

## **Engender Parliamentary Briefing: Recognising the Vital Role Men Must Play in Challenging and Eradicating Violence against Women and Girls**

30<sup>th</sup> November 2022

### **SUMMARY:**

- Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is endemic in Scotland
- The root cause of VAWG is gender inequality which continues to impact on every aspect of women's lives in Scotland
- MSPs have a key role to play in preventing VAWG by embedding a primary prevention approach in policy development
- The cost of living crisis is disproportionately affecting women and enabling VAWG; gender mainstreaming and intersectional budget analysis must be at the heart of Scotland's response to mitigate its effects
- Policymakers must urgently act to prevent sexual and sexist harassment in the workplace and to recognise this form of VAW as a pressing health and safety concern.

### **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. We welcome this debate on the role men must play in challenging and eradicating violence against women and girls (VAWG) as part of the global 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign. This year's 16 Days theme, "UNITE! Activism to end violence against women and girls", reminds us that it is not the sole responsibility of women and girls to end male violence; we all have a role to play.

Our work consistently shows the pervasiveness of violence in the lives of women and girls in Scotland, from sexual harassment in the workplace to our work supporting the delivery of the Scottish Government's Equally Safe Strategy.

**VAWG remains one of the most widespread human rights violations in the world; it is estimated that one in three women will be subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>**

According to Scotland's Gender Equality Index, "violence against women continues to occur" in Scotland and has "lasting effects on women, both psychologically and physically."<sup>2</sup> However, more data is required to understand the full extent of violence

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

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Government (2020) [Gender Equality Index 2020.](#)

occurring and the increased risk of experiencing it that women affected by intersectional discrimination face.

## SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

### 1. Primary Prevention and Public Policy

Evidence shows that VAWG is a cause and consequence of gender inequality.<sup>3</sup> There are lower levels of all forms of VAWG in societies where women's participation is valued and fewer economic, social and political inequalities exist between men and women.<sup>4</sup>

Unequal power relations and societal norms that sustain VAWG are pervasive in Scotland. The Gender Equality Index scores Scotland at 73 out of 100 (with a score of 100 indicating full gender equality). There is no area of life measured by the Index in which women enjoy full equality with men, including in domains such as work, power and money.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the use of data that is not gender-sensitive means that the Index vastly underestimates gender inequality in certain areas.<sup>6</sup>

Primary prevention is a long-term strategy which aims to stop VAWG before it occurs by tackling the root cause of the problem: gender inequality. This type of approach is a key component of the Scottish Government's Equally Safe Strategy, Scotland's strategy for challenging and eradicating violence against women and girls. The Equally Safe Strategy also recognises that for primary prevention to be effective, it must be part of coordinated actions across different levels of influence, including the political sphere.<sup>7</sup>

Engender's Delivering Equally Safe (DES) project seeks to raise awareness about the importance of primary prevention in public policy areas outwith equalities and justice-related domains, such as housing, transport, planning and so on. This is because public policy is a powerful tool for promoting gender equality and therefore preventing VAWG.

**Find out more about Engender's work on primary prevention [here](#).**

Despite primary prevention being a core objective of the Equally Safe Strategy, it is still not being operationalised consistently in Scottish policymaking. For example, the Scottish Government's 2018 Ending Homelessness Together High-Level Action Plan did not include a gendered analysis of housing and homelessness, despite the fact that domestic abuse is the most common reason given by women for a homeless application.<sup>8</sup> A primary prevention approach would have ensured that these issues were embedded within the Action Plan from the outset rather than needing to add a gendered analysis retroactively.

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<sup>3</sup> UN Women (2015) [A Framework to Underpin Action to Prevent Violence against Women](#).

<sup>4</sup> UN Women (2012) [Handbook for National Action Plans on Violence against Women](#).

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Government (2020) [Gender Equality Index 2020](#).

<sup>6</sup> Engender (2022) [Engender response to the Scottish Parliament Health, Social Care and Sport Committee inquiry on health inequalities](#).

<sup>7</sup> Scottish Government and COSLA (2018) [Equally Safe Strategy](#).

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Government (2018) [Ending Homelessness Together High-level Action Plan](#).

Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament have the power to create an environment in Scotland that is hostile to VAWG by integrating a primary prevention approach into all policy development. This will challenge gender inequality and prevent VAWG before it occurs.

**Engender is calling for the Scottish Government, and other policymakers, to:**

- **Ensure a primary prevention approach is embedded in policy development across all public policy areas**

## 2. The Cost of Living Crisis

Integrating a primary prevention approach into public policy will be crucial for Scotland's response to the cost of living crisis. Engender recently published [a report on the gendered impact of the cost of living crisis](#), which demonstrates the intersectional ways in which diverse groups of women are being disproportionately affected by the crisis because of existing gender equality.

Women at heightened risk of destitution include groups that are not often represented in policymaking, such as women in or at the edges of the youth and criminal justice systems, care experienced women and girls, women with no recourse to public funds and women who sell sex.<sup>9</sup>

Financial insecurity is a risk factor for experiencing VAWG, with ONS figures showing that women in households earning less than £10,000 are more than four times as likely to experience abuse from a partner than those in households earning over £50,000.<sup>10</sup>

**Research by Women's Aid England shows that the cost of living crisis is already condemning women to men's violence, with 73 per cent of women saying it has prevented them from leaving their abusive partner or made it harder to do so.<sup>11</sup>**

VAWG also causes women's inequality by limiting their access to resources and financial security. Around 90 per cent of women experience financial abuse as part of their experience of domestic abuse, and worsening debt is linked to gendered cycles of violence.<sup>12,13</sup> In addition, the impact of sexual harassment can have detrimental effects on women's health, professional development, employment prospects and thus, their earnings.<sup>14</sup>

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 proven to undermine women's ability to leave an abusive partner and has even caused some

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<sup>9</sup> Engender (2022) [Women & the Cost of Living: A crisis of deepening inequality](#).

<sup>10</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2018) [Women at risk of experiencing partner abuse in England and Wales: years ending March 2015 to 2017](#).

<sup>11</sup> Women's Aid (2022) [Cost of Living and the impact on survivors of domestic abuse](#).

<sup>12</sup> Refuge (2008) ['What's yours is mine': The different forms of economic abuse and its impact on women and children experiencing domestic violence](#).

<sup>13</sup> Women's Budget Group (2021) [Household debt, gender and Covid-19](#).

<sup>14</sup> Engender (2022) [Enough is Enough: Tackling workplace sexual harassment in Scotland](#).

women to turn to survival sex.<sup>15,16</sup> This is a result of design features in Universal Credit, such as the unwarranted five-week wait and single household payments, which entrench both gender and economic inequality, creating an enabling environment for VAWG to be perpetrated.

The Scottish Government is committed to providing individual payments of Universal Credit within flexibilities devolved under the Scotland Act 2016. However, this has yet to be delivered.

#### **Engender is calling for the Scottish Government to:**

- **Move swiftly to implement the commitment to a dedicated fund to support women leaving an abusive partner**
- **Fast-track delivery of automatic individual payments of Universal Credit from the outset of the claim**
- **Apply rigorous intersectional gender budget analysis to all budgeting processes**

### **3. Tackling Sexual Harassment in the Workplace**

The Scottish Government's definition of VAWG covers sexual and sexist harassment (SSH) in public and private spaces.<sup>17</sup> Our recent [Enough is Enough report](#) on this issue shows that SSH is the most common form of VAWG experienced in the workplace and is driven by gender inequality in the labour market.<sup>18</sup>

More than half (52 per cent) of women consulted in research by the TUC said they had experienced sexual harassment at work, demonstrating the widespread scale of the issue. The overwhelming majority of perpetrators in these cases were men (nine out of ten).<sup>19</sup>

Our research found that SSH is especially prevalent and tolerated in male-dominated work environments. It is perpetrated most often by men in positions of power; almost three-quarters (72 per cent) of respondents to an Engender survey told us they were harassed by someone more senior than themselves, such as a direct line manager. For many women, this was a major barrier to reporting the incident, which leads to low disclosure rates of this form of VAWG. In Scotland, men are systematically overrepresented in positions of power and influence which also contributes to this climate of underreporting.<sup>20</sup>

Our research also shows that women across economic sectors and institutional settings have very low levels of confidence in their employer's ability to appropriately prevent, investigate and sanction individuals responsible for sexual harassment.

Forty-three per cent of respondents to our survey said they did not report an incident because they did not think they would be believed. As such, current responses to

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<sup>15</sup> Engender (2022) [Women & the Cost of Living: A crisis of deepening inequality](#).

<sup>16</sup> House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee (2019) [Universal Credit and "survival sex"](#).

<sup>17</sup> Scottish Government and COSLA (2018) [Equally Safe Strategy](#).

<sup>18</sup> Engender (2022) [Enough is Enough: Tackling workplace sexual harassment in Scotland](#).

<sup>19</sup> TUC (2016) [Still Just a Bit of Banter? Sexual Harassment in the workplace](#).

<sup>20</sup> Engender (2022) [Enough is Enough: Tackling workplace sexual harassment in Scotland](#).

workplace sexual harassment mean that women are shouldering the majority of the risk and consequences for stopping harassment instead of the perpetrators.<sup>21</sup>

The impact of sexual harassment on women's lives is both insidious and far-reaching, with implications for women's health and wellbeing, earning potential, financial stability, income inequality with men, career progression and ultimately for gender equality across all spheres. This form of VAWG represents a significant public health and safety issue; however, it is not currently treated as such by Scottish or UK policymakers.

To tackle this form of VAWG, the Scottish Government, COSLA, Public Health Scotland, and regulatory bodies should identify workplace sexual harassment as a pressing public health and safety concern. The Scottish Government must also take urgent action to address this issue as part of its mandate to tackle violence against women and in its ambitions to improve workplace health and safety.

**Engender is calling for the Scottish Government to:**

- **Develop a gendered strategy on working with public bodies and other employers to prevent workplace sexual and sexist harassment, in co-production with women's organisations**
- **Endorse and implement Engender's model sexual harassment policy, and encourage take-up by employers by all possible means, including through procurement policy**
- **Develop an independent, specialist body that receives sexual harassment complaints from workers**
- **Assess how it can ensure sexual harassment is treated as a health and safety concern in Scotland**

## **CONCLUSION: UNITE! Activism to end violence against women and girls**

It cannot fall to women and girls alone to end or protect themselves from the endemic issue of violence against women and girls; this year's theme for the 16 Days of Activism reminds us that we all have a role to play in preventing VAWG and resisting the rollback on women's rights that is occurring after years of austerity, the pandemic and now the cost of living crisis.

Without mainstreaming women's needs across policymaking and budgeting in an intersectional way, we run the risk of entrenching gender inequality even more deeply and enabling VAWG in Scotland.

**Engender is calling on all MSPs to recognise their responsibility for stopping violence and discrimination against women across all settings. By embedding a primary prevention approach in public policy, we can achieve a Scotland where all individuals are equally safe and respected.**

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

## 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.