

Engender Parliamentary Briefing: 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence

29th November 2023

SUMMARY:

- Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is still endemic in Scotland
- To end VAWG, **the Scottish Government must prioritise a primary prevention approach.** This means stopping this violence from occurring by tackling the root cause: **gender inequality**
- Primary prevention **is still not integrated into key public policies, such as transport, housing and planning**
- The Scottish Government must take **strategic action to integrate primary prevention into all areas of public policy** to eradicate VAWG once and for all

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, including those beyond justice and equalities domains. We welcome this Scottish Government debate on the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign as an opportunity for **all MSPs to call for a primary prevention approach in all Scottish policymaking.**

The annual 16 Days campaign is an important opportunity for decision-makers to join an international community calling for an end to all forms of VAWG. In Scotland, campaigning is focused on two main themes: the UN's UNiTE! Initiative's campaigning theme is "Invest to prevent violence against women and girls", while Scotland's National Violence Against Women Network has selected "Imagine a Scotland without Gender-based Violence." Both themes emphasise that VAWG is not inevitable. **A Scotland free from violence and abuse is possible. However, more strategic action and sustainable investment are urgently required to realise this.**

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

1. VAWG in Scotland

VAWG remains one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world, with an estimated **one in three women subjected to a form of this violence in their lifetime.**¹ The available data in Scotland shows that this violence continues to occur at endemic levels:

¹ World Health Organisation (WHO) (2021) [Devastatingly pervasive: 1 in 3 women globally experience violence.](#)

- In 2021-22, Police Scotland recorded **64,807** incidents of **domestic abuse**. In cases where gender was recorded, **81% of incidents** involved a **male accused and a female victim**²
- Reported **sexual crimes** are at the highest levels seen since 1971³
- Between 2013-14 and 2022-23, **90% of female victims** (149) in solved **homicide** cases were **killed by a male accused** (134); in almost half of these cases (46.27%), the male accused was their **partner or ex-partner** while nearly a sixth (15.67%) of these cases involved a **male relative**⁴
- More than **one in six (17%)** women in Scotland have experienced **online violence**, while over a third (35%) have witnessed it⁵

The impact of experiencing, or fearing, VAWG is all-encompassing, with devastating consequences for the health, social and economic circumstances of women and girls, as well as their families, workplaces and communities. While it is not possible to quantify the emotional costs of VAWG, globally, this violence is estimated to cost about **US\$1.9 trillion a year**, representing about 2% of the global GDP.⁶ Yet, **just 2% of what governments spend on defence could end gender-based violence** in 132 countries.⁷

All forms of VAWG are vastly underreported. Global evidence suggests less than 40% of women who experience VAWG will seek help of any sort, while less than 10% of those who do seek help will report their experience to the police.⁸

There are significant gaps in data collection and research on VAWG in Scotland, particularly concerning disaggregated intersectional data and research with minoritised groups.⁹ This severely limits our understanding of the full extent to which this violence is occurring in this country, the groups of women and girls most at risk, and the effectiveness of prevention programmes.

Engender is calling on MSPs to ensure the Scottish Government:

- **Collects, uses and publishes intersectional gender-sensitive sex-disaggregated data on all forms of VAWG**
- **Funds research into the main drivers of VAWG in Scotland**

² Scottish Government (2022) [Domestic abuse recorded by the police in Scotland, 2021-22](#)

³ Scottish Government (2023) [Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2022-23](#)

⁴ Scottish Government (2023) [Homicide in Scotland 2022-23](#). Data Tables: Table 10

⁵ Open University (2023) [OU research reveals shocking level of online violence experienced by women and girls across Scotland](#)

⁶ UN Women (2016) [The economic costs of violence against women](#).

⁷ Oxfam (2022) [The Assault of Austerity: How prevailing economic policy choices are a form of gender-based violence](#).

⁸ UN Women (2023) [Facts and figures: Ending violence against women](#).

⁹ Scottish Government (2023) [The Independent Strategic Review of Funding and Commissioning of Violence Against Women and Girls Services](#).

2. The Role of Public Policy in Prevention

It is only by tackling the root cause of VAWG that we will see a Scotland without this violence and abuse. Gender inequality and discrimination are both a cause and consequence of this violence as they cause women to have less access to money, power and respect across all settings. This inequality continues to impact all aspects of women's lives in Scotland; **the Scottish Government's Gender Equality Index shows that women do not enjoy full equality with men in any area of life.**¹⁰

Engender's research on sexual harassment in the workplace demonstrates how this violence is driven by gender inequality in the labour market. Indeed, we found that sexual and sexist harassment is especially prevalent and tolerated in male-dominated work environments and is perpetrated most often by men in positions of power.¹¹ In a survey by the TUC, **52% of women had experienced sexual harassment at work**, with **men accounting for nine out of ten** of the perpetrators and nearly **one in five women reporting that their line manager** or someone else with direct authority over them was responsible.¹²

Men are overrepresented in positions of power due to structural inequality, which impedes women's access to economic resources and security across their lifetimes. Engender measured that in 2023, of **3,382 positions of power in Scotland, women only hold 1,222 (just over a third).**¹³ This means the needs of women and girls are missing in critical decisions, including on the distribution of resources, the portrayal of women in the media, the provision of childcare, and women's safety needs.

Simultaneously, **gender inequality is a consequence of all forms of VAWG.** For example, sexual harassment in the workplace has implications for women's health and well-being, earning potential, financial stability, income inequality, career progression and ultimately gender equality across all spheres.

To eradicate all forms of VAWG, **the Scottish Government must prioritise a primary prevention approach.** This means stopping this violence from ever occurring by tackling the root cause: gender inequality.

Public policy is an essential tool for achieving a primary prevention approach by promoting gender equality and women's safety across different policy areas. However, despite primary prevention being a core objective of the Scottish Government's Equally Safe Strategy, **this approach is still not integrated into key public policies, such as transport, housing and planning.**

Engender is calling on MSPs to ensure the Scottish Government:

- **Embeds gender-responsive and primary prevention approaches into public policy development across all directorates and policy teams**

¹⁰ Scottish Government (2020) [Gender Equality Index](#).

¹¹ Engender (2022) [Enough is Enough: Tackling Workplace Sexual Harassment in Scotland](#).

¹² TUC (2016) [Still just a bit of banter?](#)

¹³ Engender (2023) [Sex and Power 2023](#).

- **Collects, uses and publishes intersectional gender-sensitive sex-disaggregated data on women’s experiences of different policy areas**
- **Ensures Equality Impact Assessments are undertaken at the beginning of the policy development process to ensure these influence the shape of policies**
- **Encourages cross-directorate cooperation and collaboration to ensure gender equality and VAWG considerations are implemented across all policy areas**

Social security is a critical area of public policy where we must see a primary prevention approach embedded. The current system of Universal Credit has been linked to financial abuse¹⁴ and engaging in survival sex¹⁵ while also undermining women’s ability to leave an abusive partner.¹⁶ This is the result of punitive design features, like single household payments, which reinforce traditional gender roles and entrench women’s inequality.

Since 2017, the Scottish Government has been committed to providing individual payments of Universal Credit within flexibilities devolved under the Scotland Act 2016; however, as of 2023, this commitment has yet to be delivered. In the context of the cost of living crisis, it is vital this commitment is delivered as soon as possible to embed primary prevention into our social security system.

Engender is calling on MSPs to ensure the Scottish Government:

- **Prioritises the delivery of automatic individual payments of Universal Credit**

CONCLUSION

To achieve a primary prevention approach and eradicate all forms of VAWG, all policymakers must recognise VAWG as a cross-cutting issue that is caused by gender inequality. **It is only by addressing gender inequality and mainstreaming primary prevention into all areas of public policy that a Scotland without VAWG will be achieved.**

Find out more about the role of public policy in preventing VAWG [here](#).

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 level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

¹⁴ EVAW Coalition (2018) [Universal Credit and Financial Abuse Exploring the Links](#).

¹⁵ House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2019) [Universal Credit and “survival sex”](#).

¹⁶ Engender (2022) [Women & the Cost of Living: A crisis of deepening inequality](#).