



Close the Gap Briefing for Scottish Government Debate:

Preventing Violence Against Women for an Equally Safe Scotland

September 2026

Close the Gap is Scotland's policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market participation. We have been working with policymakers, employers and trade unions for 25 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of the gender pay gap. Our vision is for a Scotland where all women have a good working life.

1. Summary and key asks

Violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of women's inequality in Scotland. Preventing violence against women therefore will only be possible if women's inequality is tackled in all aspects of women's lives and of our society. This includes violence against women at work and women's economic inequality, a significant driver of violence against women. Close the Gap welcome the focus on violence against women in the Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2026-31 but urges the Government to prioritise primary prevention in their approach. Close the Gap delivers a world-leading, innovative employer accreditation programme, [Equally Safe at Work](#) (ESAW). ESAW is a key primary prevention intervention which was developed to support the implementation of the Equally Safe strategy.

Close the Gap calls on MSPs to urge the Government to:

- **Ensure that primary prevention is at the heart of Scotland's approach to eradicating violence against women**, as well as focusing on measures to support victim-survivors
- **Take action to address women's labour market inequality and violence against women in the workplace**, and support employers to address gendered inequalities in their organisations

- **Provide sustainable, long-term investment in Equally Safe at Work (ESAW)**, as a proven primary prevention intervention that supports employers to prevent violence against women and support victim-survivors in the workplace
- **Implement targeted action on women's economic inequality as a core prevention strategy**, recognising the links between gender inequality, economic insecurity and violence against women.

2. Why prevention matters: key evidence used in briefing

- Violence against women is a workplace issue: **three-quarters of domestic abuse victim-survivors are targeted at work**
- **Over 1,000 incidents of unwanted sexual behaviour** by a colleague were reported by employees across just 15 organisations in the 2024/25 ESAW employee survey
- **The same survey found that 59% of employee respondents were not confident reporting workplace sexual harassment** or were only somewhat confident
- Sexual harassment remains largely hidden, **80% of women never report workplace sexual harassment**
- **Violence against women costs the UK economy £66 billion** each year, yet prevention remains underinvested
- Primary prevention programmes like **Equally Safe at Work help employers tackle the root causes** of violence against women before harm occurs

3. Equally Safe at Work: A Primary Prevention Intervention

ESAW was designed to support employers to understand how gender inequality and men's violence affect women in the workforce and to provide a framework to drive change. The programme piloted with a small number of local authorities between January 2019 and November 2020, which saw four councils achieving Bronze accreditation. Following the success of the pilot, the ESAW programme was rolled out to another cohort of local authorities alongside a pilot of the programme with NHS and third sector organisations. Close the Gap also delivers the ESAW Community of Practice,

a peer learning network where organisations can share their experiences of tackling gender inequality in the workplace and share best practice.

Today, ESAW supports:

- **19 accredited employers (11 at Development stage and 8 at Bronze stage)**
- **10 employers working towards accreditation**
- **62 employers as part of the Community of Practice**

The tiered approach enables employers to progress from building a foundation for change to embedding a strong culture of gender equality within the organisation. As part of the programme, employers have developed new policies on violence against women and sexual harassment; delivered organisation-specific awareness raising campaigns on violence against women and work; improved reporting systems for sexual harassment to remove barriers for staff; developed interventions to tackle occupational segregation; and introduced special leave for victim-survivors of violence against women, amongst other actions. Employers are also enabled to collect intersectional disaggregated data on violence against women to allow them to assess where the issues are.

Evaluation of ESAW has shown the programme is an important lever in enabling employers to take substantive action to help address violence against women, by building employer capacity to better understand, respond to, and prevent it.

4. Violence against women is a workplace issue

Violence against women is a systemic and widespread human rights violation that is endemic in Scotland. 1 in 4 women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime in Scotland, and three-quarters are targeted at their place of work.¹ Abusers often use workplace resources, such as phones and email, to threaten, harass or abuse their current or former partner, acquaintances or strangers. Perpetrator tactics such as sabotage, stalking and harassment at work affect women's work performance, absenteeism levels and job retention. Domestic abuse can also impact women's capacity to work by having long-term consequences on their physical and mental health, and

¹ IPD (2013) *Managing and supporting employees experiencing domestic abuse*, available at: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/managing-and-supporting-employees-experiencing-domestic-abuse_2013_tcm18-10528.pdf

overall wellbeing, with victim-survivors routinely struggling to find appropriate support in the workplace.

In the 2024/25 ESW survey of employees, which received 2,247 responses from employees working across 15 organisations, respondents reported 1,068 different incidents of unwanted sexual behaviour from a colleague over the last 12 months.² These included:

- **24 cases of sexual assault**
- **20 cases of being forced to watch or listen to sexually graphic material**
- **122 comments of a sexual nature about the respondent's body and/or clothing**
- **242 unwelcome jokes of a sexual nature**
- **281 incidents of hearing comments of a sexual nature about another woman or women in general.**

These results demonstrate the widespread nature of sexual harassment in the workplace in Scotland. The following comments made by respondents on their experiences highlight the detrimental impact such incidents can have on women's working lives and careers:

- **"I considered leaving my job"**
- **"I started to doubt my future in teaching"**
- **"It made me feel isolated as I feel the only one who doesn't understand the 'banter'"**
- **"I lost confidence in conduct policies and senior managers".³**

The scale of the issue remains largely hidden as evidence shows the vast majority (80%) of those who experience sexual harassment in the workplace never report it.⁴ This highlights a lack of trust in employers to offer appropriate support, women often fear that they may be blamed, not believed or even lose their jobs if they report incidents. Over a quarter of ESW employee survey respondents stated that challenging violence against women is not a priority for their employer, while 33% were unsure what violence against women support services were available. When asked 'if you were being sexually harassed by a line manager or colleague, how confident would you be about

² Equally Safe at Work Employee Survey (2024/25).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Trade Union Congress (2016) *Still just a bit of banter? Sexual Harassment in the workplace in 2016*, available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/SexualHarassmentreport2016.pdf>

reporting it?’ 59% were not confident or only somewhat confident.⁵ This is why primary prevention programmes like ESAW are so important, to stop incidents like these occurring in the first place and to create workplace environments in which women can trust they will be properly supported if they choose to report.

Preventing violence against women is therefore essential, not only for women's safety and equality, but also for maintaining women's participation in the labour market. Violence against women can affect women's ability to do their job effectively through the impact of stress, trauma, and physical injuries, as well as the need to take time off to seek help. Victim-survivors are sometimes forced to leave their jobs and move into a role not appropriate to their skills.⁶ This not only leads to missed opportunities for women but a significant loss of skills and talent for employers. Sustained investment in preventative programmes such as ESAW is critical to help employers tackle the underlying causes of violence against women and create safer, more equal workplaces, rather than only relying on responses after harm has already occurred.

5. The cost of violence against women

Violence against women must be eradicated to stop harm and promote gender equality but there is also a clear business case for investing in this area. Violence against women is estimated to cost the UK economy around £66 billion.⁷ This figure includes the cost to public services and lost economic output from affected women. Domestic abuse is estimated to cost the UK £16 billion, which includes the cost of services, lost economic output and human and emotional costs.⁸

The cost of violence against women places significant costs on public services, at a time when there is increasing pressure to reduce public spending. Due to violence against women and wider gender inequalities, women are twice as dependent on social security than men; more likely to need access to housing services when experiencing violence and abuse; more likely to have a caring role; less likely to be financially dependent; and more likely to be experiencing poverty, including in-work poverty. This underscores the

⁵ Equally Safe at Work Employee Survey (2024/25).

⁶ Close the Gap (2022) *Written evidence for the Social Justice and Social Security Committee session on violence against women and girls, February 2022*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Evidence-to-SJSS-Committee-session-on-VAWG.pdf>

⁷ UK Government Home Office (2019) *The economic and social costs of domestic abuse*, available at: [The economic and social costs of domestic abuse](#)

⁸ Walby, S. (2009) *The Cost of Domestic Violence: Update 2009*, available at: [The cost of domestic violence: Update 2009 - Lancaster University research directory](#)

need for a strong primary prevention approach to eliminating violence against women in all areas of life, including the workplace.

Contact details:

Dr Charlotte Sanderson, Policy and Parliamentary Lead, Close the Gap

csanderson@closethegap.org.uk | 07912 203 626