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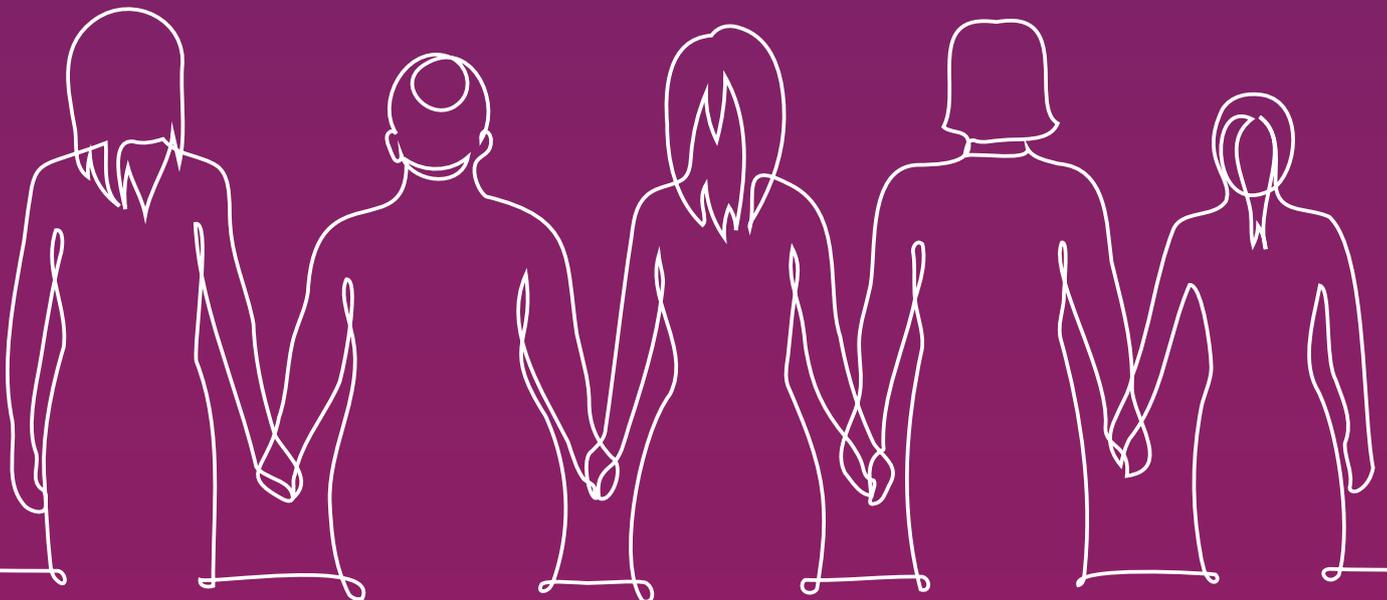
COSLA



# Equally Safe:

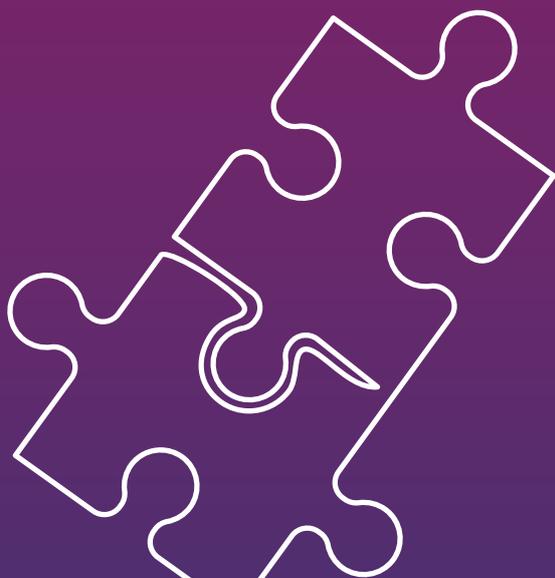
## Scotland's Strategy for Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls

December 2023



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## Foreword

**Violence against women and girls has no place in our vision for a safe, strong, successful Scotland. The Scottish Government, COSLA, and key partners remain steadfast in their commitment to preventing and eradicating this violence and addressing the underlying attitudes and systems that perpetuate it.**

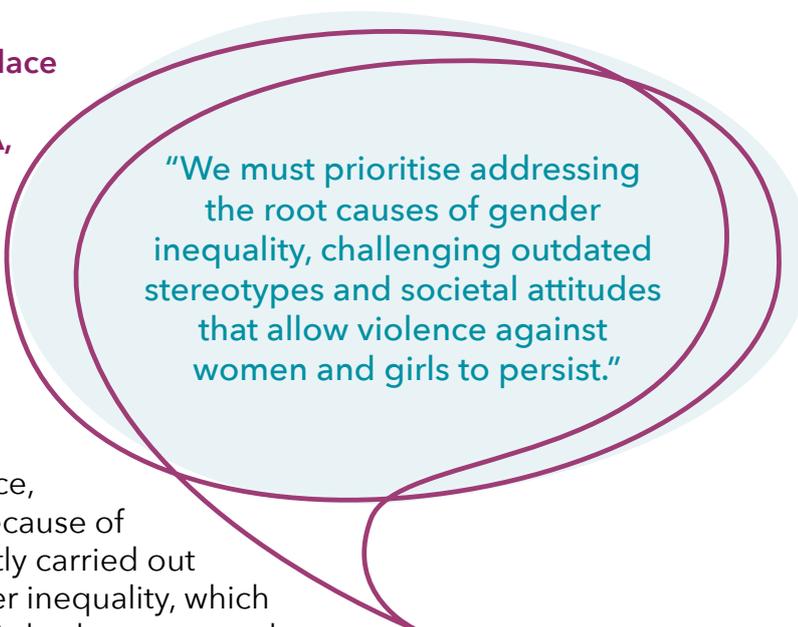
Equally Safe is our country's strategy to prevent and address all forms of violence against women and girls, specifically violence, abuse, and exploitation directed at them because of their gender. This behaviour is predominantly carried out by men and stems from deep-rooted gender inequality, which is unacceptable in modern-day Scotland. It is both a cause and consequence of women's inequality. This strategy, initially published in 2014, updated in 2016, and now refreshed, was collaboratively developed by the Scottish Government, COSLA, and various national and local partners and stakeholders from the public and third sectors.

This collaborative approach is vital because all spheres of government and all sectors of society have a role to play in tackling this issue. While specialist organisations are crucial for supporting victims of violence, abuse, and exploitation, the refreshed Equally Safe strategy emphasises that violence against women and girls is everyone's concern, and that we all have a part to play.

The Scottish Government and COSLA, the voice of Local Government in Scotland, will work together across all sectors to establish a unified and collective approach to combat violence against women and girls. This will involve public and private sector systems and services, third sector organisations, trade unions, community groups, and individuals joining forces to prevent violence and to provide safety, positive outcomes, and recovery for those affected, while holding perpetrators of such violence, abuse, and exploitation accountable for harms caused.

The refresh of Equally Safe enables us to adapt to changes in the social and legislative landscape without altering the strategy's valued aims and objectives. It ensures that the digital world, diverse identities and experiences of women and girls, and children's rights are central to the strategy. Girls face particular barriers to realising their rights, and this strategy seeks to keep girls visible.

This refresh also reaffirms the joint leadership and commitment of the Scottish Government and COSLA, aligning with the Verity House Agreement, which



**"We must prioritise addressing the root causes of gender inequality, challenging outdated stereotypes and societal attitudes that allow violence against women and girls to persist."**

emphasises regular and meaningful engagement and respect for each other's democratic mandates, and the realisation of human rights for all.

We aim to build on the progress made to date in raising awareness of the prevalence and harmful effects of violence against women and girls in Scotland, strengthening laws in this area, and providing support and resources to public and third sector workers engaging and helping those affected. Our investment in frontline services will continue, and we will work together to further explore sustainable funding models for services supporting those affected by all forms of violence against women and girls.

While we've made progress, there is still much work to be done. We must prioritise addressing the root causes of gender inequality, challenging outdated stereotypes and societal attitudes that allow violence against women and girls to persist. We need to eliminate systemic gender inequality and focus on prevention. Simultaneously, we must optimise resources and continually improve support for women and girls at risk of or experiencing violence, abuse, and exploitation, ensuring they have the services they need.

Only by working together across all aspects of Scottish life, respecting local circumstances and priorities, can we effectively prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls. This strategy demands substantial and sustained effort and commitment from all of us to create a Scotland we can be proud of, where all our citizens can thrive and be Equally Safe.



**Siobhian Brown**  
Minister for Victims  
and Community Safety



**Cllr Maureen Chalmers**  
COSLA Community  
Wellbeing Spokesperson

## Our vision and aim

This is a plan to eradicate and prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG), and it is right that we take this focus given the prevalence and harm caused by the different forms of violence experienced because of being a woman or girl.

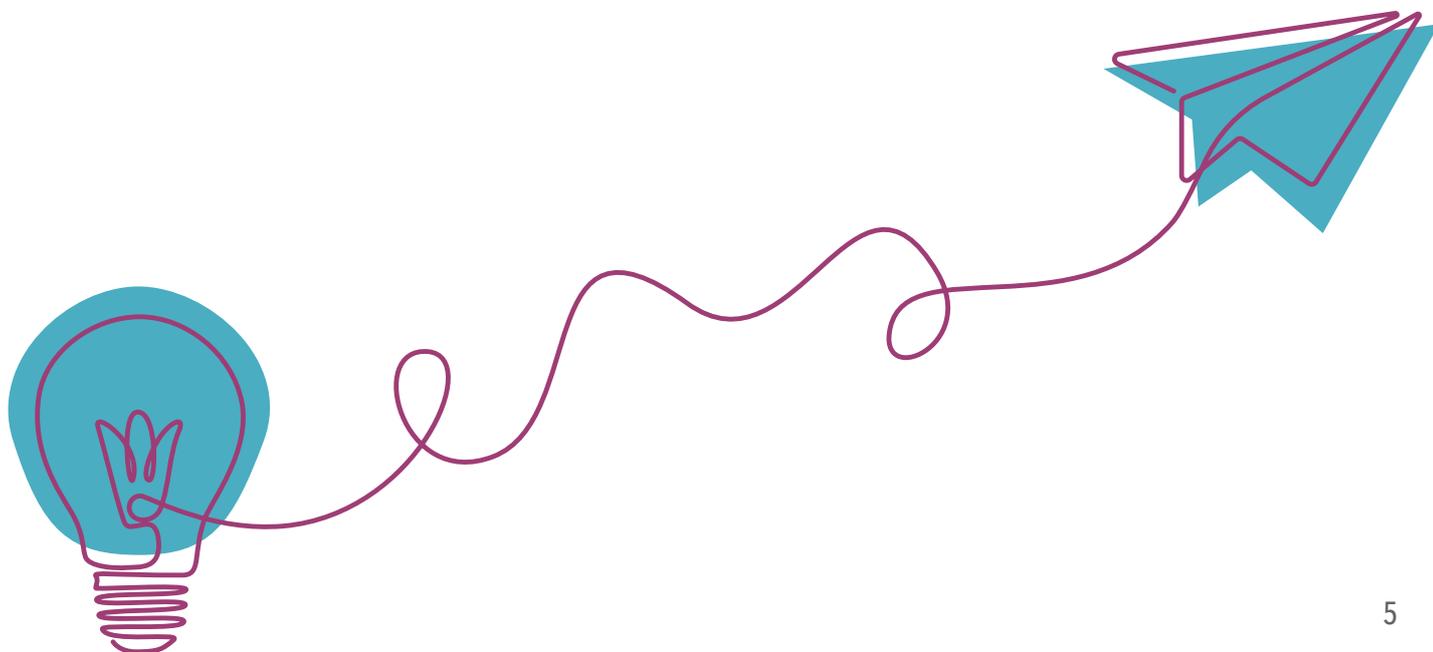
It's everyone's responsibility to create a Scotland where women and girls are safe and have the potential to live flourishing and fulfilling lives. We all need to play our part in challenging and transforming the attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate, excuse, and attempt to legitimise VAWG. Women and girls should not need to change their behaviour, and should not be blamed, shamed or further traumatised when they seek support or access to justice.

### **Vision**

A strong and flourishing Scotland where all individuals are equally safe and respected, and where women and girls live free from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation – and the attitudes that help perpetuate it.

### **Aim of Equally Safe**

To work collaboratively with key partners in the public, private and third sectors to prevent and eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls.



# Violence Against Women and Girls in Scotland



**14,602**

sexual crimes were recorded by Police Scotland in 2022-23.<sup>i</sup>

The Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2019-2020 showed that only **22%** of victims/survivors of rape reported it to the police.<sup>ii</sup>



At least **37%** of the **14,602** sexual crimes recorded in 2022-23 by the police related to a victim under the age of 18.<sup>iii</sup>

There has been a notable decrease in the extent to which people agree with rape myths since 2014. In 2019, **8%** of people in Scotland thought that 'women often lie about being raped' (down from 23% in 2014).



**28%** believed that 'rape results from men being unable to control their need for sex' (37% in 2014).<sup>iv</sup>

However, this still equates to one in ten people in Scotland thinking that 'women often lie about being raped' and nearly one in three continuing to believe that 'rape results from men being unable to control their need for sex'.



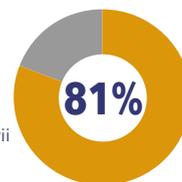
**3,830** sexual crimes were cyber-crimes in 2022-23.<sup>v</sup> That has increased from 1,100 in 2013-14.

More than **one in six** women in Scotland has experienced online violence.<sup>vi</sup>



**64,807** domestic abuse incidents were recorded by Police Scotland in 2021-22.

Around **four out of five** of these incidents had a female victim and a male perpetrator.<sup>vii</sup>

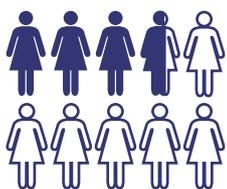


**1,928**

online child sexual abuse crimes were recorded in Scotland in 2022-23, a **6.6%** increase (20 more crimes) on the five-year mean.



The 2019/20 Scottish Crime and Justice Survey found that **just under one-sixth (16%)** of those who experienced partner abuse in the 12 months prior to interview said that the police came to know about the most recent (or only) incident.<sup>viii</sup>



In Scotland, **37%** of girls and young women aged 16 to 21 say that "I am often stared at and receive unwanted attention when I go outside", as do **12%** of 11- to 16-year-old girls.<sup>ix</sup>



**A quarter (24.5%)**

of women who have experienced financial abuse from a partner in the UK are **over 60 years** of age.<sup>x</sup>

# Violence Against Women and Girls in Scotland

Children and young people under 18 are responsible for at least **a third of recorded sexual offences** against children and young people in the UK.<sup>xi</sup>



**1 in 5**

female students in higher education experiences sexual harassment, and one in four experiences sexual assault.

**Over half** of all students who have experienced sexual assault and/or sexual harassment experienced it on campus.<sup>xii</sup>



When asked for their views on teenage girls/boys aged 14-15 watching pornography,

**a quarter of adults (25%)** agreed that it was **normal for teenage boys**, compared to 15% for teenage girls.<sup>xiii</sup>

Disabled women in the UK are **twice as likely** to experience men's violence as non-disabled women.<sup>xiv</sup>



In the UK **Black and minority ethnic (BME) and migrant women** in the UK face higher levels of domestic homicide and abuse driven suicide.<sup>xv</sup>

BME women referred to MARAC typically self-report suffering abuse 1.5 times longer before getting help than people who identify as White, British or Irish. **One in four** BME victim/survivors report **needing the aid of an interpreter** to communicate effectively and **one in five** report **having no recourse to public funds**.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Sources

- i. [Recorded Crime in Scotland](#)
- ii. [Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2019-2020](#)
- iii. [Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2022-23](#)
- iv. [Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2019: Attitudes to Violence against Women in Scotland](#)
- v. [Recorded Crime in Scotland](#)
- vi. [Open University \(2023\), Societal Attitudes and Experiences of Online Violence Against Women and Girls \(OVAWG\) Research Project](#)
- vii. [Domestic abuse in Scotland statistics](#)
- viii. [Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2019/20: main findings](#)
- ix. [GAS 2018 - QUESTION BY QUESTION TOPLINES \(girlguidingscotland.org.uk\)](#)
- x. [Surviving Economic Abuse \(2021\), Controlling Your Financial Future](#)
- xi. [Stop It Now](#)
- xii. [Empowered Campus](#)
- xiii. [Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2019: Attitudes to Violence against Women in Scotland](#)
- xiv. [Disability and crime, UK: 2019](#)
- xv. [United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner](#)
- xvi. [SafeLives, Cases involving victims who are Black or Minority Ethnic at MARAC - Scotland](#)

# What is Violence Against Women and Girls?

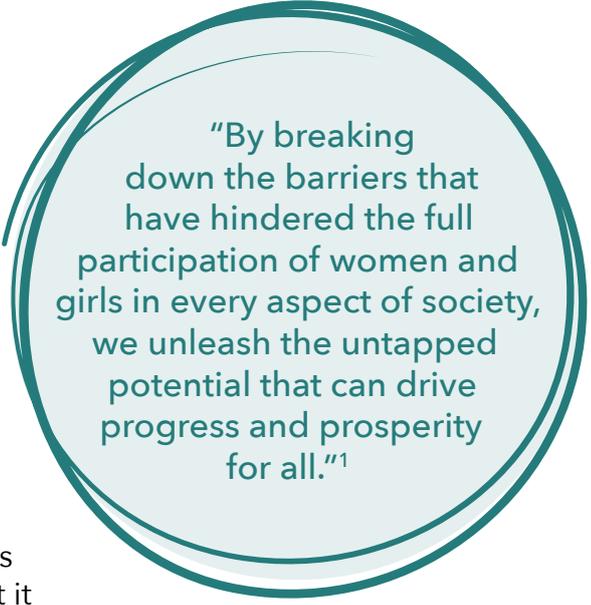
VAWG is a blight on Scottish society. It is a consequence of gender inequality and harms all of us. Everyone has a role to play in tackling it and it is important we have a shared understanding of the issue to do so. We need to understand what VAWG is and how it impacts those who experience it, its impact on society more generally, the scale of the problem, and what causes it.

VAWG occurs in every community across Scotland. It is often overlooked, minimised, accepted as the norm, or justified to protect the so-called honour of a family, community, or faith group. Baroness Kennedy notes that "the daily grind of sexual harassment and abuse degrades women's lives, yet it seems to be accepted as part of what it means to be a woman."<sup>2</sup>

In order to address harmful attitudes to women and girls, misogyny that permeates our society must be tackled. Misogyny has been defined as "a way of thinking that upholds the primary status of men and a sense of male entitlement, while subordinating women and limiting their power and freedom. Conduct based on this thinking can include a range of abusive and controlling behaviours including rape, sexual offences, harassment and bullying, and domestic abuse."<sup>3</sup> This is an example of gender inequality.

By challenging misogyny, harmful assumptions and stereotypes, we pave the way for effective dismantling of gender-based discrimination starting from childhood, and continuing into adulthood, preventing, and tackling the deep harms that gender inequalities cause in the lives of girls and women and boys and men.

Numerous studies link sexualised violence in the media to increases in violence towards women, rape myth acceptance and anti-women attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore,



"By breaking down the barriers that have hindered the full participation of women and girls in every aspect of society, we unleash the untapped potential that can drive progress and prosperity for all."<sup>1</sup>



"I have experienced death/violence/rape threats online for speaking up... about my street harassment. One man tweeted that they would love to watch me getting my teeth kicked in, many others said I was too unattractive for my experiences to be true, they didn't believe it had happened."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Maria-Francesca Spatolisano, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Inter-Agency Affairs of UN DESA, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2023/09/press-release-the-world-is-failing-girls-and-women-according-to-new-un-report/>
  2. Scottish Government (2022). [Misogyny - A Human Rights Issue](#)
  3. ibid
  4. Open University (2023). [OU research reveals shocking level of online violence experienced by women and girls across the UK](#)
  5. Scottish Government (2022). [Misogyny - A Human Rights Issue](#)

the prevalence of and easy access to pornography contributes to reinforcing unequal sexualised relations between men and women. A report by the Children's Commissioner for England established that the average age at which children first view pornography, much of which depicts degrading acts and violence against women, is 13.<sup>6</sup> The report highlighted that children themselves suggested direct links between pornography exposure and harmful sexual behaviour exhibited by young men. Another study of content from two major pornographic websites highlights that women's responses to physical aggression were either "positive" or "neutral" and rarely "negative".<sup>7</sup> This highlights the negative impact on the understanding of both men and boys and women and girls of what positive, healthy, relationships look and feel like. All these factors contribute towards the desensitisation of society to VAWG, for this to go unchallenged, be normalised, or dismissed as unimportant.

Our Equally Safe strategy seeks to prevent VAWG from occurring in the first place, as well as ensuring effective response to those affected and to those who perpetrate it. We're committed to effective and person-centred approaches to justice in which everyone can trust.

"Porn is often the starting point for young people when it comes to sex, how to have sex and what to expect." (young woman, 20, who first saw pornography aged 10)<sup>8</sup>

"Since the age of 13, I had been experiencing boys looking up my skirt and lifting my kilt up... On quite a few occasions I knew that they were taking photos up my kilt too but I was too embarrassed to say anything."<sup>9</sup>

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6. Children's Commissioner for England (2023). [Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children](#)
  7. Fritz, N., Malic, V., Paul, B., Zhou, Y. (2020). A descriptive analysis of the types, targets, and relative frequency of aggression in mainstream pornography. Arch Sex Behav. 49(8): 3041-3053. DOI:10.1007/s10508-020-01773-0
  8. Children's Commissioner for England (2023). [Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children](#)
  9. Scottish Government (2022). [Misogyny - A Human Rights Issue](#)

## Definition

The phrase violence against women and girls is used to describe violent and abusive behaviour directed at women and girls because they are women and girls. It is behaviour which is carried out predominantly by men. It is an abuse of power and stems from systemic, deep-rooted women's inequality. VAWG limits women's and girls' freedom and potential and is a fundamental violation of human rights.

Our shared understanding defines VAWG as a form of gender-based violence (GBV). GBV is defined as "any form of violence used to establish, enforce or perpetuate gender inequalities and keep in place gendered orders".<sup>11</sup> While the terms VAWG and GBV are sometimes used interchangeably, VAWG is a subset of GBV specifically targeting women and girls due to their unequal status in society.

"Such violence cannot be understood in isolation from the norms, social structure and gender roles within the community which greatly influence women's risk of VAWG."<sup>10</sup>

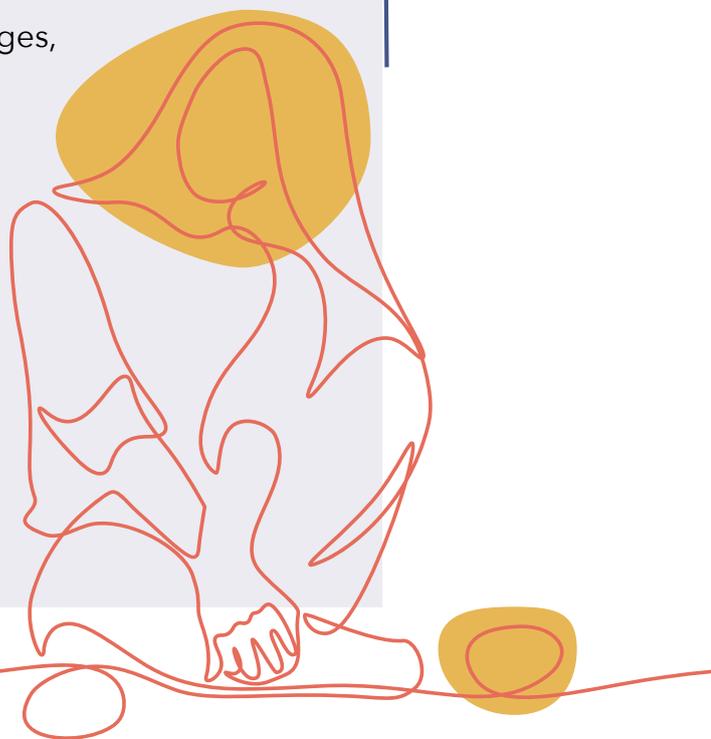
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10. UN. General Assembly (48th sess. : 1993-1994) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly. [New York] : UN, 23 Feb. 1994.
  11. Lang, J. (2002) Keynote address to The International Conference on Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls - Strengthening Human Rights. (Berlin, 2002).

This strategy's definition of VAWG includes the actual and threat of:<sup>12</sup>

- physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and financial abuse occurring in the family, within the general community, and in institutions in both physical and digital spaces and places
- domestic abuse/coercive controlling behaviours, stalking, rape, incest, sexual harassment, bullying, and intimidation
- commercial sexual exploitation (CSE), including prostitution, lap dancing, stripping, pornography
- human trafficking, including for the purposes of domestic servitude, sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation, which may include gangs and organised criminal networks
- child abuse occurring within family settings, including domestic abuse, and sexual abuse by male family members including siblings
- child sexual abuse and exploitation including the production and sharing of indecent images of children
- honour-based abuse, including forced marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), dowry abuse and 'honour based' coercive control and killings.

Boys experience domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and exploitation in significant numbers. That is why the Equally Safe strategy covers all children and young people.

This strategy recognises that women, children, and young people may experience multiple forms of VAWG simultaneously and across their lifetime.

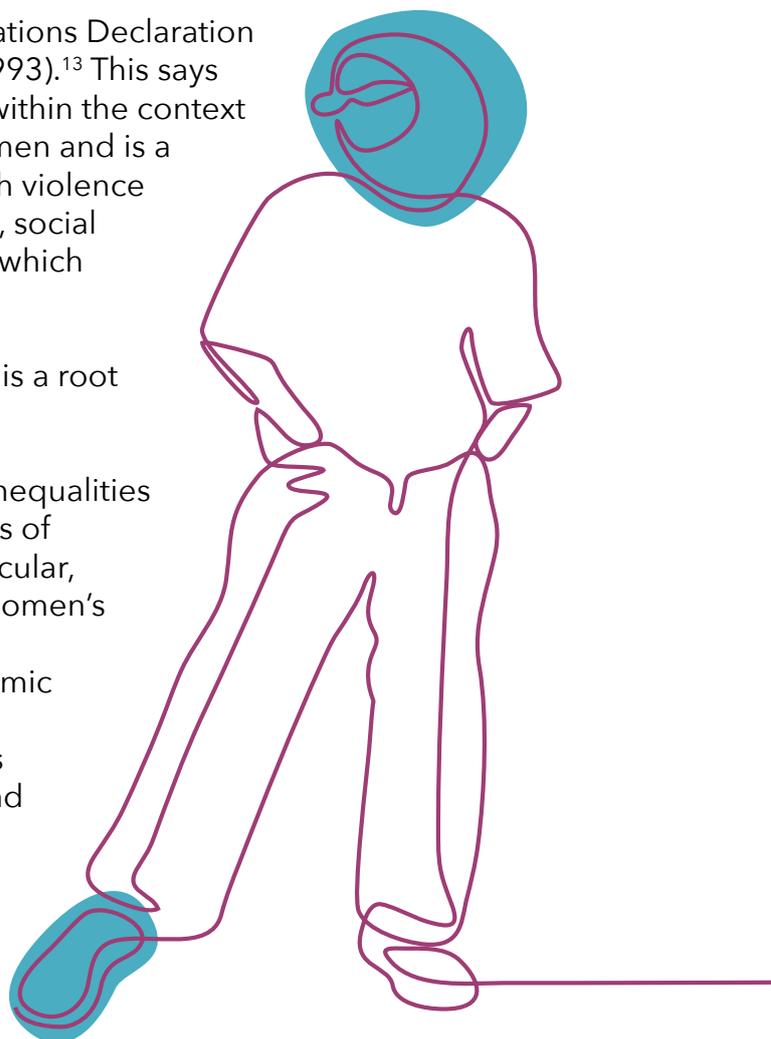


12. We have extended our definition of VAWG to recognise the UN Special Rapporteur on VAWG who issued a general statement on online violence in 2018 which includes: "The definition of online violence against women therefore extends to any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of ICT, such as mobile phones and smartphones, the Internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately."

Our definition of VAWG is based on the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993).<sup>13</sup> This says that we need to understand this type of violence within the context of society's different expectations of men and women and is a result of women's unequal position in society. Such violence cannot be understood in isolation from the norms, social structure and gender roles within the community, which greatly influence women's risk of VAWG.

This means we understand that gender inequality is a root cause of VAWG.

Despite many advances, there remain persistent inequalities between men and women in Scotland across areas of social, political, economic and cultural life. In particular, gender stereotypes and norms continue to limit women's access to opportunities in the labour market and economic resources, which affects levels of economic independence. Societal expectations of men and women as parents are also gendered, and this has implications on their engagement with systems and services. For example, lower expectations of men as parents makes it harder to hold perpetrators accountable for the harm they are causing children and families. Furthermore, higher expectations for women as parents means they are more likely to be blamed for the impact of the perpetrator's behaviours on the children.



Women do not currently have the same life chances as men - there are a number of reasons for this, including institutional sexism and disproportionate levels of economic dependence. The gender pay gap in 2021 of 3.6% (calculated as the median on full-time earnings) is one example.<sup>14</sup> The persistent gender segregation across several industries and occupations which leads to women being over-represented in lower paid sectors and insecure working conditions is another. Women still do the majority of domestic labour in the home including unpaid care, whether for children or for older dependants and others. Access to, as well as the high cost of, childcare, can present significant barriers to women accessing employability services that can support them to re-enter, or progress within, the labour market. Women over 50 can face additional barriers if they have multiple consecutive caring responsibilities for children, grandchildren, and elderly parents. Tackling these

13. UN. General Assembly (48th sess. : 1993-1994) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly. [New York] : UN, 23 Feb. 1994.

14. See gender pay gap national performance framework indicator: [National Indicator Performance](#)

structural inequalities is a necessary part of tackling women's inequality, and consequently VAWG.

## Shared and differing experiences

Along with their sex, women and girls with other protected characteristics may experience increased risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation due to the prejudice and structural barriers in society which cause inequality. The definition of VAWG across all protected characteristics defined by equality legislation – age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, and sexual orientation. We must also recognise the multiple and intersecting inequalities that some women face. This includes women in poverty and care experienced women. We recognise that all children and young people can also be affected by these compounding inequalities, with girls experiencing particularly high rates of inequality and violence.



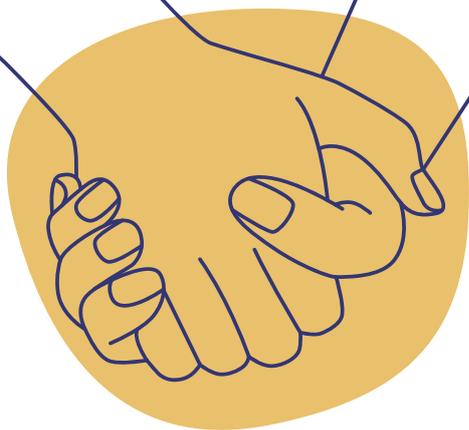
“You have to recognise intersectionality and the overlapping discrimination they [women] may experience because of factors like their age, their gender and the specific community they belong to. Every woman's experience will be different.”<sup>15</sup>

Gender norms that promote ideals of masculinity based on men's superiority, authority, entitlement, and power can lead to abuse, exploitation, and sexual violence against children and young people. Furthermore, the social position of children involves not only their reliance upon adults for all of their basic material and emotional needs, but also subordination to adult authority, a relationship often reproduced in dynamics between older and younger children. Children and young people can be subjected to the harms caused by GBV both by witnessing others being harmed, and by direct experience of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, rape, trafficking, forced marriage and FGM. Girls and young women may experience abuse and coercive control in their intimate relationships outside the family home. This is often unrecognised with a resulting gap in service provision.

Evidence suggests child sexual abuse affects a significant minority of the population, but with a higher prevalence (two to three times higher) amongst girls and women. While many children who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour have experienced abuse and maltreatment, it is important to note that not all children who are abused will go on to abuse. That is why the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 states that in all

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15. Public Health Scotland (2023) Minority Ethnic women and violence against women and girls: Insights gathering project Available at: <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/minority-ethnic-women-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-insights-gathering-project>



cases “where a child or young person displays sexual behaviour that may cause significant harm, immediate consideration should be given as to whether action should be taken under child protection procedures, in order both to protect children harmed or at risk of harm by the behaviour and to address any child protection concerns that may at least in part explain why the child/young person has behaved in such a way”.

Children and young people have the right to be cared for, to be protected from abuse, harm and exploitation, and to grow up in a safe environment in which their rights and needs are respected. In all cases where it is suspected that a child or young person may be a victim of GBV, their safety is paramount. Child protection procedures must be initiated immediately as outlined in the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland. They are also entitled to assistance and support to recover physically and emotionally from any violence, abuse, or exploitation they have experienced. Protection of and support to victim/survivors of GBV should be child-centred and in line with the Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) values and principles to ensure that the wellbeing of children and young people is enhanced and that they get the right help at the right time, for as long as is needed. This must be done in a sensitive way that does not deter women experiencing abuse from seeking support.

Lesbian and bisexual women and girls experience violence, abuse, and exploitation which target their sexual orientation. This includes “corrective rape”. Homophobia and biphobia can encourage VAWG (or be used by perpetrators as components of VAWG).

“They kept everything a secret ‘cause I was a child, but of course, it happened to me - nobody else. So they should have told me what was happening and what was-nae.”<sup>16</sup>

“I kissed my partner goodbye as she got off a bus and a drunk man in the next seat asked if he could join in. After my partner left and I was sitting by myself he kept talking to me about how he would “show me a better time”, and when I asked him to leave me alone he called me a slur and spat at me. In the moment this made me feel unsafe.”<sup>17</sup>

16. Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities (SCLD) (2023). [Unequal, Unheard, Unjust: But Not Hidden Anymore](#)

17. LGBT Youth Scotland (2022). [Life in Scotland for LGBT young people](#)

Specific risk factors affecting transgender women and girls include high levels of transphobic street harassment and hate crime, and greater levels of social isolation. These lead to high levels of risk and increased difficulties in accessing services. Members of the trans community are often over-represented in the sex industry,<sup>18</sup> linked to wider discrimination and reduced options.

It is widely acknowledged that BME women and girls may face more barriers to support and services than the general population. These can include language barriers, immigration status, institutional racism, and cultural insensitivity. These barriers are compounded for BME women experiencing VAWG. BME women and girls are disproportionately affected by VAWG and their experiences may be exacerbated and reinforced by patriarchal ideas and practices by religious and/or community leaders. BME women and girls are also subjected to racist, misogynist verbal harassment in public spaces.<sup>19</sup> Harmful practices such as FGM and forced marriages can be more prevalent among faith-based or minoritised communities and often include multiple perpetrators.

Additional barriers to Gypsy/Traveller women seeking help include prejudice and ignorance among the wider public towards Gypsy/Travellers; low literacy levels; and a lack of trust in and fear of getting involved with services.

“Women from marginalised communities often experience discrimination based on their race, gender, and religion. The inherent societal bias places them at a disadvantage from the beginning. Supporting ethnic minority women facing abuse can be complex due to additional obstacles, including immigration challenges, language barriers, and entrenched patriarchal structures within their communities.”<sup>20</sup>

“Because of the ways gypsy/ travellers live, they are frightened their cultures will be discriminated against so they won't tend to come forward to disclose abuse they've experienced. It's about key professionals not having an appreciation of different cultures and saying things that immediately destroy relationships that could have been key to someone seeking help.”<sup>21</sup>

18. Kingston, S & Smith, N 2020, 'Sex counts: an examination of sexual service advertisements in a UK online directory', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 71, no. 2, pp. 328-348. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12727>

19. Transport Scotland (2023) Women's and girls' views and experiences of personal safety when using public transport. Available at: <https://www.transport.gov.scot/media/52984/womens-and-girls-views-and-experiences-of-personal-safety-when-using-public-transport-final-report-march-2023.pdf>

20. <http://mwrc.org.uk>

21. Public Health Scotland (2023) Minority Ethnic women and violence against women and girls: Insights gathering project Available at: <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/minority-ethnic-women-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-insights-gathering-project>

Disabled women and girls are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and coercion. Research undertaken by the Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities (SCLD) highlights that people with a learning disability may be 10 to 12 times more likely to experience sexual assault than their non-disabled peers.<sup>23</sup> They can also face significant barriers to accessing support due to services not meeting their needs or making assumptions about their capacity or credibility.

"A lot of times women with learning disabilities who reach for support are put through more pain after abuse, because we are not listened to or believed."<sup>22</sup>

Older women may be either caring for, or being cared for by, their abuser. This abuse may be hidden as signs of physical and psychological abuse may be overlooked on account of a person's age. Older women also face significant barriers to support or when trying to leave an abusive partner, including isolation, long-term health consequences or disabilities, or they are reliant on their abuser for care or money. Structural gender inequality, including pension policies, reinforces older women's financial reliance on an abusive partner.

Refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls may have experienced various forms of VAWG either in their country of origin, during their journey to Scotland, or upon arrival.<sup>24</sup> We recognise conflict and displacement as key sites where VAWG exists which can create additional risks for those victim/survivors. Women seeking asylum may also be reluctant to disclose or report abuse occurring in the UK for fear of negative experiences with professionals due to institutional racism, unconscious bias and hostile Immigration policies. Women are also concerned that court cases and police reports could negatively affect their asylum claim. Complex trauma can manifest in different ways, and women and girls can find it very difficult to disclose their experiences.

"Most ethnic minority women still have a fear of speaking out. They have had no support from those who should have acted as a support system in the past so they have lost faith in ever finding help. Others fear society's judgement as sometimes the victim is blamed. They feel guilty."<sup>25</sup>

Women who are in the UK on a spousal or family visa which is dependent on the status of a partner can be at risk of specific forms of abuse

22. Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities (SCLD) (2023). [Unequal, Unheard, Unjust: But Not Hidden Anymore](#)

23. *ibid*

24. Sereda Briefing (2021). [The SEREDA project: highlighting the continuum of SGBV in forced migration](#)

25. Public Health Scotland (2023) Minority Ethnic women and violence against women and girls: Insights gathering project Available at: <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/minority-ethnic-women-and-violence-against-women-and-girls-insights-gathering-project>

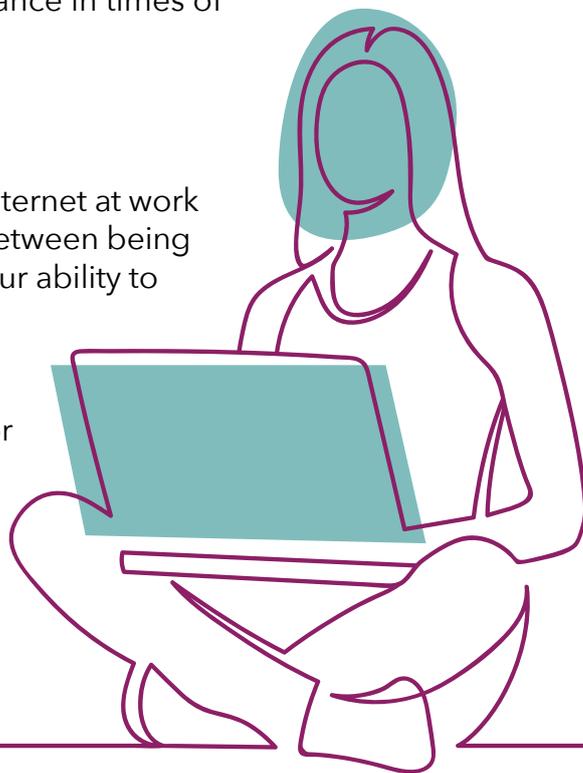
including, for example, having restricted or no access to money or their passports. This can be a barrier to leaving an abusive partner. Women with insecure immigration status, for example women who have breached a visa condition or those who have been trafficked to the UK, can also be at increased risk of exploitation. Fear of being deported can make women reluctant to report violence, abuse, or exploitation. Restricted access or no recourse to public funds constrain the ability of migrant and asylum-seeking women to leave an abusive or exploitative partner by restricting their access to support services and many social security entitlements.

"It's hard enough to 'come-out' under normal circumstances never mind if you're being abused too."<sup>26</sup>

Women living in different geographical communities – rural, urban, and island – may experience different challenges. For example, the distance between houses in rural settings are often greater than in urban areas meaning that victims/survivors of abuse may be extremely (or further) isolated with abuse and its harms more hidden. Help-seeking and service interventions can be more challenging as services may be located many miles away, with distances exacerbated by limited public transport and sporadic and limited access to the internet or mobile phone signal. Women may face greater risks in small rural or island communities when seeking support, or when leaving abuse, through lack of privacy and anonymity, with limited and highly public routes to reach safety, heightening chances of surveillance and interception. In crowded urban environments, finding safe spaces can be difficult. Women may lack places where they can seek refuge or assistance in times of danger.

## Online and tech-enabled VAWG

We live in a digital world. Whether it is social media, internet at work and/or for leisure, many of us now move seamlessly between being offline and online. While this has brought benefits in our ability to connect and engage with each other, the speed and complexity of technological change and the range of digital tools available provides new challenges. The technology to directly abuse, track, monitor covertly, or propagate abusive content, including with advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and AI generated images and videos (often known as 'deep fakes') is now widely accessible and available. VAWG is therefore experienced offline and online, and the



26. LGBT Youth Scotland (no date). [Voices Unheard: LGBT domestic abuse and gender-based violence](#)

two merge. What starts online often moves offline, and vice versa. For example, intimate images shared without consent is a growing form of VAWG.

Advances in communication technology and the emergence of new digital platforms make it more difficult to proactively tackle VAWG. Of increasing concern are the so-called "influencers" and the group of men referred to as "incels" (involuntary celibates) who now populate parts of the internet, sharing misogynistic attitudes about women, and advice on how to manipulate, coerce, exploit, abuse, and take violent action against women. As a consequence of this women and girls do not have access to their right to free speech as they are forced to change their behaviour, self-censor or remove themselves from the platform altogether because of harmful content and their concerns not being adequately addressed.



# Why is Violence Against Women and Girls a problem?

**VAWG damages health and wellbeing, and limits freedom and potential. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises VAWG as a major public health issue and a fundamental violation of human rights.**

The impacts of VAWG are wide-ranging and can have a long-term impact on the lives of those affected, as well as on their families and communities. Women, children, and young people who have experienced violence, abuse and exploitation in Scotland are at increased risk of experiencing inequality of outcomes throughout their lives, including physical and mental health problems, homelessness, drug and alcohol support needs, reduced education and employment opportunities, injuries and even death.



## Impacts of VAWG on women

There is strong evidence highlighting the negative effects of VAWG on mental health and wellbeing. Victimization is associated with an increased risk of mental health problems, including suicidal ideation and suicide.<sup>27</sup> 53% of women who have mental health problems have experienced abuse; 36% of women who have faced extensive physical and sexual abuse in both childhood and adulthood have attempted suicide; and 22% have self-harmed.<sup>28</sup> Women engaged in selling and exchanging sex also report experiencing high levels of trauma.<sup>29</sup>

VAWG is one of the most common types of psychological trauma likely to be experienced in Scotland. Although many show remarkable resilience, women, children, and young people without access to the right support at the right time, face increased risk of other types of trauma and adversity throughout all stages of their lives. As a traumatic experience, VAWG may affect women, children, and young people's relationships with others and create barriers for seeking help and engaging with services due to fears of being judged, blamed, or re-traumatized. Although efforts have been made to improve how the justice system responds

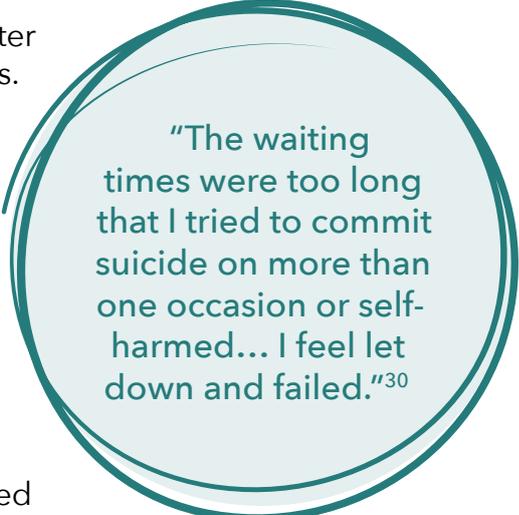
27. Oram, S., Khalifeh, H. and Howard, LM. (2017). Violence against women and mental health. *The Lancet Psychiatry* 4(2):159-170. In World Health Organization (2021) [Violence against women factsheet](#)

28. Agenda Alliance (2016). [Hidden Hurt: violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women](#)

29. Scottish Government (2022). [The experiences of people who sell or exchange sex and their interaction with support services: lived experience engagement](#)

to victim/survivors of VAWG, women and children still encounter significant challenges when navigating civil and criminal courts. Research also highlights that perpetrators are able to use these systems to continue their abuse.

Women, children, and young people who have experienced violence and abuse may develop coping strategies to address the trauma they have experienced, which may expose them to greater risk. For example, some victim/survivors report using high levels of alcohol and/or drugs as a coping mechanism for their traumatic experiences, and others report self-harming. Many of the women and girls who come into contact with the justice system have also experienced significant trauma, violence, abuse, and victimisation.<sup>31</sup>



“The waiting times were too long that I tried to commit suicide on more than one occasion or self-harmed... I feel let down and failed.”<sup>30</sup>

Domestic abuse can begin or escalate during pregnancy, and has significant negative health implications for pregnant women and their babies. Domestic abuse doubles the risk of preterm birth and low birthweight. More than 40% of victim/survivors experience mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and emotional detachment which can affect the way a mother bonds with her child.<sup>32</sup> Perpetrators use women's parenting and bonds with their children as a powerful tool for controlling women. The quality and effectiveness of support systems for women is directly linked to the well-being of children. When we ensure the protection and rights of children, recognising the differences in girls' and boys' experiences, it not only safeguards their wellbeing as they grow but also contributes to gender equality from birth into adulthood.

Women are more likely than men to live in poverty, and VAWG sustains this. For example, women experiencing abuse in the home will find it more difficult to leave their abuser if they are living in poverty. Poverty can be a factor in preventing women from accessing support for safety and wellbeing needs. It can also lead to some women becoming involved in CSE, including prostitution, to support themselves and their children. VAWG also creates barriers to employment and other economic resources because of its negative effects on women's health, wellbeing, earning potential, career progression and financial stability.<sup>33</sup> Financial abuse is used by perpetrators as a way to control women which, in turn, can raise women's risk of further violence, abuse, and exploitation.<sup>34</sup>

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30. Improvement Service (2021). [Understanding the mental health needs of women and girls experiencing gender-based violence](#)

31. Women's Justice Leadership Panel (2023). [The Case for Gendered and Intersectional Approaches to Justice](#)

32. Royal College of Midwives and Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (2020): [Joint policy statement on domestic abuse](#)

33. Public Health Scotland (2022) Scotland's public health priorities and violence against women and girls Priority 5: A Scotland where we have a sustainable, inclusive economy with equality of outcomes for all

34. [What is economic abuse? - Surviving Economic Abuse](#) (2023).

All victims/survivors of VAWG are at greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes as a result of the violence, abuse, exploitation, and trauma they have experienced.

## Impact of VAWG on children and young people

Violence against women and girls can have a significant impact on children and young people's lives, including their health, education, wellbeing and future life chances. This is especially the case for girls and young women. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that every child has the right to be protected from all forms of violence and abuse, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation. It is crucial not to misinterpret children's rights as over-riding women's rights. Women should be acknowledged as individuals with full human rights rather than merely conduits for children's rights. Likewise, girls must not be seen as 'future-women,' with their right to gender equality being withheld until they are adults. Girls must be protected by the overlap of women's and children's rights legislation. Protecting women's rights not only stands on its own merit but also yields positive outcomes for children. Children and young people are entitled to access services, have their voices heard and to receive the care and assistance to support them to recover physically and emotionally.<sup>35</sup>

Being a victim of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, and growing up in a household where abuse takes place are recognised as adverse childhood



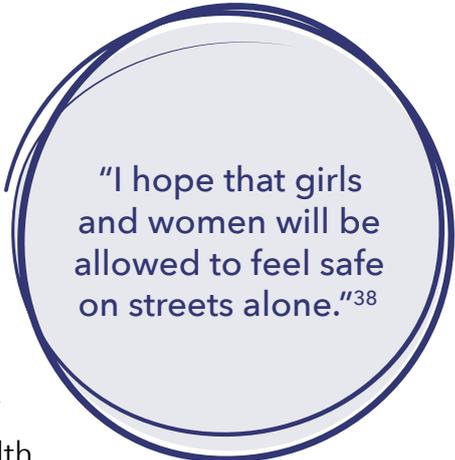
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35. SCCJR (2023). [Executive summary: domestic abuse and child contact](#)

experiences (ACEs) that can increase a child's likelihood of experiencing poor health and other negative outcomes in adulthood.

For example, domestic abuse can have a significant physical, social, and emotional impact on children and young people. Children may exhibit physical symptoms associated with trauma and stress, sustain injuries when defending a parent or sibling if there is physical violence or, at the most extreme, be injured or killed by a perpetrator. They may also experience intense feelings of fear and anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression, and face behavioural and developmental challenges. In Scotland, domestic abuse continues to be one of the most common concerns identified at child protection case conferences of children registered on the child protection register. In 2021–2022 domestic abuse accounted for 16% of the total number of concerns recorded at case conferences, and for 46% of all registrations during the year.<sup>36</sup>

While all children and young people can be negatively impacted by VAWG, the gendered nature of VAWG means that girls and young women are particularly affected. For example, several Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) across Scotland are seeing an increase in the number of young women being referred because of high risk of harm within their intimate relationships. A report from Girl Guiding UK found that girls often don't feel safe outside, at school, nor online. Girls reported hearing toxic comments from boys that made them feel uncomfortable or scared, and that they had experienced threatening or upsetting behaviour online.<sup>37</sup> Girls' experiences of sexual violence can have a significant impact on their mental health and prevent them from accessing education and other opportunities.



"I hope that girls and women will be allowed to feel safe on streets alone."<sup>38</sup>

Research shows that girls are particularly vulnerable to FGM between birth and 15. In 2022, 29% of cases of forced marriage involved a young person under 17; 78% of cases involved girls/women, while 19% of cases involved people with capacity concerns.<sup>39</sup>

Ensuring that early identification and trauma-informed support are in place to respond to children and young people affected by VAWG is key to ensuring they flourish and are supported to achieve their full potential. This must be done in co-operation and collaboration with relevant partner agencies.

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36. Scottish Government (2023) Children's Social Work Statistics Scotland: 2021 to 2022. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-scotland-2021-22/>

37. Girlguiding (2023). [Girls' attitudes survey](#)

38. Girl aged 7 to 10. Girlguiding (2023). [Girls' attitudes survey](#)

39. Official Statistics. [Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2022](#)

## Impact of VAWG on men and boys

VAWG harms everyone in society, including men and boys. While men and boys may benefit from some of the gendered norms and inequalities that give rise to VAWG, they are also harmed by them.<sup>40</sup>

Gender norms place expectations on men and boys to meet unhealthy and impossible standards of masculinity, and these expectations are linked to their experiences of mental health problems, and in particular men's disproportionate suicide rates, drug-related deaths, and violence from other men. They can lead to men and boys becoming consumers of Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE), impacting on their sexual wellbeing, perceptions of relationships, fostering a culture of entitlement, and perpetuating harmful power dynamics as this becomes a normalised part of masculinity.

While men are at lower risk of experiencing domestic abuse and other forms of GBV than women, and are far more likely to perpetrate it, there are men across Scotland who have experienced domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and exploitation. Gender stereotypes around "masculinity" may prevent these men from recognising that they have experienced such abuse, and stop them from seeking support for the harm that this abuse has caused.

A gendered approach is therefore required to ensure systems understand the differing needs of men and boys as victims, as they may experience abuse in different ways to women and girls, and report different long-term impacts. For example, when men and boys experience domestic abuse, sexual violence, and exploitation, it is primarily at the hands of other men. Gay, bisexual, and trans men and boys may require tailored support services. Research suggests that gay, bisexual, and trans men face significant risk of physical violence, sexual violence, and coercive control within their intimate relationships. It is, therefore, key that their



40. Improvement Service (2021). [Elected Member Briefing Note. Tackling violence against women and girls: what about the men?](#)

specific needs are considered when designing systems and services for victim/survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence.

## The cost of VAWG to society

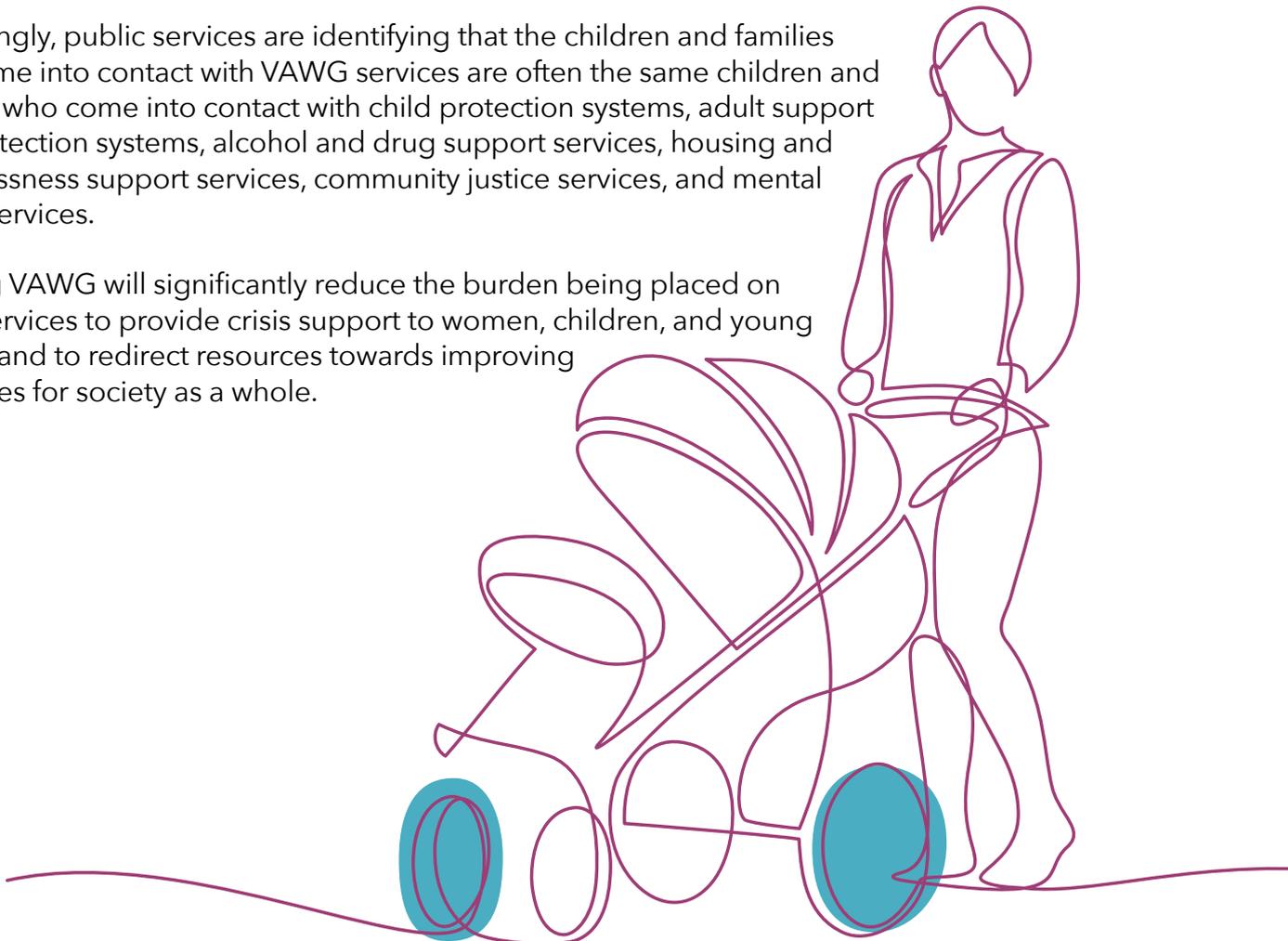
In addition to the devastating impact that VAWG has on the lives of families and communities across Scotland, it negatively impacts on society as a whole, including placing a significant pressure on public services.

As well as the human costs of failing to tackle VAWG, the financial costs are significant. This includes direct costs relating to women, children, and young people accessing healthcare, criminal justice proceedings, refuge accommodation, and other housing and social care services, and indirect costs related to support with mental health and trauma, drug and alcohol use, welfare support, and loss of economic productivity.

Dealing with the consequences of VAWG places a significant pressure on public services. For example, Police Scotland reports that dealing with incidences of domestic abuse is the greatest single demand on its time, with an average of one incident being reported to it every nine minutes.

Increasingly, public services are identifying that the children and families who come into contact with VAWG services are often the same children and families who come into contact with child protection systems, adult support and protection systems, alcohol and drug support services, housing and homelessness support services, community justice services, and mental health services.

Tackling VAWG will significantly reduce the burden being placed on these services to provide crisis support to women, children, and young people and to redirect resources towards improving outcomes for society as a whole.



## Our focus

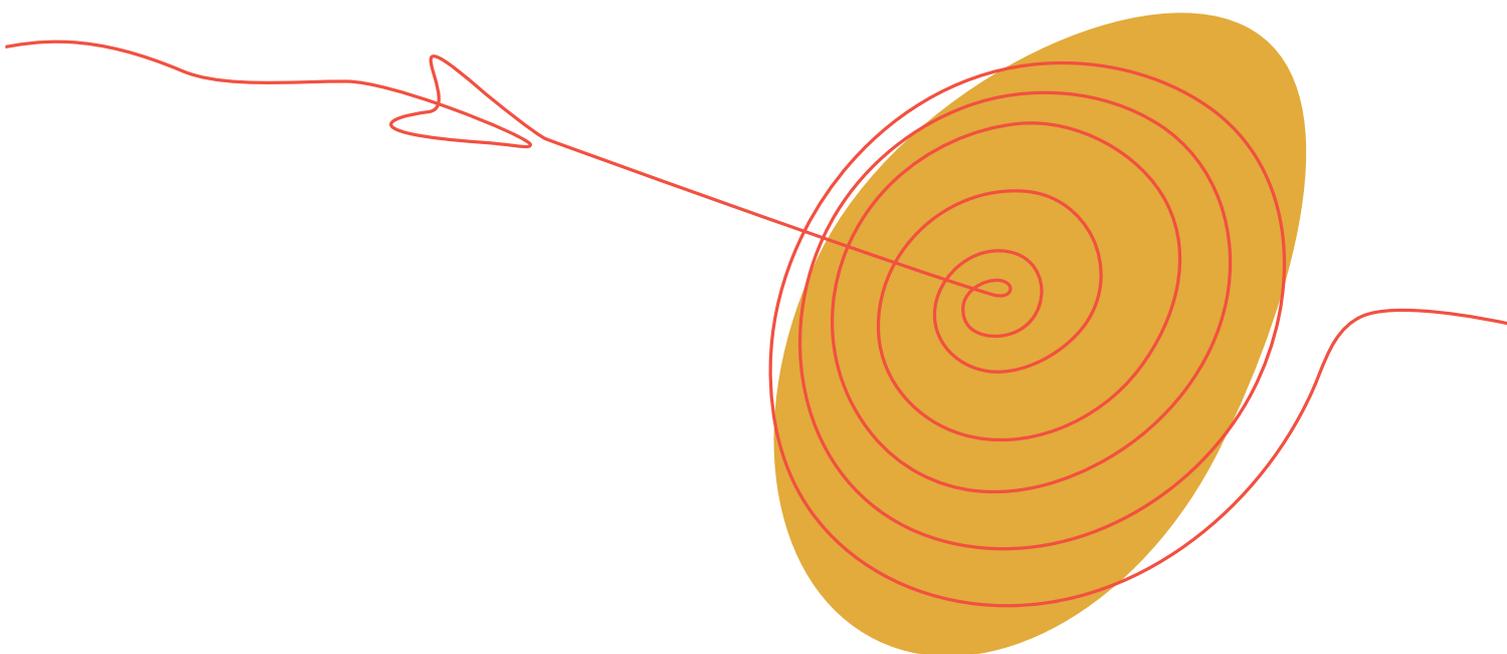
We don't live our lives in isolation. The people, places, services, and institutions we come into contact with can have a lasting impact on us and be forces of positive change.

Given the prevalence and impact of VAWG across society, its presence in our lives, and the impact of the trauma it creates, this strategy aims to ensure that VAWG is considered in all aspects of our lives. We are committed to preventing VAWG from occurring in the first place. But, until such harm is eradicated, we must ensure that the responses people and communities receive are trauma-informed, compassionate and impactful.

Universal, mainstream services are at the heart of this transformation. By designing and embedding VAWG-awareness and trauma-informed practice in universal public services, we can ensure that early engagement and interventions can help to prevent further harm that requires later complex and specialist interventions. In doing so, this will reduce the significant pressure on our public services and improve outcomes for people using them.



"When I receive support I feel less alone, weird, terrified, worried, powerless and worthless."<sup>41</sup>



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41. Improvement Service (2021). [Understanding the mental health needs of women and girls experiencing gender-based violence](#)

We commit, through the implementation of this strategy, to prioritise actions which will:

- prevent VAWG before it occurs
- support early intervention
- build a broad and shared understanding across our society and communities of what VAWG is, how it affects those who experience it, its impact on society more generally, the scale of the problem, and what causes it - so that we can reduce the harm together
- build political, institutional, sectoral, organisational, community, and personal commitment and contribution to preventing and tackling VAWG
- hold perpetrators of VAWG to account, supporting change where possible
- deliver sustainable, informed and safe specialist and universal service responses for victim/survivors that are holistic and meet victim/survivors' individual needs
- promote an intersectional approach to preventing, recognising, and responding to the compounding inequalities and risks that some women, children, and young people may experience as a result of their ethnicity, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or immigration status

To fulfil these commitments and the aims of Equally Safe, we will work closely with the structures and organisations across our communities ensuring that violence against women partnership (VAWP) actions are integrated with and integral to community planning, and health and social care priorities.

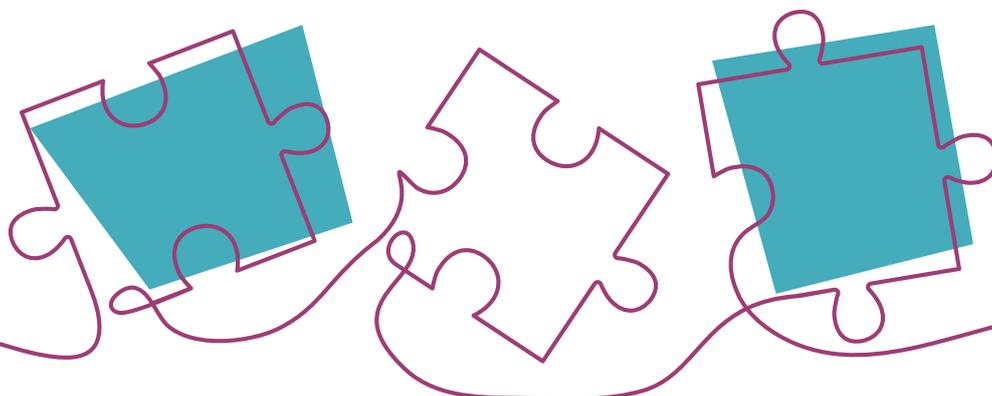
**Community planning partnerships:** In line with the principles underpinning the Verity House Agreement, community planning partnerships (CPP) are recognised as a critical mechanism for the alignment of resource locally. Focused on prevention and early intervention, CPPs support the delivery of our shared priorities. Bringing together local public services and the communities they serve, offers powerful potential to address often deep-rooted causes of inequalities, and to use preventative approaches to manage future demands on crisis intervention services. The statutory duty placed upon public bodies to actively address inequalities via the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 provides added impetus and a major focus to address one of the most significant areas of inequality in society. Some CPP activities already reflect a strong focus on improving outcomes for women, children, and young people affected by VAWG. Strengthening this will be key to the successful delivery of this strategy.

**Public protection arrangements:** Local public protection structures are critical for ensuring that we prevent harm, and that we protect, respond to, and support the recovery of women and girls experiencing harm. A public protection approach involving collaborative inter-agency working, for example between VAWG partnerships, MARACs, Multi-Agency Tasking and Coordination (MATAC), Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA), community justice partnerships, alcohol and drug partnerships, child protection committees, and adult support and protection committees, can ensure an integrated and consistent approach to planning and service delivery to reduce risk of harm to women, children and young people.

**Health and social care:** Our NHS and health and social care partnerships are critical in intervening early to identify those at risk of VAWG, and in providing care and treatment that is trauma-informed. Health and social care services are accessed by all of us at some point in our lives, giving them a pivotal role in tackling VAWG. The NHS in Scotland has long led the way in routine enquiry of abuse. However, this could be strengthened and developed to include forms of abuse other than child abuse and domestic abuse, such as rape or sexual assault. A renewed commitment to the role of our NHS and health and social care services is critical.

“The appropriate adults have been good in the past. The one I had recently, she’s been involved in a few of the things I’ve been through. She has a good understanding of what’s happened, so when I am telling the story, it’s the right way of telling it. But you’re no guaranteed to get someone to help you.”<sup>42</sup>

**Poverty/financial assistance:** As women are more likely to live in precarious financial and economic situations than men and to feel the disproportionate impact of the increases to the cost of living, ensuring opportunities to maximise women’s economic resources is key.



42. Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities (SCLD) (2023). [Unequal, Unheard, Unjust: But Not Hidden Anymore](#)

**Childcare and education:** Children and young people have a right to be nurtured and supported to grow in safe and secure environments that model and promote gender equality. Where this doesn't happen, we seek to mitigate the impact of trauma and harm by realising child survivors' rights to safety, healing and justice. We recognise that many of our existing interventions with children and young people take place within traditional settings, whereas some of our most vulnerable children and young people are not in school nor education. Supporting children and young people to learn from an early age what healthy, respectful relationships look and feel like, can prevent violence, abuse, and exploitation from occurring.

"I've been through the homeless services a few times and my longest time spent homeless was about 2 and a half years and I met a lot of other women who got involved in [selling or exchanging sex], whilst homeless."<sup>43</sup>

**Homes and housing:** Women's experiences of housing are different from those of men. This includes women's pathways into and out of homelessness, interactions with housing services, and access to affordable and adequate housing standards, including the private market. Within this, certain groups of women are more likely to experience housing instability, poor housing, homelessness, or negative treatment by housing services.<sup>45</sup> Although domestic abuse is one of the most common reasons for women to make a homelessness application in Scotland, other forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation may make women unsafe in their homes. For example, sex for rent is not only harmful but can be a pivotal factor in pushing women into CSE. This highlights how housing can be interlinked with CSE. A safe, secure, and affordable home is a major protective factor for women experiencing all forms of VAWG. Only by addressing the links between housing and the range of ways in which VAWG may be experienced, can we truly respond to the housing needs of all women.

"On one of the [Children's Hearing] panels they made my mum sit in with my dad even though she didn't want to. The panel members did not care that he was violent to my mum. She was traumatised."<sup>44</sup>

**Justice:** The Vision for Justice in Scotland<sup>46</sup> can only be fully realised when VAWG is eradicated. Until then, the commitment remains that women and girls are served appropriately. Understanding the inequalities experienced is crucial in providing justice for victim/survivors, and holding perpetrators to account.

43. Scottish Government (2022). [The experiences of people who sell or exchange sex and their interaction with support services: lived experience engagement](#)

44. [Everyday Heroes Justice Report](#)

45. Engender (2020). [A Woman's Place: gender, housing and homelessness in Scotland](#)

46. Scottish Government (2022) Vision for Justice <https://www.gov.scot/publications/vision-justice-scotland/>

To achieve this, we remain committed to working with stakeholders and justice partners at national and local levels to make improvements to the justice system that will benefit and recognise the trauma experienced by women and children, and firmly place the responsibility for VAWG on the perpetrators of such violence. This includes promoting accountability and changed behaviour for boys and young men who perpetrate VAWG. We will ensure children who have been victims or witnesses of abuse or violence receive a better coordinated and trauma-informed response through our phased approach to implementation of Bairns' Hoose.

"Everyone is so worried about my relationship with my father, but no one cares about my relationship with my mother."<sup>47</sup>

The priorities in Equally Safe directly contribute to the outcomes and vision set out in the Scottish Government's National Strategy for Community Justice,<sup>48</sup> which is principally focused on preventing offending before it occurs by working with people who are at risk of offending and supporting those who have been through the justice system. Both strategies promote prevention and early intervention.

**Place-making, community safety and transport:** The places and communities we live in, and the way we move around them have a significant impact on our lives.<sup>49</sup> If we design, plan and develop our built and natural environment with an understanding of women's and girls' needs, we can help to create the conditions in which violence, abuse, and exploitation are less likely to occur. This means, for example, safe, open, well-lit spaces that design out crime and other risks; providing community facilities such as shared sporting activities for all ages and groups; and community support hubs where women and girls are able to move around in their communities and live fulfilling and equal lives with men and boys.

**Employers:** Creating supportive and healthy workplace environments can help to mitigate and prevent violence against women in the workplace. Given the harmful consequences, not only for women experiencing this but also for workplaces and the broader economy, there is a compelling argument for action.

"As a council, we're the biggest employer locally so we need to have a better domestic abuse informed strategy for our staff who may be experiencing domestic abuse or perpetrating it... the people that we work with aren't 'the other', they are 'us'. I think that's a really positive thing to have come out of this work."<sup>50</sup>

**Digital spaces and places:** Being online is now integral to so much of our everyday lives and this is only

47. Anonymous, YELLO!, the young expert group in the Improving Justice (IJCC) in Child Contact, January 2021.

48. Scottish Government (2022) [National Strategy for Community Justice](#)

49. Transport Scotland (2023). [Women and girls' safety on public transport](#)

50. Implementing Safe & Together in Scotland: year two learning report

going to increase with technological advances. Just as VAWG takes place in all communities and places, the same applies to all online spaces. Action is required across all policy areas to respond to the added risks this may pose to women, children, and young people. Services must be competent to support women, children, and young people experiencing VAWG in online settings, and understand digital and online VAWG.

**A just transition:** Promoting gender equality within the framework of a just transition is a vital undertaking. The climate crisis and gender inequality are central concerns within the UN Sustainable Development Goals, embodying some of the most pressing global challenges of the 21st century. The simultaneous pursuit of gender equality and a just transition to a net-zero economy are inextricably linked goals. Addressing these two objectives together is mutually reinforcing and will prevent further marginalisation and de-stabilisation in the lives of women and girls. This will mitigate against unintended discrimination and harm that might undermine progress towards a just transition and our goal of gender equality and safety for all in our communities.



## Our approach

**Our approach recognises VAWG as a major public health issue. We are committed to adopting a public health approach to tackling VAWG, which focuses on preventing VAWG before it occurs.**

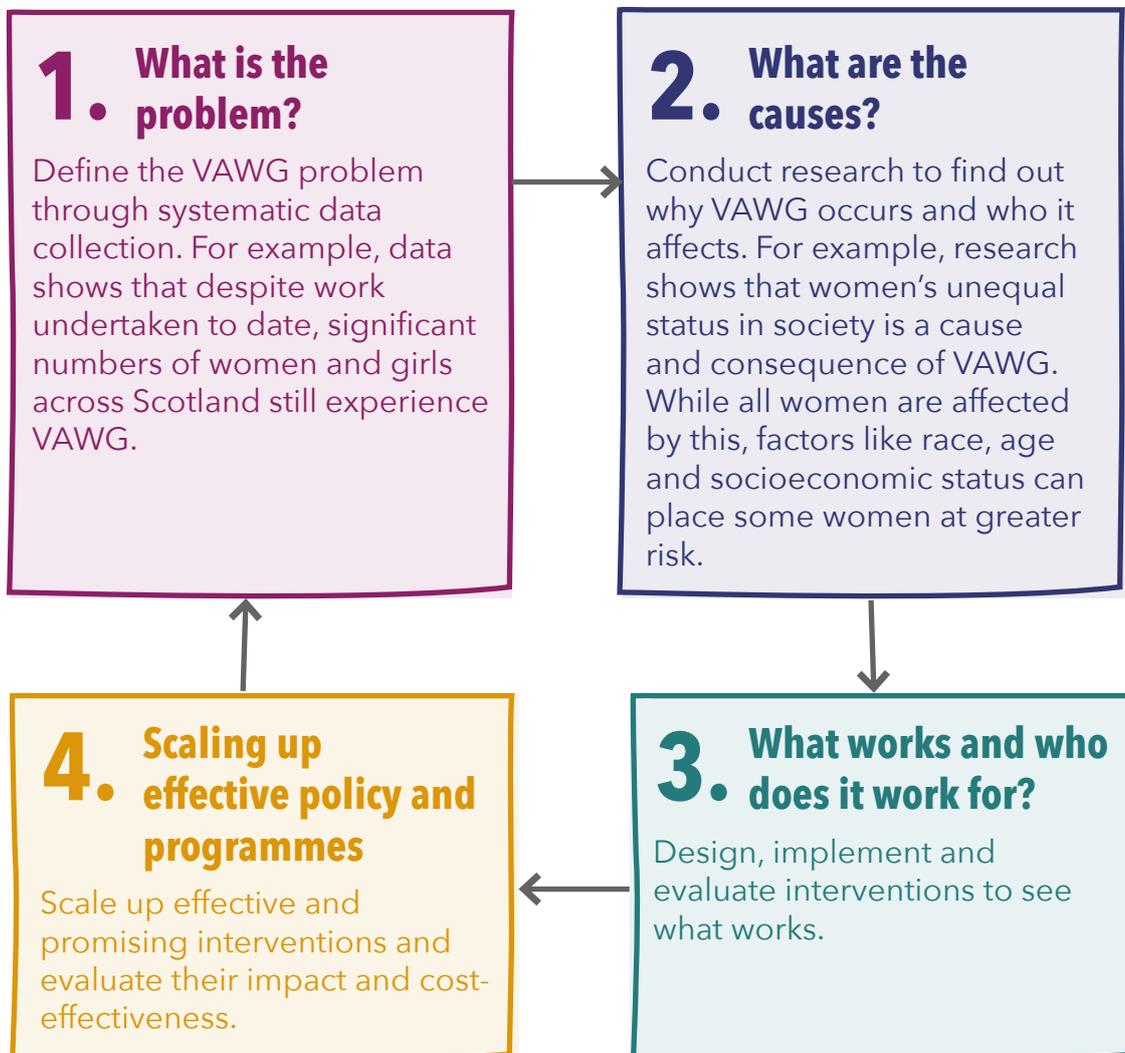
Recognising the impact of societal, community and relationship factors on women and girls' lives is key to preventing and addressing VAWG. Gender inequalities at every level of society have a profound influence on VAWG. These factors are connected and can influence and impact on each other, reinforcing the need for a comprehensive approach to prevention across all levels.



In recent years, and reflected in the engagement to refresh Equally Safe, we have heard from people that they wanted to see a commitment to taking a public health approach to preventing and eradicating VAWG. A public health approach uses evidence to prevent or to reduce VAWG, and emphasises the importance of collaborative effort from diverse sectors including health, education, social services, justice, policy, and the private sector. This will improve the safety of everyone.

To apply that approach, we've drawn on WHO's public health approach to violence reduction. The four steps of this approach have been used successfully to implement violence prevention activities across the globe. We will adopt a gendered approach to applying a public health approach to preventing and eradicating VAWG, including implementing strategies to hold to account, and change the behaviours, of men who perpetrate and condone VAWG. This approach recognises that preventing VAWG is not the responsibility of victim/survivors, but requires a broader societal effort.

## The four steps are:



This whole-society, preventative approach also provides a chance to strengthen the connections between tackling VAWG and tackling women's inequality. Without this understanding, interventions tend to focus on these separately and miss the opportunity to address the root cause. We commit to delivering this strategy in a way that is underpinned by this approach to achieve the greatest impact.

## Prevention

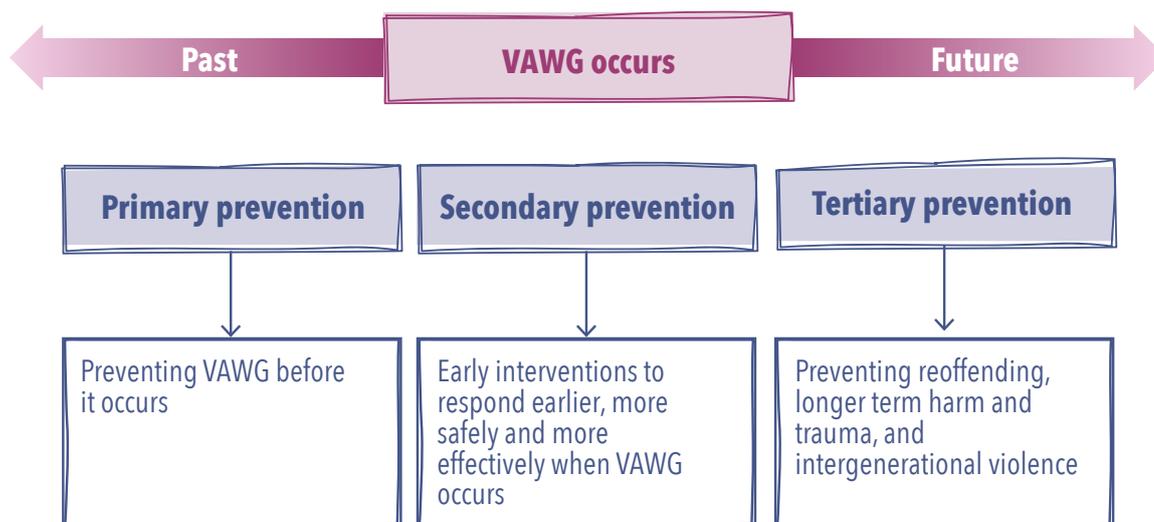
To create a Scotland where women and children are safe from the harm of VAWG, we need to prevent it from happening in the first place. VAWG is avoidable. Prioritising primary prevention challenges the notion that VAWG is inevitable or acceptable.

To achieve this, we need a fundamental change in the societal attitudes, values, and structures that give rise to and sustain VAWG. This strategy reaffirms our

commitment to this and aims to achieve the collective challenge of ensuring that the prevention of VAWG is given prominence. This does not mean that support for victim/survivors will be reduced. It means expanding the focus to minimise the chance of women and girls experiencing violence in the first place.

Our approach in this strategy is to consider how we promote protective factors and address the underlying causes of VAWG. This includes exploring how we tackle the systemic societal and economic disadvantages and circumstances that can foster all forms of VAWG. With an understanding of underlying causes, risk factors, and protective factors, we will then design and implement actions to prevent VAWG across three key stages. Applying this framework to VAWG has shown that it's an effective tool for supporting change.<sup>51</sup>

Primary prevention aims to prevent violence before it occurs; secondary prevention aims to provide an early response to violence; and tertiary prevention focuses on preventing further violence, harm, and trauma.



## Top level policy framework

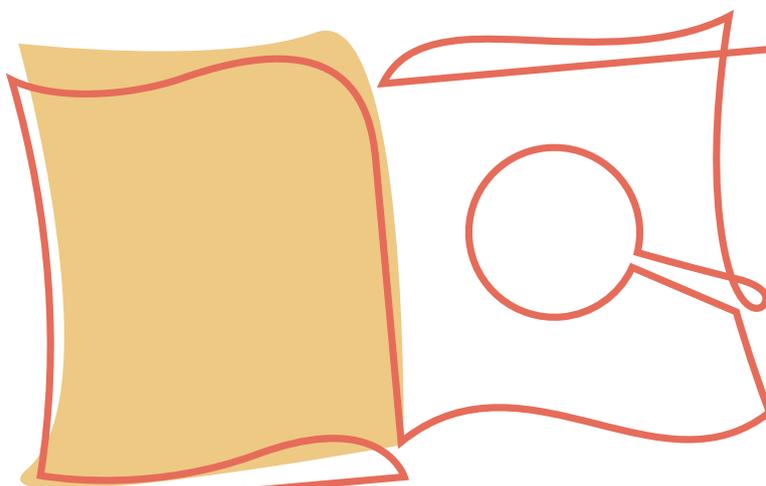
The changes we want to see through the implementation of this strategy are wide-ranging and cross into multiple policy areas throughout national and local government.

We want considerations of VAWG and the wider impact of women's inequality incorporated into all policies. Throughout the lifetime of this strategy we will work across spheres of government to prioritise actions that will improve outcomes for women, children, and young people.

51. WALDEN, I. & WALL, L. 2014. Reflecting on primary prevention of violence against women: the public health approach, Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault.

This, alongside the broader commitment to incorporate additional international human rights treaties into Scots law within the limits of devolved competence, will help to achieve the vision of Equally Safe. The proposed Human Rights Bill will incorporate the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), among other treaties. This will help to ensure that, when duty bearers are giving effect to the economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights in the Bill, they carefully consider specific protections for women, children and young people in delivering these rights.

As well as ensuring there is coherence across national policy and practice, the local implementation of this strategy is reliant on the work of VAWPs and wider community planning structures and processes. We continue our commitment to local planning and implementation.



# A strong and flourishing Scotland where all individuals are equally safe and respected, and where women and girls live free from all forms of violence, abuse and exploitation and the attitudes that help perpetuate these.

The vision is framed within the context of:



It is underpinned by our six public health priorities:



It is reinforced by current and forthcoming legislation and treaties, including:



It is supported by Scottish Government and COSLA strategies and action plans to help tackle inequalities and improve outcomes for all including (but not limited to):

Best start, bright futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan	The Promise	Mental health and wellbeing strategy	The Vision for Justice in Scotland	National Strategy for Community Justice
Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC)	Housing to 2040	Ending Homelessness Together	Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation	Violence prevention framework
Creating Hope Together: suicide prevention strategy	Rights, respect and recovery: alcohol and drug treatment strategy	New Scots: refugee integration strategy	Challenging men's demand for prostitution: policy principles	Ending destitution together: strategy
Fair Work action plan	Human Trafficking and Exploitation Strategy	Gender Equality Taskforce on Education and Learning	Domestic Homicide Review Taskforce	Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan
Women's Health Plan	First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls (NACWG)	Adult Support Protection guidance	Incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)	Feminist approach to International Relations
Whole family approach	A Culture Strategy for Scotland (2020) and Culture Strategy Action Plan refresh (forthcoming)	National guidance for child protection in Scotland 2021 - updated 2023	Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007 Code of Practice 2022	Victims, Witnesses and Criminal Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill
Improving the lives of Gypsy/ Travellers: 2019-2021	Family Justice Modernisation Strategy	No One Left Behind: delivery plan	Anti-Racism Observatory for Scotland	Non-Binary Equality Action Plan
Self-Harm Strategy and Action Plan				

The impact on outcomes will be measured in line with our National Performance Framework, in particular:

 We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential	 We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe
 We are healthy and active	 We tackle poverty by sharing opportunities, wealth and power more equally
 We respect, protect and fulfil human rights and live free from discrimination	 We have a globally competitive, entrepreneurial, inclusive and sustainable economy

# How will we get there?

## Leadership and Governance

The central aim of Equally Safe is to work collaboratively with partners across all sectors. Having a clear governance structure that underpins delivery is essential.

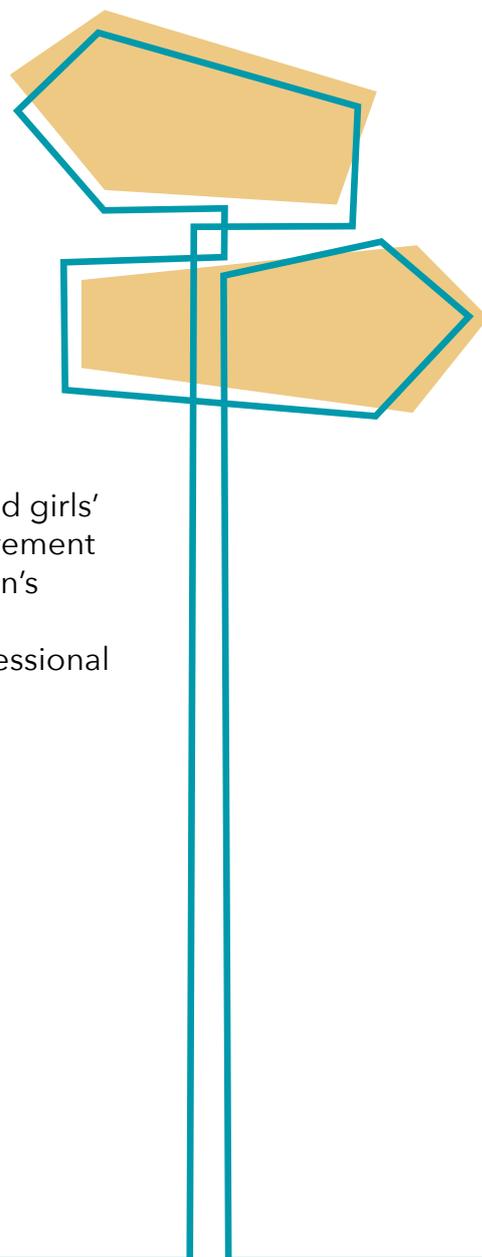
Key delivery partners will have a strong and effective voice in how progress is made, particularly over process, risk management and tackling challenges.

Our governance arrangements draw on existing structures that work well. They continue to place delivery partners at the centre.

Our high-level Joint Strategic Board, chaired by the Scottish Government and COSLA, ensures accountability and aligns strategic focus. The Verity House Agreement informs our working arrangements.

A Scottish Government ministerial group has been established to demonstrate and enable collective leadership across portfolios, and to ensure that the Scottish Government is using all the tools of national government so that the aims of Equally Safe are achieved as work progresses.

COSLA is committed to ongoing collaboration and partnership with the Scottish Government. It will work with its members to consider VAWG across all areas of policy that affect women's and girls' lives. Close working with Public Health Scotland and the Improvement Service through our joint framework agreement to tackle women's inequality and VAWG, along with guidance and advice from the experience and expertise of the local VAOWPs, our advisory professional bodies and specialist services, will underpin local government's ongoing focus on preventing and eradicating VAWG.



**LEADERSHIP**

Scottish Government/COSLA partnership in line with Verity House Agreement

**PROGRESS AND ASSURANCE**

**Scottish Government:**

The Scottish Government has a key role in co-ordinating the implementation of Equally Safe across at a national level by demonstrating leadership, commitment, and co-operation.

**COSLA:**

COSLA has the key role in co-ordinating the implementation of Equally Safe across all local partnerships and stakeholders by demonstrating local leadership, commitment and co-operation.

**Strategic assurance:**

The Scottish Government and COSLA are committed to working collaboratively with partners through the Equally Safe Joint Strategic Board and other key mechanisms to achieve change.

**COLLABORATION**

**Delivery partners:** We will work to strengthen ties with our wider networks across the policy landscape to ensure stakeholders remain at the core of delivery.

**INFORMED BY**

Victims/survivors

**Governance principles**

The governance arrangements for Equally Safe are based on the following principles.

- We are clear, delivery focused and streamlined.
- We organise around a central pillar of collaboration that uses the specialist knowledge and experience in national and local government, the third sector, and public sector organisations.
- We will ensure policy is informed by those on the front line and those with lived experience.
- We will ensure that roles are clear and supported in taking forward Equally Safe priorities.

## Collaborative effort

No one sector, organisation, or service can tackle the prevention and eradication of VAWG alone.

Specialist services remain key. However, it is only by working together nationally and locally through collective leadership, that we can make the system changes needed to realise the human rights of women, children and young people. Equally Safe is predicated on the strength of a whole-system, gendered response to preventing and tackling all forms of VAWG. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience across Scotland and beyond for us to tap into and build upon. Much of this has been developed by our partners in the third sector from decades of working directly with women, children and young people who have experienced violence, abuse, and exploitation. Much has been learned through the projects and initiatives that have been funded over the years locally and significantly by the Scottish Executive and Scottish Government.

At every step, we'll collaborate with women, children, and young people, learning from their direct experiences of VAWG. Participation should be meaningful, effective, and sustainable. It should recognise the barriers for particular groups to be involved. It should ensure that those participating understand their rights; have a chance to be involved; engage on the basis that it is their choice to do so; are valued and supported; that everyone works together; and that there is regular communication and feedback.

## Making the best use of resources

COSLA and the Scottish Government agree that it is vital that we remain focused on addressing VAWG.

We acknowledge the scale and importance of the task before us. We recognise that we must work collaboratively and with partners and expert stakeholders from across the public and third sectors to ensure that investment in tackling VAWG is equal to the task before us.

Scottish Government funding dedicated to tackling VAWG is at an all-time high in Scotland. We have invested £19 million a year in specialist services and projects through the Delivering Equally Safe Fund and £18.5m for specialist advocacy support for victim/ survivors of GBV from the Victim Centred Approach Fund.

We also recognise the investments, made by local authorities, health boards, and justice partners among others, in local systems and services to prevent and



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tackle VAWG and to support victim/survivors. We are committed, through even greater partnership working, to build a focus on prevention and to ensure that women, children and young people are supported to recover from VAWG.

It is vital now more than ever that we make the best use of the resources, including the people and finances that we have, to tackle VAWG by effectively using the collective resources of the public and third sectors.

We remain committed to developing a more consistent, coherent, collective, and stable funding model that will ensure both a focus on prevention and high-quality, accessible, specialist services across Scotland for women, children, and young people experiencing any form of VAWG.

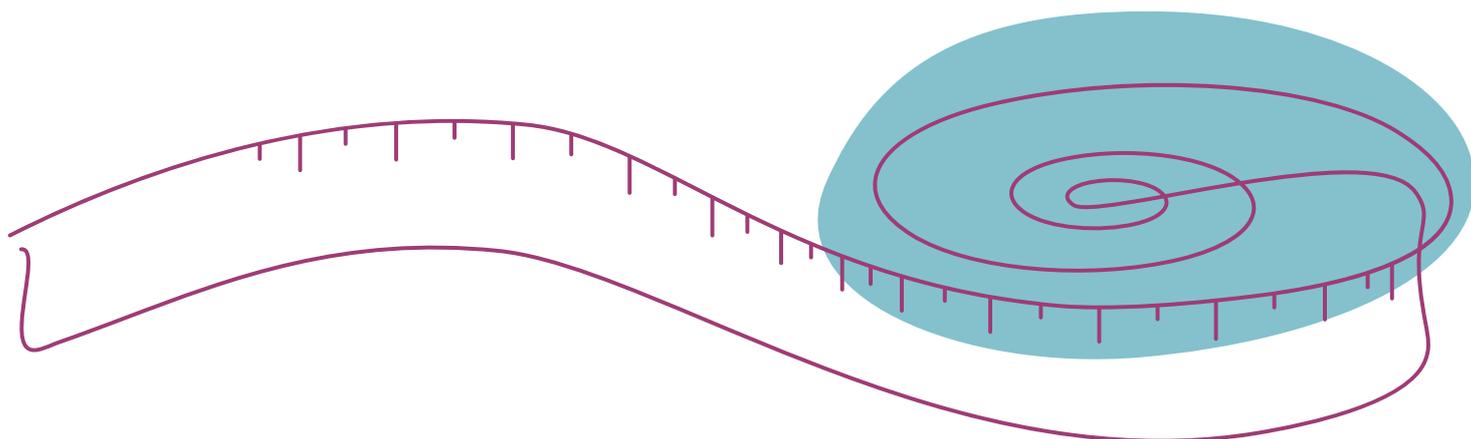
We will consider the delivery approach of current dedicated funding for tackling VAWG, and how this funding can be further aligned to meet the ambitions of Equally Safe.

## **Accountability and measuring progress**

We've updated our outcomes framework, which sets out a high-level vision for Equally Safe.

We are committed to publishing an updated Equally Safe delivery plan and performance framework with SMART indicators to help monitor progress against our agreed activities and outcomes, and to identify areas for future improvement.

We'll continuously assess our progress, aiming to reduce all forms of VAWG. We'll use evidence and data to understand how our joint efforts are effecting change.





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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

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EH1 3DG

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