

Engender Parliamentary Briefing

Preventing Violence Against Women for an Equally Safe Scotland

15th September 2026

BACKGROUND

Engender welcomes this Scottish Government debate on preventing violence against women (VAW) for an Equally Safe Scotland. The term violence against women and girls (VAWG) refers to forms of gender-based violence that are predominantly perpetrated by men and disproportionately affect women and girls. This violence takes many different forms including, but not limited to, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, so-called honour-based abuse and online abuse.

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, mostly from someone already known to them**, such as a partner, ex-partner or family member.¹

The Equally Safe Strategy, Scotland's strategy for preventing and eradicating all forms of VAWG, takes a "world-leading" approach by adopting a gendered analysis of this violence and prioritising primary prevention. Primary prevention means stopping VAWG before it ever occurs by addressing its root cause, which is gender inequality.

Primary prevention is the most effective way to eradicate VAWG. While we welcome the Scottish Government and COSLA's commitment to this approach, this has yet to translate into meaningful implementation. Engender's [Delivering Equally Safe project](#) highlights the role that different areas of public policy can and should play to address gender inequality and promote women's safety. To achieve this, and deliver an Equally Safe Scotland, coordinated action is required across all levels and areas of government to tackle pervasive gender inequality that continues drive VAWG in this country.

SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

1. Violence Against Women and Girls in Scotland Remains Endemic

VAWG continues to occur at endemic levels in Scotland:

- In 2024/25, Police Scotland recorded **64,967 incidents of domestic abuse** (an increase of 2% from the previous year); about four-in-five (81%) incidents involved a female victim and a male suspected perpetrator.²

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>

² Scottish Government (2026) Domestic abuse statistics recorded by the police in Scotland, 2024-25. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/domestic-abuse-statistics-recorded-police-scotland-2024-25/>

- In 2025/26, the police recorded **3,229 crimes of rape and attempted rape**; this is an increase of 11% from 2024/25 and the highest level recorded since 1971.³
- 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

Global evidence indicates that less than 10% of women who experience VAWG report it to the police, meaning many of these figures only represent the very tip of the iceberg.⁷

2. Gender inequality is the Root Cause of VAWG

Gender inequality is the root cause of all forms of VAWG. This inequality continues to affect women’s everyday lives in Scotland today, with women still having less access than men to power and decision-making, money and resources and respect.

Power and Decision-Making

Women currently accounting for just 43% of MSPs and 35% of councillors. Engender’s 2023 “**Sex and Power**” report also found that **women held just one 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.⁸

Evidence shows that women in politics are more likely to prioritise women’s interests and issues that benefit society’s most vulnerable, including VAWG, welfare and education.⁹ When women are excluded from positions of power, it can lead to the development of policies and decisions that fail to address their needs, or harm them.¹⁰

³ Scottish Government (2026) Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2025-26. Available at:

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/recorded-crime-scotland-2025-26/>

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

⁸ Engender (2023) Sex and Power 2023. Available at:

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/SP2023NEW.pdf>

⁹ King’s College London (2020) Women political leaders: the impact of gender on democracy. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/women-political-leaders.pdf>

¹⁰ Engender (2023) An Overview of VAWG and the Role of Public Policy in Scotland in Primary Prevention. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/VAWGbriefingNov23.pdf>

While increasing the number of women in positions of power is important, culture change within these institutions is equally vital. Engender's research into women councillors' safety in Scotland highlights how women politicians are subject to high levels of everyday sexism and abuse. **Nine out of 10 women councillors told us they had experienced some form of VAW during their political career**, with their fellow councillors and members of the public the most common perpetrators.¹¹ This violence has a chilling effect on women's participation in our politics; **48% councillors told us that they self-censored as a result of the violence they experienced, while nearly a fifth (18%) decided to step down from politics altogether.**

The 2023 Gender Sensitive Audit of the Scottish Parliament similarly highlighted how "everyday and routine sexism is embedded in the parliamentary norms and culture," affecting women's participation in parliamentary business.¹² Many former women MSPs also cited the high levels of abuse they faced in their role as their reason for stepping down at this year's Scottish Parliament election. One former MSP told us in our "**Standing Down, Speaking Out**" report that, **"the Chamber has become a toxic bear pit with shouty men silencing women."**¹³

Engender is calling on MSPs to:

- **Push the Scottish Government to implement recommendations from Engender's report into women councillors' safety in Scotland ahead of the local elections.**
- **Support the Equal Representation Coalition's forthcoming Equal Representation Charter when it is launched at the end of this year. This will outline ten commitments for stakeholders in the Scottish Parliament, including promoting a zero-tolerance culture, ensuring inclusive debate and tackling misogyny.**

Money and Resources

Women still do not have equal access to financial resources in Scotland; women are more likely to live in poverty, rely more on social security and are less likely to own their own home.¹⁴ Economic inequality between men and women makes VAWG more likely to occur by undermining women's financial independence as well as by restricting their power and status in their relationships, families, and workplaces.¹⁵

¹¹ Engender (2026) 'Part of the Job?' Women councillors' experiences of sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence in Scottish Councils. Available at:

<https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender---Part-of-the-Job---WEB---June2026.pdf>

¹² Scottish Parliament (2023) A Parliament for All: Report of the Parliament's Gender Sensitive Audit.

Available at: <https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/spcb/gender-sensitive-audit.pdf>

¹³ Engender (2026) Standing Down, Speaking Out. Why Women MSPs Are Leaving Holyrood and How We Fix It. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Standing-Down-Speaking-Out.pdf>

¹⁴ 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>

¹⁵ Women's Budget Group (2020) Violence Against Women and Girls and Women's Economic Inequality. Available at: <https://www.wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Violence-and-womens-economic-equality-1.pdf>

Our recent report on “[Confronting Women’s Poverty](#)” highlights how women’s economic inequality has widened in the last decade following successive crises of austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis.¹⁶ Austerity has been described as its own form of gender-based violence due to the way it disproportionately affects women’s incomes and financial independence.¹⁷ **In the UK, austerity measures have been linked to a projected 21% reduction in living standards for the most economically marginalised women by 2030**, with single mothers, Black and Asian women, and disabled women the most severely affected.¹⁸

The IPPR warns that the Scottish Government’s plans for **public sector reform and workforce reduction targets risk Scotland “slipping into austerity.”**¹⁹ These plans will have a disproportionate impact on women. In particular, women are the majority of the public sector workforce, meaning they will be more adversely affected by plans to cut 18,000 public sector jobs over the next five years (as calculated by the IPPR).

In addition, women are the majority of users of public services, including public transport, childcare and social care. When such services are cut, it is women who are more likely to fill these gaps with their own unpaid labour. This has been found to put women at an increased risk of experiencing VAWG, including economic abuse and domestic abuse, as they have less opportunities to access paid employment or build social support networks outwith the home which perpetrators can exploit.²⁰

Engender is calling the Scottish Government to:

- **Establish a Taskforce on Women’s Poverty to eliminate the gender income gap and recommend statutory poverty reduction targets.**
- **Create a Women’s Equality Fund to provide targeted crisis support, including for women with No Recourse to Public Funds and other marginalised groups.**
- **Ensure public sector reform does not undermine existing commitments to eradicate VAWG, and that there is policy coherence with the Equally Safe Strategy.**

Respect and Safety

¹⁶ Engender (2026) Confronting Women’s Poverty. An Effective Response to an Age of Crisis. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/ChallengingWomensPovertyFINAL.pdf>

¹⁷ Oxfam (2022) The Assault of Austerity: How prevailing economic policy choices are a form of gender-based violence. Available at: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-assault-of-austerity-how-prevailing-economic-policy-choices-are-a-form-of-g-621448/>

¹⁸ Women’s Budget Group (2024) Where do we go from here? An intersectional analysis of women’s living standards since 2010. Available at: <https://www.wbg.org.uk/publication/where-do-we-go-from-here-an-intersectional-analysis-of-womens-living-standards-since-2010/>

¹⁹ IPPR (2026) More for less? Employment, productivity and reform in Scottish public services. Available at: <https://www.ippr.org/articles/more-for-less-scottish-public-services>

²⁰ Oxfam (2022) The Assault of Austerity: How prevailing economic policy choices are a form of gender-based violence.

We are increasingly concerned about the spread of misogyny, including extreme misogyny, in online and offline spaces in Scotland and the impact this is having on the safety of women and girls.

Misogyny is “a way of thinking that upholds the primary status of men and sense of male entitlement while subordinating women and limiting their power and freedom.”²¹ This thinking underpins the attitudes and structures that enable and normalise VAWG in our society. While misogynistic attitudes have always existed, there is evidence they are being increasingly promoted and normalised in online spaces. **Nearly three-quarters (73%) of 12- to 25-year-olds in the UK have viewed misogynistic content on social media.**²²

This is not an individual problem; rather, online platforms are routinely directing harmful content to users through the design of these platforms and their algorithms. Indeed, **boys aged 11 to 14 are exposed to harmful content within 30 minutes of being online.**²³

The proliferation of misogynistic content online can translate into offline harms for women and girls. For example, **children and young people exposed to misogynistic content are five times more likely than those who have not viewed it to believe that it's acceptable to physically hurt someone.**²⁴ Young people who hold a favourable view of misogynistic influencer Andrew Tate are also significantly more likely to hold misogynistic views like, “women often cry rape after sex they regret.”²⁵

Engender is calling on 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.**
- **Put pressure on the UK Government to strengthen duties on online platforms to prevent the spread of extreme misogynistic content and online VAWG.**

CONCLUSION

VAWG is preventable. However, persistent gender inequality continues to undermine efforts to stop this violence from occurring. Addressing this inequality and prioritising primary prevention requires strong political will from MSPs of all parties. We therefore

²¹ Helena Kennedy KC (2022) Misogyny – A Human Rights Issue. Report of the Working Group on Misogyny and Criminal Justice. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/misogyny-human-rights-issue/>

²² Amnesty International (2025) Toxic tech: New polling exposes widespread online misogyny driving Gen Z away from social media. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/latest/toxic-tech-new-polling-exposes-widespread-online-misogyny-driving-gen-z-away-social/>

²³ Vodafone (2024) AI ‘Aggro-rithms’: young boys are served harmful content within 60 seconds of being online. Available at: <https://www.vodafone.co.uk/newscentre/press-release/ai-aggro-rithms/>

²⁴ Women’s Aid (2023) Influencers and Attitudes. How will the next generation understand domestic abuse? Listening to children and young people to build a better future. Available at: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CYP-WWF-FINAL-SMALL.pdf>

²⁵ Hope Not Hate (2024) Plugged in but not disconnected: young people and hateful attitudes. Available at: <https://hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Plugged-in-but-disconnected-young-people-and-hateful-attitudes-hope-not-hate-2024.pdf>

urge all MSPs to support our calls for coordinated and comprehensive action to tackle women's inequality in all its forms and deliver an Equally Safe Scotland.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact: Hannah Brisbane, Policy Officer, Engender

Email: hannah.brisbane@engender.org.uk

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.