experiences of psychological violence said they were told their experiences were simply the “cost of doing politics”, that they needed to grow “a thicker skin”, or that they just weren't “robust enough” for politics. It is important to note that many participants with experience of psychological violence were keen to acknowledge, without prompting, the adversarial nature of politics and emphasise the need for robust debate in a democracy. However, they felt strongly that their experiences crossed the line of acceptable conduct in politics, often veering into personal attacks and character assassination. They explained that this was often not about challenging their ideas, but about challenging their presence in a political institution as a woman. They also did not believe male councillors received the same treatment.

**Just two of the 16 survey respondents who reported their experiences of psychological violence said the perpetrator faced any consequences.** This corresponds with interview participants who explained that existing reporting processes for councillors were not effective for addressing psychological violence. Many felt that organisations like the police or the Standards Commission would only take action if physical violence had occurred.

It's the cost of doing politics...

You need to grow a thicker skin...

You're just not robust enough...

## Experiences of Psychological Violence



*"...when you think about violence, you're thinking physical... You always think of it as physical. But very much mine has been psychological. A fear of my safety. I feel unsafe in our council."*

In her interview, one participant detailed the high levels of hostility, aggression and psychological violence she has experienced from male councillors.

She described the chamber in her council as being like a "gladiator arena" in which meetings become "very combative", adding that male councillors would often "gang up" on her and other female councillors during council meetings and committee sessions.

The participant told us she welcomes opportunities for her ideas to be challenged and debated, stating, "I'm absolutely comfortable with people saying, 'see that idea, that's rubbish, and this is the reason it's rubbish,'" but she felt that personal attacks, shouting and undermining behaviour should not be accepted.

She told us about a particular incident in which a senior male councillor became visibly angry and physically intimidating during her contribution at one council meeting. She believed this to be an attempt to disrupt her and other women councillors' participation.

*"He'll stop being angry if you stop talking. That's what he's saying in that room."*

As the participant gained more experience as a councillor, she has become more empowered to call out aggressive behaviour, particularly when more women councillors are present. However, she emphasised that a lack of accountability and consequences for perpetrators was reinforcing and normalising sexist, misogynist behaviour and violence. Anti-harassment and bullying policies in her council only apply to councillors in their interactions with council employees, not between fellow councillors.

She describes being "classed as the enemy" after reporting incidents of these behaviours. After raising a complaint about one councillor's conduct, she experienced further intimidating behaviour from others. This included one councillor staring at her in a threatening manner and another attending a meeting that did not involve him, which she perceived as an attempt to intimidate her.

While her complaint was being investigated, no measures were implemented to protect her from this intimidation, allowing the hostility to continue. She felt this put pressure on her to withdraw her complaint.

The participant explained that complaints made by her and other female councillors have consistently been dismissed, reinforcing her perception that concerns about intimidation and misogynistic behaviour are not taken seriously. Indeed, when female councillors' concerns were brought to the attention of senior officials, no effective action was taken to address the behaviour or protect those affected.



*"I'm feeling abandoned..."*

The participant doesn't believe that any of the relevant bodies she has reported her experiences to, including the council and other authorities, adequately recognise or respond to psychological violence. She has also found that incidents are often considered in isolation, without taking into account the cumulative effect or wider pattern of inappropriate conduct.

*"It's been hugely detrimental to my mental health."*

These experiences have left this participant feeling isolated and exhausted, and they have also affected her family. The conduct of some male councillors in meetings has, at times, triggered her "fight or flight response." As a result, she has sought external advice on how to deal with aggressive and confrontational situations to help her "mentally prepare" before contributing in council meetings.

In some cases, she has felt it easier to censor herself to avoid any backlash; however, she knows that this has a negative impact on her ability to influence decision-making and policymaking.

The participant has considered resigning on multiple occasions, but ultimately feels a duty to her community to fulfil her full term. She also describes feeling a responsibility to ensure women's voices are represented on the council. However, while she recognises the importance of equal representation, she does not feel she can encourage other women to go into politics now because of her experiences.



*"I just want to be left alone to do my job. All I want to do is represent my community quietly in the background and do what I can. I didn't want to get thrust into all this hostility."*

## Sexual Harassment

**Two in five (40%) respondents who indicated they had experienced sexism, misogyny and VAWiP during their career as a councillor said they had experienced sexual harassment.** Of these respondents, 62% had experienced it more than three times, and 70% had experienced it last within the past 12 months.

*"I'd only been elected about two or three months, and somebody said something vile to me, sexually vile." - Interview Participant*

The term sexual harassment describes unwanted conduct of a sexual nature. Such behaviour creates and maintains unequal power relations and is intended to subordinate, degrade and disrespect women. Different forms of sexual harassment

.....

include staring, unwanted touching, making lewd gestures, exposure, sexual comments or sexual jokes.<sup>28</sup>

Participants in this research shared their experiences of sexual jokes and comments, as well as comments about their looks, attractiveness, weight and clothing. Many of these incidents were perpetrated by other male councillors, particularly older ones.

*"There are a couple of councillors who I've had to pull up a couple of times on things they've said or actions. You know, the ones that are maybe a bit too touchy-feely, if there are a couple of them still out there." - Interview Participant*

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Another participant described her shock after a senior councillor told her,

*“You know everybody in the building just wants to fuck you, don’t you?” - Interview Participant*

She believed the councillor in question was trying to “discompose” her:

*“To make me feel unsettled... because it sticks with you. And then you start to question things. You start to feel **unsafe**, as well, like, there’s the idea that people are thinking about you in that kind of context, even though I don’t think they really are. **But just that whole idea that another councillor would say that to you.**”*

The vast majority (81%) of respondents with experience of sexual harassment did not report it. The most common reasons for not reporting cited by respondents included:

- I wasn’t confident my complaint would be taken seriously
- There was no clear structure or process for reporting
- I did not feel supported by the organisational culture

These reasons are concerning as sexual harassment is the only form of VAWiP explicitly mentioned in the Councillors’ Code of Conduct, which is upheld by the Standards Commission. In line with the Code, councillors must commit to refraining from conduct that could amount to bullying or harassment, which includes sexual harassment. Councillors must also accept that it is their own responsibility to understand what constitutes such behaviour.

Despite this, this research suggests that women councillors do not have confidence in the reporting procedures available to them. Indeed, many respondents characterised the Standards Commission’s process as “inadequate” at best, and “harmful” at worst. One interviewee who reported her experiences of sexual harassment said of the Standards Commission’s process that it was “*a nightmare that I regretted for a while, actually... it was a really horrible experience.*”

These reasons are perhaps why just four (19%) out of 21 respondents with experience of sexual harassment reported it. Most of these respondents reported their experiences to:

- Chief Executive
- Leader of party group/business manager
- Ethical Standards Commissioner/Standards Commission
- Council Leader

**Concerningly, just one of these respondents said the perpetrator faced any consequences. Two of the others said their complaints were never investigated.**

### Relevant Sections of the Code of Conduct for Councillors:

Paragraph 3.3. states that:

“I will not engage in any conduct that could amount to bullying or harassment (which includes **sexual harassment**). I accept that such conduct is completely unacceptable and will be considered to be a breach of [the] Code.”

Paragraph 3.6. states that:

“I accept that it is my responsibility to understand what constitutes bullying and harassment and I will utilise resources, including the Standards Commission’s guidance and advice notes, Council policies and training material (where appropriate) to ensure that my knowledge and understanding is up to date.”

## Handling of Sexual Harassment Complaints

During the course of this research, the Standards Commission was publicly criticised by a Council Leader for having a “weak record” in its handling of sexual harassment complaints. The councillor went on to state that she did not believe the Standards Commission to be “fit for purpose” as a result, which the Standards Commission itself refuted.<sup>29</sup>

This intervention followed an investigation into a complaint made against a male councillor who allegedly made an inappropriate sexual comment towards a young woman council employee. The Standards Commission’s Hearing Panel accepted that the council employee believed the councillor had “intentionally made an inappropriate remark towards her” and that this comment made her feel “uncomfortable” and “distressed”. However, the Panel ultimately cleared the councillor of any wrongdoing because they did not accept he intended the comment as a sexual reference, instead determining that he was “simply making small talk.”<sup>30</sup>

It is worth noting that the Standards Commission Advice Note on Bullying and Harassment (which covers sexual harassment) states that behaviour can be classed as sexual harassment if it causes offence, fear and intimidation – regardless of whether it was intentional or not. This is in line with the approach set out in the Equality Act 2010, which does not apply to councillors but does provide protection for council employees against sexual harassment at work. The Advice Note also states that councillors must act in accordance with the provisions of the Equality Act, while the Councillor Code of Conduct sets out that it is the councillor’s responsibility to “understand what constitutes bullying and harassment...”

## Economic Violence

Of those who indicated they had experienced sexism, misogyny, and VAWiP, **12 respondents (23%) said they had experienced economic violence**. Seven out of these 12 respondents had experienced it between one and two times as a councillor, and six had experienced it within the last 12 months.

Economic violence often occurs in the context of intimate partner relationships, where the perpetrator exerts control over their partner’s or ex-partner’s money and resources, creating

economic instability and dependence.<sup>31</sup> Experts studying VAWiP use this term to draw attention to the ways perpetrators use economic barriers and deprivation of resources to control, harm and intimidate women in politics, ultimately undermining their ability to perform political functions.<sup>32</sup> Examples of this violence in a political context include denying access to resources (including electoral expenses, campaign funds, staffing budgets, and office space) or blocking opportunities (such as promotions within the political party or parliament), as well as theft, destruction of property and extortion.<sup>33</sup>



**29** Sharp, M (2025) Midlothian Council leader says Standards Commission is ‘not fit for purpose’. Midlothian View. Available at: <https://www.midlothianview.com/news/midlothian-council-leader-says-standards-commission-is-not-fit-for-purpose>.

**30** Standards Commission for Scotland (2025) Decision of the Hearing Panel of the Standards Commission for Scotland following the Hearing held at Midlothian House, Dalkeith on Wednesday, 15 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/uploads/files/1737623848250123WrittenDecision.pdf>.

**31** Surviving Economic Abuse (2025) What is economic abuse? Available at: <https://survivingeconomicabuse.org/what-is-economic-abuse/>.

**32** Krook, M L (2020) Violence Against Women in Politics. Oxford University Press; Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (2016) Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians. Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>.

**33** Ibid.

Participants in this research shared examples of being denied opportunities within their political parties and councils. One explained that she had been passed over by members of her party group for a promotion in the council in favour of someone less qualified. She believed this decision was due to her ethnicity and background. Another described how opportunities and Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs)<sup>34</sup> were restricted to members of her party group who were loyal to her party leader. The unequal distribution of opportunities was also discussed in interviews:

*“Because in other councils, they’re [women] all backbenchers or they’re not in positions of power. You go to a finance meeting in local government, and it’s all men for every council.”*

- Interview Participant

*“I’m on a committee that I’ve been sitting on for eight years. I’m the most experienced elected member on that committee. A new person got brought in, and is now the chair.”*

- Interview Participant

Another issue raised in interviews was the use of complaints procedures against women councillors. Some participants shared experiences of male councillors and members of the public making, or threatening to make, complaints against them to the Ethical Standards Commissioner (ESC), which could lead to action from the Standards Commission.

*“... it’s [Standard’s Commission] also used to abuse. It’s used against councillors in that manner as well. You know, it’s just to beat them.”*

- Interview Participant

*“So they [perpetrators] use the rules against [women].”* - Interview Participant

It is important to note that raising a complaint with the ESC against a female councillor does not, in itself, constitute economic violence. However, these participants felt that the complaints made against them were not based in truth, and instead were intended to silence and/or intimidate them, particularly after they had spoken out about issues relating to gender equality and gender-based violence.



**34** Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) are paid to councillors with certain additional roles, such as Council Leader, committee chair and vice chair, and so on.

While the complaints against these councillors were ultimately dismissed, they had negative consequences on their personal finances, health and wellbeing. For example, one participant was forced to obtain and pay for her own legal advice and appoint a legal representative to defend her in the Standards Commission process.

The Standards Commission has the power to censure, suspend or disqualify councillors who have been found to breach the Councillors’ Code of Conduct. One participant with experience of a “pile-on” of complaints made against her told us the investigation had caused her a lot of stress and anxiety, even though she knew the complaints were based on “blatant lies”.

It should be noted that one participant with a similar experience described the Standards Commission as being “very sympathetic” and “generally understanding” of the situation.

Only two of the 12 respondents with experience of economic violence reported it. **In contrast to the other forms of violence included in this report, there were consequences for the perpetrators in each of these cases.**

The most commonly cited reasons for not reporting included:

- I did not feel confident my complaint would be taken seriously
- I did not feel supported by the organisational culture
- I did not know who to report it to

The two respondents who reported their experiences did so to:

- Leader of party group and/or business manager
- Ethical Standards Commissioner
- COSLA
- Committee clerk(s)

## Physical Violence

**Of those who indicated they had experienced sexism, misogyny, and VAWiP, a total of six (11%) respondents said they had experienced physical violence.** Of these six respondents, four had experienced it between one and two times, and all six incidents occurred more than one year ago.

Physical violence includes unwanted touching, sexual assault and physical attacks. It is generally less common than other forms of VAWiP because it tends to be more visible and less socially tolerated. Consequently, perpetrators typically employ “less costly” (non-criminal) forms of violence before escalating to physical violence; the most extreme cases of physical VAWiP, such as assassination, are usually preceded by threats against the victim.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, all six respondents with experience of physical violence in this research also had experienced microaggressions, and four had also experienced psychological violence.

Several participants expressed fear that other forms of violence they experienced, such as online abuse and psychological violence, could one day escalate into physical forms. Reflecting on the local dimension of their role, some participants were concerned about constituents being able to easily find out where they live and the potential impact this could have for their safety and that of their family.

One participant described an incident of “physical aggression” she had experienced from a constituent when, in between business at a council meeting, this constituent moved from the public gallery to sit next to her: “... he had me pinned in and was shouting at me.” He refused to leave when she told him he was behaving inappropriately. It was only when a council officer intervened that he walked out “still shouting”. She also reflected that she felt he targeted her because of her gender:

*“... I was one of nine people that made that decision, and he didn't plonk himself down next to a man, he plonked himself down next to me... I absolutely do not believe that he would have done that to a man. Well, he didn't do it to a man. There were men in that room. He could have gone to the Council Leader.” - Interview Participant*

There was an even split between respondents who had reported their experience of physical violence and those who chose not to. **Worryingly, two of the three respondents reported that their complaints were never investigated and that their perpetrators faced no consequences.** The remaining participant, who had experienced this form of VAWiP more than five times, indicated her complaints were only ‘rarely’ investigated. However, this respondent said that the perpetrator *did* face consequences.

The top reason among the three respondents who chose not to report was:

- I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously

Other reasons cited amongst the respondents included:

- I was worried it would impact my personal life
- I was afraid of being identified
- I did not feel supported by the organisational culture

The three who did report did so to:

- Police
- Leader of party group and/or business manager
- Council Officer(s)
- Council Leader
- Chief Executive

A number of respondents in this research described a common perception that the Standards Commission is only likely to intervene in cases that involve physical violence. However, the experiences outlined above, albeit from a small number of research participants, suggest that even when physical violence is involved, reporting procedures are still inadequate and ineffective. This demonstrates that the concerns cited by those who did not report their experiences of physical violence may unfortunately be justified in relation to current reporting processes.

35 Krook, M L (2020) Violence Against Women in Politics. Oxford University Press; UN Women (2018) Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report Meeting and Recommendations.

## Reporting Incidents of VAWiP

*"No one's there for us, but we can make sure that there's someone there for others."*

- Interview Participant

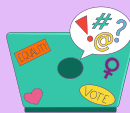
Across the survey, the number of respondents who chose not to report their experiences varied for each form of VAWiP:



Of those who had experienced economic violence, 83% did not report



Of those who had experienced sexual harassment, 81% did not report



Of those who had experienced cyberviolence, 66% did not report



Of those who had experienced microaggressions, 65% did not report



Of those who had experienced psychological violence, 50% did not report



Of those who had experienced physical violence, 50% did not report

Across every form of VAWiP, **"I wasn't confident my complaint would be taken seriously"** was among the top reasons for not reporting. This was also a common theme in interviews.

*"I knew if I reported it, nothing would be done..."*

- Interview Participant

The other top reasons cited for not reporting were:

- There was no clear structure or process for reporting
- I didn't know who to report to

## Reporting Routes and Procedures

As the findings show, most councillors indicated being moderately or extremely familiar with the different routes and procedures for reporting incidents of sexism, misogyny and VAWiP. However, a significant minority of respondents indicated they were only slightly or not at all familiar with most of these routes, suggesting that more action is still needed to raise awareness of them.

While women councillors may be familiar with the reporting routes available to them, many expressed deep dissatisfaction with them. Many particularly felt that existing reporting routes were neither appropriate nor effective for addressing the complex nature of VAWiP, citing the following reasons:

- Most procedures do not take account of the cumulative impact of multiple, repeated patterns of behaviour involved in VAWiP;
- Lack of understanding about non-physical forms of VAWiP among reporting bodies;
- Lack of understanding about the gendered nature of this violence, and how it is related to, but ultimately distinct from, other forms of political violence.

**It is worth highlighting that most survey respondents who reported their experiences of VAWiP indicated the perpetrator did not face any consequences.**

Processes that consider only individual instances of VAWiP that meet a specific, usually criminal, threshold of seriousness risk leaving patterns of cumulative, normative bad behaviour unaddressed. Patterns of microaggression and more subtle forms of VAWiP create permissive cultures within institutions that can cause deep harm to women and undermine democratic representation. This research indicates a need for regulators and other relevant bodies to consider what they can do to help facilitate healthier, safer and more equal internal cultures within our democratic institutions. This needs to involve consideration of actions beyond traditional complaints mechanisms only.

## Ethical Standards Commissioner and the Standards Commission

### About the Ethical Standards Commissioner and the Standards Commission

The Standards Commission is an independent body responsible for adjudicating over complaints about alleged breaches of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, and therefore deals with complaints against councillors. Anyone can make a complaint about a councillor's conduct; these must first be submitted to the Ethical Standards Commissioner (ESC), which is separate from the Standards Commission. The ESC and their team will then investigate the complaint and gather evidence before sending a report of their findings to the Standards Commission.

Upon receipt of the ESC's report, the Standards Commission will decide whether to hold a hearing on the complaint or take no action. It can also direct the ESC to investigate the complaint further. Following a hearing, a panel of three Standards Commission members will determine whether the councillor in question has indeed breached the Code of Conduct and, if so, what sanction, if any, should be imposed. Available sanctions include censuring the councillor, suspending them from some of their duties for a specified period, or disqualifying them from serving as a councillor.

### Of the Ethical Standards Commissioner/Standards Commission routes:

- 54% of respondents were extremely or very familiar
- 23% were moderately familiar
- 23% were slightly or not at all familiar

Participants in this research generally expressed negative views of the Standards Commission's handling of complaints of VAWiP. They felt that the Standards Commission's approach to such complaints was not gender competent or informed by VAWG expertise.

*"If we look at violence against women and we look at various definitions that are out there, if we look at how it manifests, if we look at the long-term impacts it has on people, Standards Commission don't get that, at all. And I think that's a massive problem."* - Interview Participant

*"... the Standards Commission rules are just inadequate... Like, again, nobody reports. What's the point?"* - Interview Participant

The Councillors' Code of Conduct recognises that bullying and harassment can be part of a course of behaviour. However, participants felt that cases involving VAWiP were typically viewed by the Standards Commission as isolated incidents, rather than being part of a pattern of repeated behaviours that women councillors experience continuously every day. Some felt this approach also negated the "cumulative impact" of multiple incidents on women councillors' health and wellbeing, which can wear women down over time.

*"... I'm not convinced they take in cumulative impact. And I think sometimes it's that cumulative impact is the most damaging bit."*

- Interview Participant

Other participants described the Ethical Standards Commissioner (ESC)/Standards Commission process as burdensome, with the onus on victim-survivors to gather evidence to meet what they perceived to be a "high threshold", especially if non-physical forms of VAWiP are involved.

*"So in my highly stressed, non-resilient, overwhelmed position, you want me to sit and pick through all of the bad things and put a case together."* - Interview Participant

*"I think there's a big barrier with Standards as to how seriously do they take it, and there seems to be quite a high threshold..."* - Interview Participant

*"You have to get so much proof to actually prove that yes, you've been aggressed, but how do you show how you've had so many microaggressions except if you're wearing a body cam all the time?"*

- Interview Participant

It was suggested that problems with the Standards Commission process may be due to a lack of expertise and training about VAWiP. Some councillors felt that they were better equipped to address complaints involving financial irregularities or planning issues. One participant recounted a time she called the Standards Commission for advice on what to do after being sexually harassed. She told us they "weren't really helpful. They said, 'well it's up to you.' They didn't even take me through the process." She decided not to report the incident.

Some of those who did report their experiences of VAWiP described regret or frustration with the process. One participant described her experience of reporting sexual harassment as a “mistake” and a “nightmare” that she regretted for some time because of the way it was handled by the Standards Commission.

There was an overwhelming perception that perpetrators faced very few or no repercussions from the Standards Commission, which made them or their peers reluctant to report incidents of VAWiP.

*“But something needs to be done because these violence against women cases that go through Standards, they just always seem to work out for the men.” - Interview Participant*

Some participants attributed the lack of consequences for male councillors to the Standards Commission’s approach to Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), which protects freedom of expression.

While everyone in the UK has an equal right to freedom of expression, it is typically more strongly protected in political contexts to protect political speech and debates on issues of public interest.<sup>36</sup> Article 10 does not protect hate speech or other unlawful conduct. It is not an absolute right, meaning it does not trump other human rights, such as the right to live a life free of discrimination. Nevertheless, language or behaviour that might be considered shocking or unacceptable in most other contexts may be more tolerated in political ones.

The Standards Commission is therefore required to take into account a councillor’s right to freedom of expression when determining whether they have breached the Code of Conduct. The organisation sets out its approach to this in an Advice Note to councillors, which acknowledges

the enhanced protection in political contexts while also highlighting that councillors are still expected to comply with the Councillors’ Code of Conduct. Furthermore, the Advice Note states that, “if a councillor is making a gratuitous personal comment and/or is simply indulging in offensive abuse, it is unlikely they will attract the protection of freedom of expression afforded under Article 10.”<sup>37</sup>

The right to freedom of expression is fundamental to a functioning democracy. However, as the former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women found, freedom of expression protections can contribute to a “culture of impunity for sexist remarks” among elected representatives.<sup>38</sup> This corresponds with a UN expert group report that found freedom of expression protections are “often used to justify VAWiP”, while at the same time, this violence restricts women politicians’ freedom of expression.<sup>39</sup>

Participants in this research shared their own experiences of this:

*“Some councillors also believe that they have a right to say inappropriate things under their freedom of expression.” - Survey Respondent*

*“There’s a guidance note about freedom of speech, and so they [male councillors] can kind of get away with saying whatever they like in the Chamber, because it’s under a political debate, as if it’s some world where normal rules don’t apply. So they use that to their advantage.”*

- Interview Participant

Participants questioned who was protecting their freedom of expression, which was being constrained by their experiences of VAWiP. It is notable that nearly half (48%) of survey respondents who had experienced or witnessed VAWiP said they became less vocal during their political journey as a result.



**36** European Court of Human Rights (2022) Guide on Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Freedom of Expression. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/guide-on-article-10-freedom-of-expression-eng/native/1680ad61d6>.

**37** Standards Commission (2024) Freedom of Expression – Advice Note on the Application of Article 10 of the ECHR. Available at: <https://www.standardscommissionscotland.org.uk/uploads/files/1729002219241015AdviceNoteCouncillorsArticle102024v1.pdf>.

**38** UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (2018) Violence against women in politics. Note by the Secretary General. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/73/301>.

**39** UN Women (2018) Violence Against Women in Politics: Expert Group Meeting Report Meeting and Recommendations.

*“No one cares if I can’t exercise my democratic right by being silenced by default but how do I prove that I’m affected...” - Interview Participant*

We understand this is a complex area involving national and international legislation and case law. Nevertheless, the Standards Commission has a role to address this perceived “culture of impunity” in Scottish councils, across which male councillors are ostensibly emboldened by freedom of expression protections to verbally abuse and harass women councillors, as according to participants in this research.

Similarly, more action is needed to promote and protect women councillors’ right to freedom of expression, as well as their Article 14 right: protection from discrimination. In addition to the ECHR, all women in Scotland have an equal right to freedom of expression through the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In particular, CEDAW (ratified by the UK in 1986) ensures women’s right to participate in politics and public life without discrimination, while the ICCPR (ratified by the UK in 1976) ensures that women have equal access to the political rights it affords, including freedom of expression. While these are not incorporated into UK or Scottish law, both governments still have a legal obligation to proactively remove barriers which impede women’s freedom of expression.<sup>40</sup>

## Police Scotland and Operation Ford

### About Operation Ford

Operation Ford has been launched across the UK to increase police support for elected representatives and candidates. To report an incident or crime that relates to their position as a local elected representative, councillors should call 101 or 999 and quote ‘Operation Ford’.

An Operation Ford incident is, “any act committed against a serving elected official including Police and Crime Commissioners, elected Mayors and local Councillors or a Candidate for any of those roles in an election, where it is reasonable to believe that the act has been committed with the intention of intimidating or harassing the elected official or candidate in connection with his or her official position or potential future position.”

Under this operation, Police Scotland also has two ‘Force-Elected-Official-Advisors’ (FEOAs), who local councillors can contact regarding any concerns or for briefings about security. These FEOAs are supported by local officers in every Police Scotland division across the country.

### Of **police** reporting routes:

- 52% of respondents were extremely or very familiar
- 27% were moderately familiar
- 21% were slightly or not at all familiar

Respondents had mixed views on how the police handled cases of VAWiP. Some respondents told us they felt supported when they reported their experiences, even when their cases did not meet the criminality threshold. By contrast, some found it difficult to get the police to take action, particularly in cases involving non-physical forms of VAWiP. This was especially the case for participants with experience of online abuse and harassment, with many feeling the police lacked the necessary understanding about this form of VAWiP to provide support or address it.

.....

<sup>40</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression (2021) Promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/76/258>.

*“... I’ve had to contact the police beforehand, and that was when people were threatening to lynch me. Which you know was pretty bad... they [the police] just said because no one had actually done anything or come up to me, then there was nothing they could do.” - Interview Participant*

*“They refused to intervene on anything on social media, even when one of my colleagues got threatened to be shot, literally threatened to be shot. They wouldn’t even go and investigate that account.” - Interview Participant*

One participant who had witnessed her colleagues’ experiences of this described how this made her hesitant to report her own experiences of VAWiP:

*“... I’ve had colleagues who have reported stuff to police, and the police have just went ‘uh, it’s online.’ So I’ve seen from the experiences of others that nothing happens, so there’s no point.” - Interview Participant*

Another participant also described the police as hesitant to intervene in a situation involving psychological violence perpetrated by another councillor, because they couldn’t get involved in situations they deemed “political.”

Councillors are generally more present and visible in their communities, which can put them at a greater risk of violence from constituents compared to MSPs and MPs, who need to travel away to the national parliaments and usually have more security protections. However, many participants felt the police failed to understand the risks to their safety as councillors.

*“And I still don’t think [...] the police understand what our roles are as elected councillors. They sort of understand what MPs/MSPs do because it’s been in the press, and I think it’s taken for MPs to be murdered for them to take note, to be quite frank. But still, yeah, there’s nothing really for us.” - Interview Participant*

Some participants were hopeful that Operation Ford would lead to improved outcomes for women councillors experiencing VAWiP. However, those who had used the programme told us that the advice they were offered focused on them adapting their behaviour, rather than actually addressing the VAWiP.

*“And when I contacted Operation Ford this time, it was just advice around: ‘don’t sit further away from the door in my advice surgery.’ No one’s doing anything about the actual thing that’s causing me the fear.” - Interview Participant*

*“It was one of those where you did worry about your safety, because you didn’t know. And the police advice was, ‘Oh, well, don’t look at social media.’” - Interview Participant*

Others had never heard of it or knew very little about it, suggesting there is still work to be done to improve its profile.

## Internal Party Procedures

### About Internal Party Procedures

Political parties have their own procedures for addressing misconduct by their members. All of the main parties in Scotland have their own Codes of Conduct for their members. Some parties also have separate policies on bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and/or gender discrimination.

While reporting procedures differ party to party, most have a centralised inbox or phone number for complaints about breaches of the party’s Code of Conduct or other relevant policy. Councillors may also want to report incidents to their party’s group leader or business manager in their council.

Of internal **party** procedures:

- 47% of respondents were extremely or very familiar
- 18% were moderately familiar
- 35% were slightly or not at all familiar

Of all the reporting mechanisms we asked about, respondents were least familiar with internal party procedures. This was echoed by some interview participants who were unaware if their party had any formal policies and procedures at all.

*“I’m not aware of any formal policies or procedures, but that could mean me being quite ignorant... But then in a way, I think actually it’s not really me being ignorant; they should be easily accessible.” - Interview Participant*

Among those who were familiar with their party's procedures, there were mixed views on their efficacy. Some participants indicated that while policies and procedures existed, they were not always implemented or enforced. One survey respondent summarised problems with internal party procedures by writing,

*"Even with procedures in party groups, they are either not being followed or those tasked with implementing them have no training, are the ones being reported, or they are protecting the colleague you have reported because they are friends."* - Survey Respondent

These issues were also raised in interviews:

*"It's just words to be honest. We do have a Code of Conduct within our party. We do have safeguarding rules, but there's just no implementation. And there's hardly any consequences for violating it, unless it hits newspaper headlines."*

- Interview Participant

One participant also described political parties as "very toxic places", adding that "it's usually a boys' club at the top", which affects how seriously a complaint of VAWiP is taken, particularly when the perpetrator is a member of the same party.

Similarly, another participant described political parties like a "family". She explained that "if you are the one who brings something forward, then you will split the family", adding that, while some party members might offer support, they will ultimately want to uphold the party's image and remain members of the party.

*"They're still going to have to support the family. They're not going to leave the party. They're not going to campaign against the party. They're not going to call those people out... The instinct of parties, no matter who they are, which party it is, will always be to protect the party electorally."*

- Interview Participant

This same participant was aware of men in her party who were responsible for "pretty horrendous" and "misogynistic" behaviour, but who were allowed to continue with their political careers "completely unscathed". At the same time, she witnessed women stepping down from elected office or quitting the party altogether to get away from these situations. She added that:

*"It is such a personal cost to make a complaint. Such a personal cost. And so much risk that women just don't."*

Multiple participants felt that, in addition to formal procedures and policies, parties should also provide greater support to members affected by VAWiP. However, some cautioned that party members responsible for handling VAWiP complaints currently lacked the necessary training and expertise to do so.

*"We should feel supported. And even just that in itself would be a huge help."*

- Interview Participant

One participant with experience of VAWiP, which intersected and was compounded by other forms of discrimination, told us that members of her party failed to support her because they could not fully comprehend the nature of abuse she received as a minoritised woman:

*"... they [party group members] don't truly understand the nature of it. And some of the responses have even made my situation worse... They don't understand the level [of abuse] because they can never dream of experiencing that level... So I have pulled away a bit as well... I just don't want to get hurt anymore. So you're sort of self-censoring. You're self-excluding just to try and get the job done."* - Interview Participant

Another participant explained that the men responsible for leading her group locally told her she needed to "have a thicker skin" when she reported her experiences of relentless daily abuse. This was in contrast to her more recent experiences in a new council area, where the women in her party group did provide support:

*"... they've seen the way that I've been treated in the last few weeks, and they are livid. They are angry and they're protective and they have wrapped around going 'how dare they!'"*

- Interview Participant

## The Impact of Sexism, Misogyny and VAWiP on Women Councillors

### Women Councillors' Physical Safety and Mental Wellbeing

Our research shows that wellbeing and safety are major concerns when it comes to being a councillor in Scotland. The participants of our survey and interviews explained that violence and harassment are regular occurrences – and of course detrimental to their wellbeing, particularly their mental health.

We asked about the impact of experiencing or witnessing sexism, misogyny and/or violence: from our respondents, 71% said it negatively affected their mood, 69% felt undermined, and 45% were made to feel unsafe.

**A workplace where nearly a third experience or witness some form of violence is appalling. For councillors, this seems to be a reality.** These revelations bring up questions around coping mechanisms. Many participants of our survey have shared with us the need to prioritise their mental health, leading some to consider leaving politics. 12% of survey respondents experienced physical violence (e.g. physical attacks, unwanted touching, sexual assault).

One interview respondent recounted an incident during an election when she was nearly run off the road during a road rage incident. Another interviewee recounted an early experience of sexual violence during her time in politics:

*“When I experienced sexual violence early on in my first term, I was really, really in a terrible place, and not feeling like I could even cope with that because I just didn't know what to do... I couldn't talk about it. I was very trapped in that whole situation.”* - Interview Participant

Those who experience intersecting discrimination are disproportionately affected. Racialised women, for example, have reported the racist abuse that comes on top of the misogyny. One interviewee recalls a comment directed at her: *“Someone like you shouldn't be in politics because you don't represent Scotland”*. Young women have told us how the online space has become increasingly unbearable, with comments like “stupid young women” becoming a regular occurrence. Similarly,

in the council environment, young women have shared with us that oftentimes their male colleagues will not address them with their title but instead “young lady” or even dismiss their contributions by explaining “oh, you're too young, you don't know that”.

This stress can also affect councillors physically, making it near impossible to do your job if you are disabled, for example:

*“It's draining, and you feel as a woman that you have to fight for your place... Fight for your respect, to be respected as a person, as a representative and elected member and on top of that you have to fight for the normal fight you have to do as a councillor like potholes and stuff like that. And I think it's doubly draining in terms of that, and I have a chronic condition, and my level is absolutely down the drain. Hence why I'm going to stop.”* - Interview Participant

*“But, stress levels and the fallout from that on my own body, on my back. I was having palpitations. Stress-related things, health-wise. But also it takes a toll when you're that stressed mentally for that length of time. It's very difficult.”* - Interview Participant

Mechanisms for safeguarding and reporting are rarely designed to understand, recognise or respond to the intersecting dimensions of these pressures.



Another area in which women are disproportionately affected is the juggling of family and work life. Family life and safety were mentioned repeatedly by various women who participated in interviews and the survey. One interviewee shared that the role of a councillor was extremely toxic to their family life and mental health. They described having to be in a constant “fight mode”. The online abuse another interviewee had to face influenced their decision to move as a family and described how their spouse was feeling at “breaking point”. Consequently, they decided to step out of politics entirely. Others explained that while they were unsure about continuing in politics, their family and friends did not want them to stand again due to the impact of violence and harassment on them.

## Women’s Representation and Participation

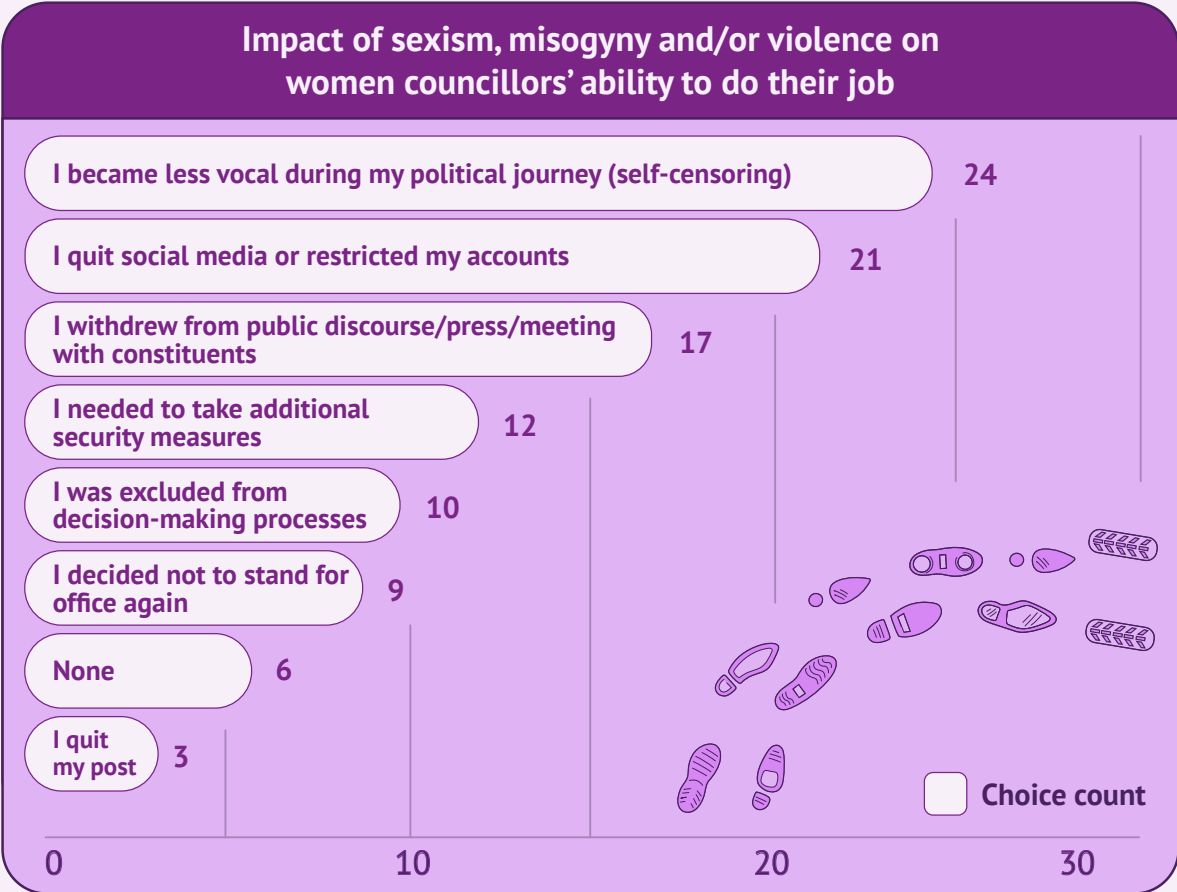
Our research highlights that sexism, misogyny and VAWiP are systematically undermining, and in some cases blocking, women’s representation and participation in local governments across Scotland.

*“It does impact your ability to do your job or your resolve to want to do. It makes decisions incredibly difficult.” - Interview Participant*

This is deeply concerning as local authorities have a responsibility for delivering services that disproportionately impact women’s lives, such as childcare, social care, and public transport. Local government is also a major employer of women in sectors including social care and education, where women make up most of the workforce. It is therefore crucial that women are represented and able to participate equally and safely at this level of decision-making.

Research shows that women’s increased representation is associated with improved delivery of public services and greater prioritisation of policies and services that better address the needs of women and the most vulnerable in society. The same study also found that women elected representatives tend to be more concerned with

*“... My family don’t want me to stand again. Absolutely don’t want me to stand again. And it’s got nothing to do with the fact that I’m not good at this job or that I’m not successful, it’s just the impact it has on me. That’s what they see. They see that this heavily impacts on you as their mum, and as a person, and your happiness, and they don’t want you to do it anymore. My friends would say the same thing, they can see what it does. And I know so many women that have left because of that.” - Interview Participant*



and responsive to constituents than their male counterparts.<sup>41</sup> However, as the data shows, women councillors in Scotland report becoming less vocal and visible due to their experiences of VAWiP, with some even quitting politics altogether.

## Self-censoring and exclusion from decision-making

Nearly half (48%) of respondents said their experiences of VAWiP had caused them to become less vocal during their political journey, and a fifth (20%) said they had been excluded from decision-making processes. In interviews, participants described being “silenced” in council and committee meetings by a fear of “backlash” and abuse from fellow councillors and citizens. One participant highlighted how not being able to participate safely in council meetings limited her ability to debate ideas, persuade others and influence the decision-making process.

*“Because it’s very hostile. It’s a very hostile place. So that’s why it censors you.”*

- Interview Participant

Another participant described wanting to be a more vocal champion for issues important to her, such as LGBT issues, but feeling too intimidated by her experiences of online abuse. Senior members of her party also warned her against speaking out on these issues. She described the impact of this:

*“... I feel guilty about that because I’m like, I’ve got this platform and I should be using it to try and affect change for marginalised people, for people who are being harmed at the moment with how society is. I should be doing something for them and I’m scared to. And that’s horrible!”*

- Interview Participant

On the other hand, a small number of participants expressed a steely determination to overcome fear and intimidation in order to effectively represent their constituents. For some, this meant taking extra time to carefully plan their remarks for council meetings.

*“So you’re always aware, and I’m always very careful what I say when there are these big meetings that I know things might be controversial.”*

- Interview Participant

Ahead of one council meeting, one participant explained how she sought advice from an external professional on how to cope with combat; they told her to “stay quiet, lower your voice and you stay small.” She also described practising staying calm when under attack and mentally preparing herself to go to the meeting. On the impact this has on her ability to do her job, she said,

*“It is [exhausting] because it’s a distraction from just getting the work done...”*

- Interview Participant



## Protective and additional security measures

Respondents also described making themselves less visible and accessible as a result of their experiences; about two in five (42%) of respondents said they had quit social media or restricted their accounts, and a third reported withdrawing from public discourse, press, or meetings with constituents.

*“So I’ve absolutely changed how I interact online and I feel it is to the detriment of my job. I would like to promote more what I do. I’m really busy. I’m doing a lot of stuff.”*

- Interview Participant

Interview participants similarly spoke of needing to cancel or postpone constituent surgeries due to safety concerns, particularly in response to online abuse and threats from the general public. One participant told us how, during a period of abuse following a council tax increase, their council’s communications team said they would avoid posting pictures of her on the official social media blurbs, while council officers also removed

her name from official meeting papers. While she understood this was the council trying to protect her, she felt that “it was infringing on democracy” by making her less visible. Similarly, another participant felt that to do her job well, she needed to be online and couldn’t simply come off social media.

Nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents also reported that they had been compelled to take additional security measures as a result of their experiences. Amongst interviewees, such measures included only participating in council business online to avoid in-person interactions with perpetrators who, in these cases, were mainly other councillors.

*“But also because the microaggressions, especially in the council chamber, I had really bad panic attacks to go to full council that I had to join online because I couldn’t physically be in the chamber with the same people.”*

- Interview Participant

There were mixed feelings about participating online, with some participants welcoming the safety that online meetings provided:

*“We’re just lucky now, we’ve got online, so some days I just decide to just do my meetings online because it feels safer. You know, and that’s psychologically safer because I don’t need to [do] those calculations of who am I going to see... Some days you just need to avoid it.”*

- Interview Participant

However, others felt more frustrated with the situation:

*“I didn’t go back to the committee, to that committee for a few months... I had to do stuff online without risk of further comments or actions. So that was rough...”*

- Interview Participant

The same participant (who had been sexually harassed by another councillor) explained that she might have left the committee altogether if it hadn’t been for the fact that she held a position of power on it, which meant she had more influence over her interactions with the perpetrator. However, she also remarked that she wouldn’t have wanted to move because it would only have benefited him.

## Exiting roles and politics

Three survey respondents indicated they did in fact quit their posts because of the sexism, misogyny or VAWiP they had experienced or witnessed. Similarly, nearly a fifth (18%) indicated that they decided not to stand for office again due to their experiences. Several interviewees had also decided not to run again because of the sexism, misogyny or VAWiP they had faced in their role. For some, this had been an extremely difficult decision to reach because they generally did enjoy being a councillor and representing their community, but felt that frequent experiences of VAWiP had ultimately worn them down:

*[on the prospect of standing for re-election] “I think at this stage probably not. But I don’t know. There’s a part of me that just wants to because I just love what I do. But it’s just, like when I think about the impact, the really hard personal impact it’s had, why would I want to do that again? Why would I want to take that risk for another five years to do that again?”*

- Interview Participant

*“At some point I feel that I need to prioritise my mental health right now... You feel on constant fight mode, threat mode because you know you’re going to be aggressed at some point in your meeting. I feel that it’s probably weighing more on women than on men, probably.”*

- Interview Participant

*“... I think it’s a lot of the reason why a lot of us walk. There were some very good councillors in [anonymised council] that walked because of this in the last election. They just couldn’t take it anymore.”*

*I haven’t made my mind up [on whether to stand again]. Right now I’m 50/50, but it’s one of the big questions: ‘do I want to do this for another five years.’ And it’s not the work, it’s the putting up with this [sexism, misogyny and VAWiP]. And it is something that so many of us ask ourselves...*

*I’ve never met a guy that’s a councillor, that this is a part of their thought process. It’s only the women that I speak to. And that’s just ridiculous that this is probably one of the main drivers for why we’ll walk away... Good women that were really trying to do things for their community. But they just couldn’t take it anymore. And it does, it wears you down.”*

- Interview Participant



Conversely, for a small number of participants, their experiences of VAWiP have made them more determined to stay in politics:

*“To be quite honest, it’s made me go in the opposite direction... it’s made me want to see action in other ways.”* - Interview Participant

*“... it’s made me more determined... I think this is just another hurdle that’s made me more determined to stand up for what I believe in and to try and change things, even just a tiny bit.”*

- Interview Participant

## Recommending role to other women

We asked respondents whether they would recommend being a councillor to other women, to which 70% responded ‘Yes’. It is clear that participants took immense pride in representing their community and ensuring that women’s voices were represented on the council.

*“And you know representation matters as well, and a representative democracy to ensure that all voices are captured. So I was encouraged for a variety of reasons to ensure that I am at the table and creating change from within.”*

- Interview Participant

*“I noticed that my local authority was underrepresented in terms of females... I didn’t see anyone that looked like me or was interested in the stuff that I was interested in.”*

- Interview Participant

*“I felt at the time that was a good way to represent my communities and helping my communities by basically speaking for them and being sure that their voices are heard and represented.”*

- Interview Participant

*“I really love being a councillor... You know, when people come to you for help, if you’re that sort of person who generally has the energy, the drive, the passion to sort things out... and I’m the kind of person who can take it and run with it on behalf of other people.”* - Interview Participant

However, this also meant that **almost a third of respondents would not recommend being a councillor to other women**. Several participants, including those who loved being a councillor, said they could not recommend it to other women because of their experiences of sexism, misogyny and violence.

*“We have the power to make a difference and I do feel like having a diversity of voices makes a massive difference. The stuff I’ve brought to the table would not have come there if it was the usual array of older white men that we see in every council... in terms of getting other women in, I’d struggle so much to recommend it to other women because of my experiences.”*

- Interview Participant

*“I loved serving my community, but the atmosphere within the Council was totally toxic and not safe for women.”* - Survey Respondent

*“I think it is such a valuable role and I love doing it. It is torture. I wouldn’t recommend it to a close friend.”* - Interview Participant

Notably, the percentage that would not recommend rises to 45% among councillors under 55, who were also more likely to state that sexism, misogyny and violence towards women councillors have increased in the last 10 years.

When explaining why they would not recommend it, several participants referenced experiences of sexism, misogyny and VAWiP.

*“I couldn’t recommend any woman to become a councillor. I couldn’t actually recommend anybody to become a councillor, but especially a woman to become a councillor because it was so bad.”*

- Interview Participant

*“I cannot guarantee their safety, emotional safety at least, which pains me to say. The structures, behaviours and overall culture need to be challenged before I could encourage women to go in there.”* - Survey Respondent

Other participants said they would not recommend it due to other structural barriers, such as poor remuneration, inadequate or no provision of maternity or family leave, and long working hours.

Many of those who would not recommend being a councillor to other women expressed a genuine sense of sadness that this was the case, especially because they believed that improving women's representation was key to improving the culture in politics.

*"Publicly I do recommend and advocate for more women and do what I can to encourage. But hand on heart, if a close friend or someone I truly cared about, I think I would just tell them to run unless I knew they were very strong indeed."*

- Survey Respondent

*"... You're not going to be able to combat that [violence against women in politics] until you get more women in politics. Honestly, I don't recommend it to my friends. But it won't get better until we make it better."*

- Interview Participant

*"I feel heartbroken about that because we desperately need more women in politics or this will never change but it's hard to recommend something to people which you know will harm them."*

- Survey Respondent

## Future candidates

Participants in this research were either current or former councillors, meaning we did not examine the impact of sexism, misogyny, and VAWiP on other women in Scotland who might be interested in entering politics or on recent first-time candidates.

Research from elsewhere demonstrates that VAWiP does influence women's decisions on whether to enter politics as well as how they participate. For example, one recent study in the

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**42** De Jong, J C and Runderkamp, Z (2025) Who still wants to enter politics? Intersectional perspectives of young women aspirants on violence against politicians. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*. Available at: <https://bristoluniversitypress-digital.com/view/journals/ejpg/aop/article-10.1332-25151088Y2025D000000105/article-10.1332-25151088Y2025D000000105.xml>.

**43** Oppenheim, M (2021) About seven in 10 women say they would not become a politician due to 'facing abuse or harassment'. *The Independent*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/women-politicians-abuse-harassment-sexism-b1812937.html>.

**44** De Jong, J C and Runderkamp, Z (2025) Who still wants to enter politics? Intersectional perspectives of young women aspirants on violence against politicians. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*.

Netherlands found that, on the most extreme end, witnessing violence against women politicians deters women from a career in politics. The same research demonstrates that groups of marginalised women who expect to face intersecting forms of discrimination in politics are particularly deterred, including young, disabled, neurodiverse or migrant women.<sup>42</sup> Research by the Fawcett Society in 2021 also found that 70% of women surveyed would not become a politician because of fears of facing abuse or harassment in the role. The same study found that six in 10 women view sexism in local politics as a barrier to pursuing a political career.<sup>43</sup>

Those who are not deterred from a career in politics report minimising their visibility to avoid harm. For example, women in this research reported restricting their social media presence or opting for political roles that are "behind the scenes", such as jobs in political parties rather than elected positions. There is a risk that such strategies reduce women's political advancement. In addition, reduced visibility can mean there is a lack of role models in elected positions whose presence could challenge stereotypes about ideal politicians and encourage other women to enter politics.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, the impact of sexism, misogyny and violence in Scottish local politics likely extends beyond individual victim-survivors. It is highly likely that it is creating a wider chilling effect on women's representation, with women interested in politics deterred from running for office or opting for "back office" roles instead to avoid experiencing VAWiP.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As this report shows, violence against women in local politics is causing lasting harm to individual women councillors as well as the state of our democracy. With the next local elections in 2027 on the horizon, urgent and comprehensive action is needed to prevent and meaningfully address VAWiP.

We asked women councillors to rank what they considered to be the main barriers to addressing sexism, misogyny and VAWiP. As is shown, the top-ranked barriers included:

1. **Lack of reporting procedures in party groups**
2. **Lack of resources and support for victim-survivors**
3. **Unsupportive culture in party group**

### Barriers to addressing sexism, misogyny & VAWiP



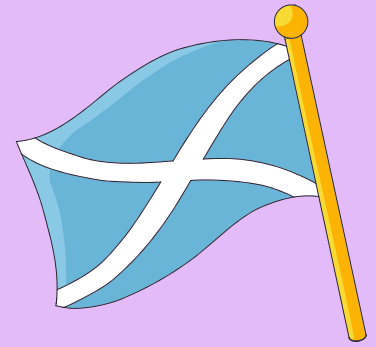
In an open-text question, we also asked what initiatives and strategies they believed would be effective for preventing sexism, misogyny and VAWiP. These suggestions fell into the following categories:

- **Improving women's representation in politics**
- **Improving reporting procedures**
- **Strengthening councillors' rights**
- **Awareness-raising activities and advocacy campaigns**

**These issues have informed the following recommendations for change:**

## Recommendations for the Scottish Government

- Commission a comprehensive independent review into women councillors' safety in Scotland. This should explore:
  - How to improve reporting procedures and mechanisms for politicians seeking to report incidents of VAWiP, particularly for such incidents perpetrated by another politician in Scotland and/or online.
  - How to facilitate anonymous and/or confidential reporting for politicians seeking to report an incident of VAWiP.
  - How to protect politicians making a complaint from detrimental or retaliatory action.
  - Whether a dedicated independent body is required to receive, investigate and address complaints of gender-based violence against women politicians working at any level of politics in Scotland.
- Invest in initiatives aimed at increasing women's representation, removing barriers to elected office and empowering more women to stand.
- Improve access to childcare and support for carers to remove barriers to elected office for women with caring responsibilities.
- Ensure councillors in Scotland receive the same level of police protection as MPs and MSPs
- Work with COSLA to regularly collect data to monitor incidents of VAWiP across all levels of politics in Scotland.
- Proceed with the long-awaited incorporation of CEDAW, and other human rights treaties, into Scots law through the Human Rights Bill.
- Introduce a new offence of issuing threats of, or invoking, rape or sexual assault or disfigurement of women and girls online and offline, as recommended by Baroness Kennedy KC.<sup>45</sup>



## Recommendations for the Ethical Standards Commissioner/Standards Commission

- Produce guidance on how to submit complaints about breaches of the Councillor Code of Conduct which involve multiple cumulative incidents of VAWiP, such as microaggressions and verbal abuse.
- Work with the Scottish Human Rights Commission to promote women councillors' human rights, including the ECHR, CEDAW and ICCPR.
- Promote the Equally Safe at Work<sup>46</sup> learning modules on VAW and sexual harassment on the Standards Commission's e-learning webpage to support councillors in upholding the Code of Conduct.



<sup>45</sup> Baroness H Kennedy KC (2022) Misogyny – A Human Rights Issue. The Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/misogyny-human-rights-issue/documents/>.

<sup>46</sup> Equally Safe at Work is an employer accreditation programme focusing on organisational and institutional change that will enable public and third sector employers to improve workplace and employment practices to advance gender equality at work and prevent violence against women. Find out more at [equallysafetatwork.scot](http://equallysafetatwork.scot).

- Develop staff capacity and competence on understanding and responding to VAW, including how it impacts women councillors and their experiences as elected members, to ensure they respond in a trauma-informed and survivor-centred manner.
- Consider establishing a specialist process for complaints about sexual harassment that is gender-competent, trauma-informed and led by VAWG experts.

### Recommendations for local authorities

- Introduce or update standing orders that explicitly prohibit VAWiP by elected members
- Provide compulsory training for elected members and staff on VAWG, by engaging with the national Equally Safe initiatives, Equally Safe at Work and Equally Safe in Practice.<sup>47</sup>
- Demonstrate commitment to addressing gender inequality and preventing VAW, including towards elected members, by engaging with Equally Safe at Work.
- Ensure staff receiving reports or complaints of VAW from elected members receive adequate training, which is trauma-informed and survivor-centred, on how to respond appropriately
- Explore providing bystander training for staff and elected members on how to intervene in incidents of sexism and sexual harassment.
- Enable councillors to access the same employee assistance schemes as council officers and staff.



### Recommendations for political parties

- Ensure there is a Code of Conduct and bespoke policies for all members that prohibit gender-based violence and discrimination, and set out clear and transparent reporting processes
- Provide training for party staff responsible for addressing complaints of gender-based violence.
- Mandate training for all party leaders, party group leaders and business managers on addressing complaints of VAWiP.
- Raise awareness about procedures for addressing complaints of gender-based violence and gender discrimination by party members.
- Provide access to mental health and wellbeing support for members who have experienced gender-based violence or discrimination.



<sup>47</sup> Equally Safe in Practice is a workforce development framework, tiered for all levels of the workforce that will support organisations to strengthen knowledge and practice of their workforce in relation to VAWG and gender equality, to ensure consistent, effective and appropriate responses to VAWG. Find out more at [equallysafeinpractice.scot](http://equallysafeinpractice.scot).

- Establish a fund for safety spending for candidates and politicians to alleviate councillors having to use personal finances to ensure their safety.
- Implement recommendations from Engender’s report on [Women’s Political Journey](#), and our [Making It Happen for 2027](#) campaign.

### Recommendations for COSLA

- Continue to support initiatives aimed at increasing women’s representation, removing barriers to elected office and empowering more women to stand.
- Establish and facilitate an informal network for women councillors with experiences of VAWiP to connect and provide informal peer support, including for independent councillors.

### Recommendations for Police Scotland

- Continue to raise awareness about Operation Ford amongst all councillors in Scotland.
- Ensure police responses to women councillors’ reports of VAWiP are aligned with Police Scotland’s VAWG Strategy, which focuses on shifting responses from preventative advice and victim-blaming to a cultural shift in behaviours and views on VAWG.

### Recommendations for the Scottish Human Rights Commission and the Equality and Human Rights Commission

- Produce guidance for reporting bodies and local authorities on addressing VAWiP and protecting women councillors’ human rights.
- Ensure guidance incorporates an intersectional lens to address compounded risks experienced by women from minority or marginalised groups.



## CONCLUSION

Sexism, misogyny and violence against women councillors are widespread, systemic issues, with nine in 10 respondents reporting at least one form of VAWiP during their career across Scottish local government.

Violence against Women in Politics (VAWiP) spans across different levels in councils, from everyday microaggressions to threats, sexual harassment and physical violence, demonstrating that these behaviours are not isolated incidents but part of entrenched gendered power dynamics and cultures. Non-physical forms of violence – particularly microaggressions, psychological abuse and cyberviolence – are pervasive and often dismissed, despite their significant impact on women councillors' safety, mental health and ability to participate fully.

Current reporting structures are widely viewed as ineffective, inaccessible or harmful, resulting in low reporting rates and very limited accountability for perpetrators. Therefore, the lack of trust in institutions and their reporting mechanisms, such as Police Scotland, the Standards Commission or councils, is evident.

Intersectionality is central: minoritised women, including younger women, Black and minority ethnic women, disabled women, and LGBTQ+ women, face compounded and more intense forms of VAWiP, reflecting general structural inequalities in Scottish politics.

VAWiP is directly undermining women's political participation, leading to self-censorship, reduced visibility, withdrawal from decision-making spaces, and, in some cases, early resignation or decisions not to stand again.

These harms extend to Scotland's democracy at its core, because it limits diverse representation, shapes who feels able to participate, excludes certain groups, and weakens the quality of decision-making at the local level. Despite the serious impact on individual councillors, women continue to value their roles deeply, expressing pride in representing their communities. At the same time, many, in good conscience, and with high levels of regret, cannot recommend that other women enter local politics under current conditions.

Urgent, coordinated, and systemic change is needed across the Scottish Government, COSLA, local authorities, political parties, Police Scotland and the Standards Commission to ensure women councillors can participate safely and equally. Improving women's representation, strengthening reporting procedures, embedding VAWG-informed practice and ensuring accountability are essential steps to addressing VAWiP, ensuring a cultural change to make politics a welcoming space for all, and safeguarding the future of local democracy.

We have developed the following motion for councillors across Scotland to submit in their own councils:

### **Fostering a Culture of Respect and Inclusivity in Local Government**

Council aspires to promote a culture of respect, inclusivity, and accountability, free from bullying, misogyny, and discriminatory behaviours, ensuring that all staff and elected members are safe to express their opinions without fear of harassment or discrimination.

Council notes:

- That despite progress in recent years, there remains underrepresentation of women in local government.
- That structural and cultural issues present barriers to women and traditionally underrepresented groups from entering and remaining in local government as councillors, as noted by COSLA in its 2022 councillors survey.
- That while progress has been made across society in Scotland and in Scottish local government in tackling discrimination in all its forms, we acknowledge that we are all on a journey and that discrimination and barriers still exist that prevent us from being a fully inclusive profession.
- That while recognising that we are in a political environment where debate and discussion can at times be robust, we must all seek to ensure that we are inclusive in our behaviours and in the words we use, to ensure that every voice is heard with respect.
- That all forms of violence against women exist in a continuum, in which microaggressions normalise a culture of permissiveness towards sexism and misogyny that enable more serious incidents of this violence to occur.
- The Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee (SLARC) recommendation for fair compensation to attract a more diverse range of candidates underscores the need for systemic change to create a safer and more equitable environment in elected office positions.
- The SLARC Report in February 2024 that notes that councillors are subject to increasing abuse via social media which can be particularly targeted at young female members and that SLARC notes recent correspondence from the Scottish Parliament's Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee to council Chief Executives saying "We are aware that the long-standing issue of political culture and at times, the toxicity of debate, both within councils themselves but also across the broader political landscape and wider society as a whole – something that is particularly evident in online discourse – can act as a major barrier to diverse representation".
- Engender Scotland's findings from their 2026 report on "Women councillors' experiences of sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence in Scottish Councils", which states that 90% of women councillors surveyed indicated they had experienced sexism, misogyny or gender-based violence at some point during their career as a councillor. Additionally, almost a third (30%) of women councillors would not recommend being a councillor to other women, with this figure rising to 45% among those under 55.
- The importance of the Scottish Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit and its recommendations, as an audit better equips a parliament to ensure that internal processes, structures and culture facilitate the equal participation of women and men in law-making. Taking intersectional gender equality into account in all aspects of its work means Parliament can lay the foundation for increased gender equality in wider society through gender-sensitive policy and service design.

Council therefore:

- Reaffirms its commitment to diversity, equality, and fair representation in local government and to upholding standards of behaviour and respect amongst all elected members as guided by the Councillors' Code of Conduct.
- Calls on the leadership of all political parties to promote clear and consistent messaging that all discriminatory behaviours are unacceptable, especially amongst elected representatives at every sphere of representation.
- Pledge to look at the Scottish Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit and which of its recommendations might be relevant to adopt for our council.
- Commits to exploring ways of setting up our own gender sensitive audit in our council.
- Agrees to engage with appropriate organisations to ensure that we are a welcoming organisation where discriminatory behaviours are unacceptable.
- Agrees to support staff and councillors in addressing more subtle forms of violence and discrimination, such as microaggressions, in its efforts to eradicate all forms of violence against women councillors in the interest of their safety and equal participation in the political debate.
- Recommends that the Cross Party Leaders Group considers standards of behaviour and respect as a standing item on its agenda, encourages the development of appropriate training on all forms of discrimination for councillors and directs a review of our policies and procedures to be carried out (including the Member/Officer Protocols) in relation to discriminatory issues and related behaviours with any recommendations to Cabinet Committee or Council as appropriate.

## Annex B: Methodology

This report's findings are based on research carried out by Dr Leah McCabe and Professor Meryl Kenny from the University of Edinburgh between February and August 2025. The design of this research was informed by Engender staff and a cross-party advisory group of women councillors from across Scotland.

Between the 24<sup>th</sup> February and the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2025, the researchers undertook a survey open to all current and former women councillors in Scotland. The survey received 59 usable responses, mostly from sitting councillors, reflecting the barriers we faced in contacting former councillors.

To complement the survey's findings, the researchers also conducted 16 long-form interviews. Interview participants were recruited via the survey and Engender's existing contacts and networks.

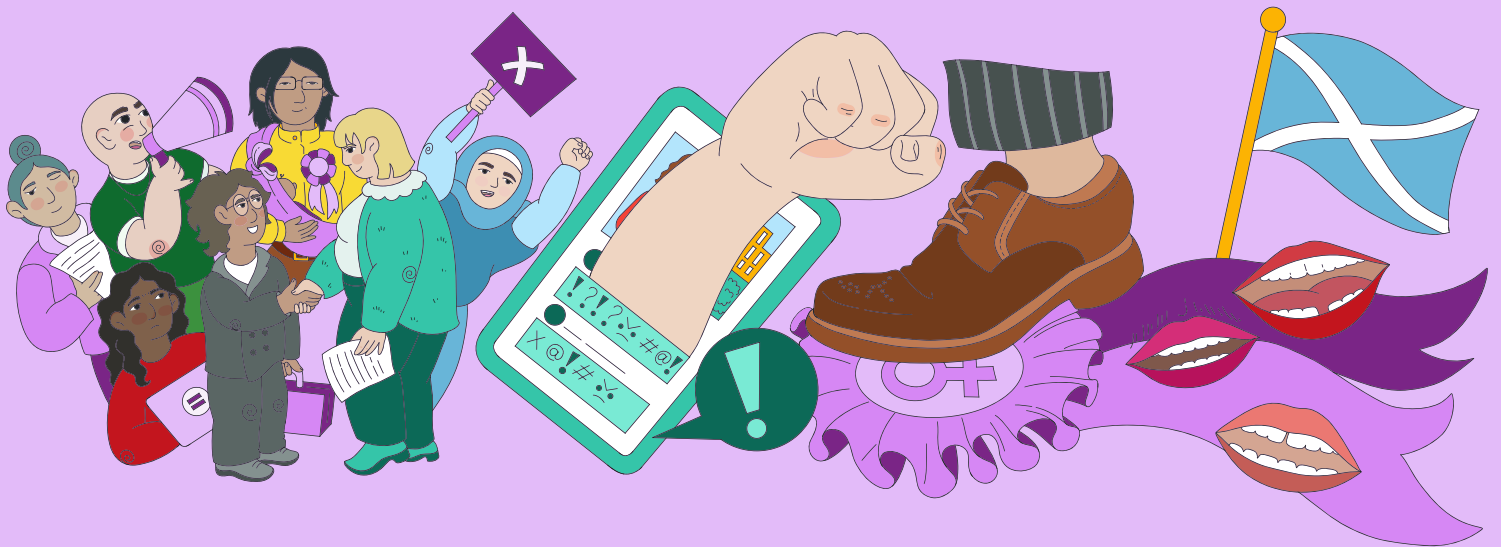
The researchers also provided a desk-based review of relevant documents and resources on how VAWiP is currently addressed. These included relevant materials such as the Councillors' Code of Conduct, Police Scotland's Operation Ford, COSLA's campaigning activities and more.

Research findings are limited by comparatively lower representation of women from Black and minority ethnic communities and younger women, which is reflective of the chronic underrepresentation of these groups throughout all levels of Scottish politics, especially at the local level.

In line with the University of Edinburgh's ethics policy, and to avoid potential jigsaw identification, we have not included analyses aggregated by demographic characteristics or council-related details when there are fewer than 10 respondents in a category. Nevertheless, where possible, we have endeavoured to highlight the impact of intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression, which compound marginalised women's experiences of gender-based violence.

## Annex C: Demographics

<p><b>Current councillors</b></p> <p>Current councillors: 93% Former councillors: 7%</p> <p><b>Length of service</b> 1-5 years: 61% 5-10 years: 23% More than 10 years: 16%</p>	<p><b>Party Affiliation</b></p> <p>SNP: 34% Scottish Labour: 14% Scottish Conservatives: 11% Scottish Greens: 7% Scottish Liberal Democrats: 18% Independent: 4% Prefer not to say: 5%</p>
<p><b>Gender</b></p> <p>Women: 95% Other or prefer not to say: 5%</p> <p><b>Trans or had a trans history</b> Yes: 2%</p>	<p><b>Age</b></p> <p>24 years old or younger: 0% 25-34: 9% 35-44: 18% 45-54: 23% 55-64: 25% Over 65: 21% Prefer not to say: 4%</p>
<p><b>Ethnicity</b></p> <p>White: 88% Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: 2% Asian, Scottish Asian or British Asian: 0% African Scottish, African or British African: 2% Other ethnic group: 4% Prefer not to say: 5%</p>	<p><b>Sexual Orientation</b></p> <p>Straight/heterosexual: 76% Gay or lesbian: 4% Bisexual: 13% Other: 2% Prefer not to say: 7%</p>
<p><b>Physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more</b></p> <p>Yes: 41% No: 57% Prefer not to say: 2%</p>	<p><b>Occupation of main household earner when aged 14</b></p> <p>Modern professional &amp; traditional occupations: 36% Senior, middle or junior managers or administrators: 11% Clerical and intermediate occupations: 6% Technical &amp; craft occupations: 20% Routine, semi-routine manual and service occupations: 13% Long-term unemployed: 6% Small business owner: 2% Other: 7%</p>
<p><b>Work apart from/in addition to work as a councillor</b></p> <p>Self-employed: 16% Employed full-time: 20% Looking after the home or family: 16% Permanently retired from work: 16% Unemployed and seeking work: 2% In further/higher education: 0% Government work or training scheme: 0% Other: 29% (including 18% employed part-time)</p>	<p><b>Caring responsibilities</b></p> <p><b>For children aged under 16:</b> Yes: 38% No: 63%</p> <p><b>For family members, friends, neighbours or others due to old age, disability or long-term health conditions:</b> Yes: 39% No: 61%</p>



**Engender Project Team:** Noomi Anyanwu, Hannah Brisbane, Jessie Duncan  
Researchers: Dr Leah McCabe and Prof. Meryl Kenny from the University of Edinburgh


**Report design:** Madeleine Leisk


**Note of thanks:** We wish to extend our sincere gratitude to all the women who have shared their experiences of sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence in politics with us over the years, whether through this research or otherwise.


This project was also informed by an Advisory Group comprising women councillors from across Scotland and the political spectrum. We are extremely grateful to each member of this group for sharing their time and insights with us throughout this research project.

We are also thankful to the many stakeholder organisations we consulted in developing the report recommendations.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:  
Contact: Catherine Murphy,  
Executive Director, Engender  
[info@engender.org.uk](mailto:info@engender.org.uk)

Engender  
Baltic Chambers  
50 Wellington Street  
Glasgow  
G2 6HJ