

Engender Parliamentary Briefing: Empowering Young People's Voices in Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls

5th December 2024

BACKGROUND

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation. Our aspiration is for a Scotland where women and men have equal access to rights, resources, decision-making and safety. Our [Delivering Equally Safe](#) project aims to improve the prevention of violence against women and girls (VAWG) through all areas of public policy.

We welcome the Scottish Government debate on 'Empowering Young People's Voices in Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls' as a chance to highlight our work on primary prevention.

This debate is an important opportunity for MSPs to engage with the global 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign and join with the international community to end this violence once and for all.

Girls and women across Scotland continue to experience violence at endemic levels. The 16 Days campaign is a reminder that gender-based violence must not be an inevitable part of growing up in Scotland. **A Scotland free from violence and abuse is possible. The only way to achieve this is to fund prevention work that stops this violence before it gets the chance to occur by tackling the root cause: gender inequality. We ask MSPs to call on the Scottish Government to invest in primary prevention of VAWG.**

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

1. Violence Against Young Women and Girls in Scotland

VAWG is one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world; one in three women will experience a form of this violence in their lifetime and, according to the UN, girls and young women are at a higher risk.¹

In Scotland, we are seeing soaring levels of violence against girls and young women:

¹ UN Women (2024) Facts and figures: Ending violence against women. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women>

- Many girls and young women in Scotland don't feel safe in their daily lives: 23% don't feel safe online, 43% don't feel safe outside alone, and 19% don't feel safe at school.²
- Globally, almost a quarter (24%) of girls who have been in a relationship have already been physically, sexually or psychologically abused by a partner by the time they are 19.³
- In a survey of young women in Scotland, over a third (36%) of participants indicated they had been in an intimate relationship with someone who was abusive or harmed them physically or emotionally, while 74% said they knew someone who had.⁴
- In the UK, 80% of women aged 18 to 34 have experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public place.⁵
- According to Zero Tolerance, misogynistic extremism is spreading amongst young people online, which is a growing concern in Scotland.⁶

2. The Root Cause of VAWG is Gender Inequality

The root cause of all forms of VAWG is gender inequality, which persists in Scotland today. Women in this country have less access to power and decision-making, money and resources, and respect. This promotes unequal power relations and harmful social norms that condone VAWG in different settings, including in our homes, workplaces, educational institutions and public spaces. Women's inequality is further compounded by intersecting discrimination and systems of oppression, such as racism and ableism, meaning that marginalised women are at a greater risk of experiencing this violence.⁷

A primary prevention approach aims to stop VAWG before it gets the chance to occur by tackling gender inequality as well as the harmful social norms, structures and systems that sustain it. However, this relationship between gender inequality and VAWG is poorly understood in Scotland.

² Girlguiding Scotland (2022) Girls' Attitudes Survey 2022 - Scotland Snapshot. Available at:

https://www.girlguidingscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/UK_Snapshot_Scotland_web_AW.pdf

³ UN Women (2024) Facts and figures: Ending violence against women. Available at:

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women>

⁴ Scottish Women's Aid & the Young Women's Movement (2022) The Rise Report. Supporting Young Women Facing Abuse in Their Intimate Relationships. Available at:

<https://www.youngwomenscot.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-Rise-Report-2.pdf>

⁵ All Party Parliamentary Group for UN Women (2021) Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces. Available at: https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf

⁶ Zero Tolerance (2024) Many Good Men. Young Scots' experiences of online misogynistic extremism and radicalisation. Available at: <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Many-Good-Men.pdf>

⁷ Engender (2023) An Overview of VAWG and the Role of Public Policy in Scotland in Prevention. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/VAWGbriefingNov23.pdf>

Research commissioned by Scottish Women's Aid in 2020 found that only 47% of Scottish adults could identify unequal power dynamics between men and women as a key cause of VAWG, while just 51% could say the same about harmful gender norms.⁸ In addition, the 2019 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey found many people continue to hold problematic views on VAWG, including believing harmful rape myths or holding victim-blaming beliefs. In particular, a significant minority believed a woman was to blame for being raped if she wore revealing clothing or was very drunk, with people who held gender-stereotypical views more likely to agree with these statements.⁹

This context is concerning, given that research shows increasingly mixed attitudes towards gender equality among young people. According to IPSOS, 60% of 'Gen Z' men and 40% of 'Gen Z' women across 31 countries believe women's equality discriminates against men. Younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) are also more likely than older generations to believe men are being asked to do too much to support gender equality. These attitudes are not only harmful to women and girls; members of these younger generations are also more likely to agree that a man who stays home to care for his children is "less of a man."¹⁰

Worryingly, there is a widening gender divide between the views of young men and young women on these issues. Just over two-thirds (68%) of young women aged 16 to 29 in the UK believe it is harder to be a woman than a man today. Conversely, young men (35%) are almost half as likely to say the same, with 25% stating instead that it is harder to be a man.¹¹

While many different factors shape young people's views on gender equality, the recent increase in misogynistic influencers has been linked to a resurgence of attitudes that challenge equality and incite VAWG.¹² Research from England and Wales shows that as many as one-third of 13 to 17-year-olds have encountered online content encouraging VAWG.¹³ **Zero Tolerance's latest research shows this "phenomenon is of growing concern in Scotland."**¹⁴

⁸ Scottish Women's Aid (2020) Shifting attitudes and changing the future for women and girls. Available at: <https://womensaid.scot/shifting-attitudes-and-changing-the-future-for-women-and-girls/>

⁹ Scottish Government (2020) Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2019: attitudes to violence against women. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-attitudes-violence-against-women-scotland/documents/>

¹⁰ IPSOS (2024) Millennials and Gen Z less in favour of gender equality than older generations. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/millennials-and-gen-z-less-favour-gender-equality-older-generations>

¹¹ King's College London (2024) Emerging tensions? How younger generations are dividing on masculinity and gender equality. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/emerging-tensions.pdf>

¹² Renström, E. & Bäck, H. (2024) Manfluencers and Young Men's Misogynistic Attitudes: The Role of Perceived Threats to Men's Status. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-024-01538-2>

¹³ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability 2024. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/>

¹⁴ Zero Tolerance (2024) Many Good Men. Young Scots' experiences of online misogynistic extremism and radicalisation. Available at: <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Many-Good-Men.pdf>

Challenging these harmful attitudes on gender equality and VAWG is vital for preventing this violence before it occurs. Therefore, the Scottish Government must fulfil the recommendation from the Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of VAWG Services to invest in national prevention work, including awareness-raising campaigns and training programmes.

Engender is calling on MSPs to ensure the Scottish Government:

- **Fulfil the recommendation from the Independent Strategic Review to invest in national prevention work, including awareness-raising campaigns and training programmes.**
- **Shows leadership on VAWG by explicitly promoting the value of gender equality to combat harmful attitudes and online misinformation.**

3. The Role of Public Policy in Preventing VAWG

Engender supports the work being delivered by numerous organisations across Scotland to address violence against girls and young women, including in schools, youth groups and local communities. Empowering children and young people to tackle VAWG is crucial for challenging the harmful norms and attitudes that enable it.

However, working with children and young people alone is not enough to tackle Scotland's high levels of VAWG. The Scottish Government must complement this work by delivering the systemic and structural change required outwith these settings to prevent VAWG.

Our [Delivering Equally Safe project](#) highlights the critical role of public policy in achieving this. **Public policy is a vital tool for tackling gender inequality by actively promoting women's equality and safety across all areas of society, including those beyond education and justice.**

Through our work, we regularly explore how areas of public policy commonly viewed as 'gender-neutral' can support the prevention of VAWG. We have previously demonstrated how the design of our social security system can create conditions for VAWG. For example, the current system of Universal Credit has been found to enable financial abuse¹⁴ while also undermining women's ability to leave abusive partners.¹⁶ This is the result of punitive design features, like single household payments, which reinforce traditional gender roles and entrench women's inequality.

Our recent [briefing on public transport](#) also demonstrates how Scotland's transport system is negatively affecting women's equality by restricting their access to education, employment and social opportunities, as well as essential services. This is because the transport system is designed around the needs of men, whereas women are more likely to need regular integrated timetables, well-lit transit points and less crowded services. Failing to integrate women's needs into public transport policy creates an inequitable system that enables VAWG on public transport and in wider society.

Throughout the 16 Days campaign, we will publish further briefings on how housing and planning policies can also support the prevention of VAWG. These briefings will provide detailed examples of why a holistic approach to preventing VAWG is vital, alongside work with children and young people, to address systemic gender inequality in Scotland.

Engender is calling on MSPs to:

- **Ensure the Scottish Government integrates women's equality and safety into all areas of public policy to prevent VAWG across all settings**
- **Engage with Engender's briefing series on the link between different areas of public policy and preventing VAWG**

You can access our briefing on public transport [here](#).

CONCLUSION

The soaring levels of violence against girls and young women coupled with increasing harmful attitudes among young people towards achieving gender equality is concerning. Empowering young people in tackling VAWG is crucial for preventing this violence and abuse. However, this work must be supported by investment in wider primary prevention activities that address pervasive gender inequality in Scotland. **To achieve this, MSPs must ensure gender equality is integrated into all areas of public policy – including those beyond education and justice.**

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international levels to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.