

Engender Parliamentary Briefing

Uniting Local and National Efforts, Across Sectors to End Violence Against Women and Girls

2nd December 2025

BACKGROUND

Engender is Scotland's intersectional 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 this Scottish Government debate on ending VAWG, which is being held during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign. This year's 16 Days campaign comes at a time in Scotland when VAWG is occurring at endemic levels, and equality and women's rights are increasingly under threat. We are also seeing women's and children's safety being weaponised to demonise marginalised communities through widespread disinformation campaigns online. Distortion of the root causes of VAWG only causes harm to individuals and communities and does nothing to end VAWG.

We need all MSPs to unite to ensure that debate and discussion about how to eradicate VAWG is based on evidence and rooted in international human rights. With the next Scottish election less than six months away, now is the time for all parties to reaffirm their commitment to eradicating VAWG. At Engender, we know that **this can only be achieved by investing in primary prevention**. Primary prevention focuses on stopping VAWG **before** it occurs by addressing its root cause: gender inequality. This requires coordinated action across all levels and areas of government, as well as all relevant sectors, to ensure that preventing VAWG is understood as everyone's responsibility.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

1. Violence Against Women and Girls in Scotland Remains Endemic

VAWG is one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world; **one in three women will experience at least one form of this violence in their lifetime**. Most of this violence is perpetrated by **someone already known to the victim-survivor**.¹

In Scotland, VAWG continues to occur at endemic levels:

¹ UN Women (2025) 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>

- In 2023/24, Police Scotland recorded **63,867 incidents of domestic abuse** (an increase of 3% from the previous year); four-in-five (81%) incidents involved a female victim and male suspected perpetrator.²
- In 2024/25, the police recorded **2,897 crimes of rape and attempted rape**; an increase of 15% from 2023/24.³
- The number of **sexual crimes** recorded by the police is at its **second-highest level** since 1971.
- Between 2017 and 2021, Police Scotland recorded **701 Honour-Based Abuse**-related concerns; an average of **140 per annum**.⁴
- Nearly **three-quarters (71%)** of women in the UK have experienced some form of **harassment** in a public space; this number rises to 86% among 18-24 year olds.⁵
- More than **one in six (17%)** women in Scotland have experienced **online violence**, while over a third (35%) have witnessed it.⁶
- Research by Zero Tolerance shows that **misogynistic extremism is spreading** amongst young people online, which is a growing concern in Scotland.⁷

Scotland's data on VAWG relies heavily on incidents reported to the police. However, these figures likely only represent the very tip of the iceberg, with global evidence indicating that less than 10% of women who experience VAWG will go to the police.⁸

The collection and publication of data on all forms of VAWG is essential for embedding primary prevention in policymaking. **Engender's own research** into the delivery of primary prevention approaches in Scotland found that **"a more reliable way of measuring levels of gender-based violence in Scotland is needed."**⁹

The collection of data on VAWG is also a requirement under Article 11 of the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the

² Scottish Government (2024) Domestic abuse statistics recorded by the police in Scotland, 2023 to 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/domestic-abuse-statistics-recorded-police-scotland-2023-24/>

³ Scottish Government (2025) Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2024-25. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/recorded-crime-scotland-2024-25/>

⁴ Scottish Government (2024) Minoritised Ethnic Women's Experiences of Domestic Abuse and Barriers to Help-Seeking: A Summary of the Evidence. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/minoritised-ethnic-womens-experiences-domestic-abuse-barriers-help-seeking-summary-evidence/>

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 Open University (2023) OU research reveals shocking level of online violence experienced by women and girls across Scotland. Available at: <https://university.open.ac.uk/scotland/news/ou-research-reveals-shocking-online-violence>

⁷ 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>

⁸ UN Women (2025) Facts and figures: Ending violence against women.

⁹ Engender (2025) Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls in Scotland. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/DESreport2025FIN-1.pdf>

Istanbul Convention). In line with this, Scotland should publish data on all forms of VAWG that can be disaggregated by sex, age, type of violence, the relationship to the victim, geographical location, and any other relevant characteristics, such as ethnicity and disability. States should also support research into the root causes of VAWG and conduct population-based surveys to assess its prevalence and identify any particular trends. However, in June 2025, GREVIO (the monitoring body of the Istanbul Convention) criticised Scotland for failing to have a **“specific publication of data on all forms of violence against women as covered by the Istanbul Convention, making it difficult to assess the full scale of the problem.”**¹⁰ This is a significant barrier in Scotland’s approach to preventing and eliminating all forms of VAWG.

Engender is calling on MSPs to ask the Scottish Government to:

- **Improve the collection and publication of gender sensitive sex-disaggregated data on violence against women and girls (VAWG).**
- **Commission a large-scale survey of women across Scotland on violence against women and girls (VAWG) and consider adding relevant questions on VAWG to the Scottish Health Survey and/or Scottish Household Survey.**

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 still have less access than men to:

- **Power:** In 2023, **women held only a third of positions of power** in Scotland across our political institutions, public sector, media, cultural bodies and corporate world – despite accounting for 51% of the population.¹¹
- **Money and Resources:** Women experience **higher rates of poverty**, rely more on **social security** and are **less likely to own their own home**.¹²
- **Respect:** **A third** of secondary school boys believe that **girls wearing revealing clothing are “asking for trouble”**, while **one in six (17%)** did not view girls as their equals.¹³

It is this inequality that continues to enable VAWG in women’s intimate relationships, homes, workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces and daily life. This inequality is further compounded by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and

¹⁰ Group of Experts on Action Against Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2025) GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report United Kingdom. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-s-baseline-evaluation-report-on-legislative-and-other-measures-/1680b66579>

¹¹ Engender (2023) Sex and Power 2023. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SP2023NEW.pdf>

¹² Engender (2022) Women and the Cost of Living A Crisis of Deepening Inequality. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Women-and-the-cost-of-living---updated-copy.pdf>

¹³ Mitchell, K.R. et al., (2025) Is a ‘crisis of masculinity’ evident in UK secondary student attitudes towards gender equality, gender stereotypes and sexual harassment? Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health. Available at: <https://jech.bmj.com/content/79/12/960>

oppression, such as racism and ableism, which puts marginalised women at an even greater risk of experiencing VAWG.¹⁴

This causal relationship between gender inequality and VAWG is not well understood in Scotland. 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**.¹⁵ The 2019 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey also found that **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.¹⁶

The lack of understanding in both our policymaking and from the public about the root causes of VAWG is enabling bad-faith actors to spread dangerous myths, which seek to demonise minorities and restrict women's rights. However, those claiming to protect women and children have been notably absent in campaigns against government policies and decisions that have been proven to enable VAWG. These include measures such as the underfunding of prevention and specialist support services, misogynistic features of the social security system or the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition.¹⁷ Furthermore, two-fifths of those arrested for last year's far-right riots had previously been reported to the police for domestic abuse.¹⁸

The increased weaponisation of women's safety is accompanied by a global coordinated pushback on women's equality. Recent research by Plan International shows that **nearly one in ten (9%) adults believe women now have too much influence or power in the UK**, and **one in five (20%) want to see a return to traditional gender norms (rising to 29% among younger men aged 18-24)**.¹⁹ More action is urgently required to raise awareness about the benefits of gender equality for both men and women and the crucial role it plays in preventing VAWG. **We urge all MSPs to denounce racist, sexist narratives purporting to be about "protecting women's safety" and support action aimed at raising public awareness about the root causes of VAWG.**

¹⁴ 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>

¹⁵ 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/>

¹⁶ 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/>

¹⁷ Engender (2023) An Overview of VAWG and the Role of Public Policy in Scotland in Prevention.

¹⁸ The Guardian (2025) Two in five arrested for last summer's UK riots had been reported for domestic abuse. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/jul/26/two-in-five-arrested-for-last-summer-uk-riots-had-been-reported-for-domestic-abuse>

¹⁹ Plan International (2025) A Quarter of UK Adults Believe Progress on Gender Equality Is Bad for Men. Available at: <https://plan-uk.org/press/quarter-uk-adults-believe-progress-gender-equality-bad-men>

Engender is calling on MSPs to ask the Scottish Government to:

- Fund a national campaign and initiatives aimed at raising public awareness about the root causes of VAWG and the importance of gender equality.

3. The Role of Policymaking in Preventing VAWG

Primary prevention approaches aim to address systemic and structural gender inequality to stop VAWG **before** it occurs. These are distinct from other prevention or early intervention approaches, which address VAWG **after** it has occurred.

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. Our [Delivering Equally Safe project](#) highlights the crucial role of public policy in achieving this goal.

Prioritising primary prevention requires action from all levels of government and all sectors. In 2025, we commissioned [research](#) into the delivery of primary prevention approaches across Scotland. We heard from 51 practitioners across 30 of Scotland's 32 local authority areas. There was **unanimous agreement among those interviewed that work on primary prevention is crucial, and they would like to do more of it. However, limitations on funding and resources are currently making this difficult.** Participants informed us that VAWG is often siloed, making it challenging to integrate women's equality into other relevant aspects of local policies, including child poverty plans, local improvement plans, and placemaking.

It is a similar picture at the national level, with **many UK and Scottish Government policies continuing to entrench gender inequality and consequently enable VAWG.** One of the most glaring examples is the design of our social security system, which continues to create an enabling environment for VAWG. For example, Universal Credit's misogynistic design features, such as household-level payments, enable financial abuse and domestic abuse, while also undermining women's ability to leave abusive partners.²⁰

In addition, evidence shows perpetrators weaponise the NRPF condition to coerce women to stay with them and limit women's access to the benefits or services they might need to leave.²¹ Women with NRPF are three times more likely to experience VAWG.²² GREVIO raised "grave" concerns about this condition and the way it creates barriers for migrant women and girls striving to live free from violence or seek help for experiences

²⁰ WBG (2018) Universal Credit and Financial Abuse. Available at: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/universal-credit-and-financial-abuse-2-pager-final.pdf>

House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2019) Universal Credit and "survival sex". Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmworpen/83/8304.htm>

²¹ WBG (2024) Funding for violence against women and girls services. Briefing for a new government. Available at: <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/funding-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-services-briefing-for-a-new-government/>

²² EAW (2025) 100+ women's rights groups warn against racist weaponisation of VAWG. Available at: <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/100-womens-rights-groups-warn-against-racist-weaponisation-of-vawg/>

of it. Although this is a reserved matter, **we are calling on the Scottish Government to mitigate it by establishing a 'Women's Equality Fund'** that provides targeted crisis financial support for marginalised groups of women who fall through the gaps in existing systems of support, including women with NRPF.

We have also published briefings on how gender inequality in our **housing, transport and planning** sectors is contributing to VAWG. These highlight how **women's underrepresentation, lack of intersectional gender analysis and the de-prioritisation of women's safety in these areas enable VAWG.**

Engender is calling on MSPs to ask the Scottish Government to:

- **Embed a primary prevention approach in policymaking that ensures women are equally represented, gender equality is mainstreamed, and women's safety is prioritised.**
- **Address the misogynistic design of our social security system, including by introducing individual payments of Universal Credit.**
- **Establish a "Women's Equality Fund" to provide targeted crisis financial support for marginalised groups of women, including women with NRPF.**
- **Create a new action plan to tackle women's homelessness and housing insecurity in Scotland, which recognises that a safe and secure home is a protective factor against VAWG.**

CONCLUSION

VAWG continues to occur at endemic levels in Scotland; this is preventable. To eradicate VAWG, we must address the root cause, which is gender inequality, and integrate primary prevention into all areas of public policy. Our research suggests that practitioners across Scotland would like to engage in more primary prevention; however, current funding and resource constraints make this impossible. This 16 Days, **we urge MSPs to call on the Scottish Government to improve data on all forms of VAWG, increase awareness about the root causes of VAWG and ensure all areas of public policy promote women's equality and safety.**

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.