

**Engender Parliamentary Briefing:
Scottish Government Debate: Making Scotland Equally Safe: Marking
the Annual International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against
Women**

26 November 2020

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. Violence against women is a human rights violation and a cause and a consequence of women's inequality, and yet the daily reality of women and girls remains inflected with acts of misogyny perpetrated largely by men. There is some evidence that in 2020 harassment and violence is escalating in intensity and harm, permeating new forums and taking new forms. Engender's work on misogynistic harassment and 'hate crime' demonstrates there is a critical gap in the law where certain forms of violence towards women and girls continues to be normalised.¹

We welcome this debate coinciding with 16 Days of Activism, and the opportunity to set out some of the current evidence surrounding violence against women, which remains endemic in Scotland, noting specific opportunities for harms over the upcoming election. We also set out our hopes for the working group on misogynistic harassment announced by the Scottish Government and this opportunity for Scotland to be bold and develop new solutions to the types of violence that continue to impede women's lives.

RESPONDING TO MISOGYNY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN 2020

1. Women's Experience of Misogynistic Harassment

Harassment permeates almost every aspect of women's lives, constraining our freedoms and changing the way that we think about ourselves and relate to the world. Women are constantly forced to undertake 'safety work' – strategising and planning to avoid, manage or disrupt men's violence. Survey data shows that:

¹ Engender (2019) Making Women Safer in Scotland: The case for a standalone misogyny offence. Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Making-Women-Safer-in-Scotland---the-case-for-a-standalone-misogyny-offence.pdf>.

- More than half of women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace, with one quarter experiencing unwanted touching, and one fifth of women experiencing unwanted sexual advances.²
- Women in precarious or irregular employment are particularly at risk of sexual harassment,³ types of contracts which are particularly common in service sector jobs dominated by women, especially Black and racialised women,⁴ and which are at additional risk due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- A 2010 YouGov poll of 16-18 year olds found 29% of girls experienced unwanted sexual touching at school and a further 71% said they heard sexual name-calling such as ‘slut’ or ‘slag’ towards girls at school daily or a few times per week.⁵
- ActionAid reported in 2016 that more than half (53%) of women in Great Britain had experienced some form of harassment within the last month, and that almost half (43%) had done so at the age of 18 or younger.⁶
- An international survey in 2017 found that nearly a quarter (23%) of women has experienced online abuse and harassment, and of those 41% felt that their physical safety was threatened.⁷

2. Violence against women in politics

Gender-based violence constrains women’s choices, including avoiding certain workplace situations⁸ and not considering career options and sectors. In this way sexual harassment contributes to the ‘glass ceiling’, to women’s subordinate role in the workplace, and to the population-level gender pay gap.⁹ No sector is immune, but as noted by Dame Laura Cox it is “perhaps not surprising that such allegations had emerged in the world of politics, where the inherent imbalance of power creates obvious vulnerabilities.”¹⁰

² TUC (2016) Still just a bit of banter? Sexual harassment in the workplace in 2016.

³ Fundamental Rights Agency (2014) Survey on violence against women in EU (2012). European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/survey-data-explorer-violence-against-women-survey>.

⁴ Close the Gap (2019) Still Not Visible: Research on Black and minority ethnic women’s experiences of employment in Scotland. Available at: https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1557499847_Still-Not-Visible.pdf.

⁵ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2010) 2010 poll on sexual harassment in schools.

⁶ ActionAid UK (2016) Nearly three in four women were harassed in past month. ActionAid UK Available at: <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/latest-news/three-in-four-women-uk-world-harassed-in-last-month>.

⁷ Amnesty International (2017) Amnesty reveals alarming impact of online abuse against women. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>.

⁸ TUC (2016) Still just a bit of banter? Sexual harassment in the workplace in 2016.

⁹ Women and Equalities Committee (2018) Sexual harassment in the workplace. House of Commons.

¹⁰ Dame Laura Cox DBE (2018) The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff Independent Inquiry Report. Available at:

<http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/CWP%20Workshop%204%20The%20Bullying%20and%20Harassment%20of%20Parliamentary%20staff.pdf>.

Violence against women in politics is a global phenomenon with high profile examples, such as attacks in parliamentary discourse and media towards former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard;¹¹ insulting and abusive language from a male opponent towards US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the murder of UK MP Jo Cox in 2016. Scotland is not immune to this problem of political violence against women, as Amnesty's Toxic Twitter campaign demonstrates.¹² Women remain under-represented in our public life, with just 36% of MSP and 29% of councillor offices held by women in 2020.¹³ A woman of colour has never yet been elected to the Scottish Parliament.

Politics increasingly requires individuals to engage with social media, to profile themselves and connect with voters, yet online space is a significant forum for hatred, abuse and hostility towards women who work in politics or merely express political opinion.¹⁴ The UN's Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women charts online threats made to women in politics around the world, which are often sexualised, and which function as a "direct attack on the full participation by women in political and public life".¹⁵ Women of colour are significantly more affected in the scale and intensity of harassment and threats.¹⁶

Political violence against women has wider communicative impacts that compound our responsibility to take action.¹⁷ Failing to address it not only harms the intended victim, but has a multiplier effect, damaging the ambitions of women and girls as political staff, voters and future candidates, while reaffirming hierarchies that maintain women's wider inequality.

As we approach an election campaign in 2021, one that is more likely than ever to rely on digital forms of campaigning to create visibility and engagement with candidates, Engender is calling on political parties to ensure that they have robust responses to political violence against women, including harassment via Twitter and other digital platforms.

¹¹ Huffington Post (2016) Julia Gillard Warns Of 'Almost Daily' Rape Threats For Women In Public Life. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2016/10/12/julia-gillard-warns-of-almost-daily-rape-threats-for-women-in_a_21580468/.

¹² BBC (2018) Female politicians speak out over Twitter abuse. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-43479004>.

¹³ Engender (2020) Sex and Power in Scotland 2020 Available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engenders-Sex-and-Power-2020.pdf>.

¹⁴ National Democratic Institute (2019) Tweets That Chill: Analyzing Online Violence Against Women in Politics. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Tweets%20That%20Chill%20Report.pdf>.

¹⁵ UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (2018) Violence against women in politics. UN General Assembly. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/73/301.

¹⁶ Amnesty International UK (2017) Unsocial Media: Tracking Twitter Abuse against Women MPs. Available at: <https://medium.com/@AmnestyInsights/unsocial-media-tracking-twitter-abuse-against-women-mps-fc28aeca498a>.

¹⁷ Fawcett (2019) Open Letter: Lifetime ban from standing for elected office for those who promote rape or violence. Available at: <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=5ade3f7b-a6e1-4e6c-b8da-20a042c97fa5>.

3. The Misogyny Working Group

Engender warmly welcomes the creation of a working group on misogyny, as announced by Scottish Government in April 2020.¹⁸ The group, which will be chaired by Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws, has yet to be convened, but we hope that it will consider the gaps in the law that enable misogynistic harassment, both in person and online, to continue unimpeded, restricting the success and wellbeing of women and girls. We hope that the group will:

- Build on Equally Safe’s gendered approach and will consider the themes of this 16 Days global campaign – “Fund, Respond, Prevent, Collect!”
- Work to fill data and analysis gaps, including identifying where the existing law does not provide coverage of egregious misogynistic harassment.
- Work towards a definition of misogyny and develop any legal responses through a participatory approach, following the example of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act.

Developing a response to the kinds of misogyny we outline in this briefing, considering the gendered and communicative effects of gender-based violence for victim-survivors as well as other women and for our equality, will be an ambitious and world-leading feat. However, there is a clear and urgent need for this boldness. Yet criminal sanction for egregious harassment can only ever be one part of preventing violence against women. Our ambition is for violence against women, including misogynistic harassment and hate, to be consigned to history.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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ABOUT US

Engender is a membership organisation working on feminist agendas in Scotland and Europe, to increase women’s power and influence and to make visible the impact of sexism on women, men and society. We provide support to individuals, organisations and institutions who seek to achieve gender equality and justice.

¹⁸ Scottish Government (2020) Hate Crime Bill: Working Group to consider standalone offence on misogynistic harassment. Scottish Government News. Available at: <https://news.gov.scot/news/hate-crime-bill>.