



Briefing for Scottish Government Debate: Empowering Young People's Voices in Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls

December 2024

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 more than 20 years to influence and enable action that will address the causes of women's labour market inequality.

1. Introduction

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence is an international campaign started in 1991 by the Centre for Women's Global Leadership. The campaign highlights that violence against women and girls (VAWG) is an enduring social problem that undermines workplaces and communities. It affects women from all backgrounds irrespective of age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, education level, culture, and socioeconomic demographic. The intersecting inequalities that the most marginalised women, such as disabled women, racially minoritised women and migrant women, face also shape their experiences of men's violence and abuse.

This year's theme from UN Women, 'Towards Beijing +30', marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which is a landmark document recognising the importance of promoting women's rights and advancing gender equality. This global theme importantly aligns with Scotland's Equally Safe strategy by recognising that VAWG is a cause and consequence of wider gender inequality.

In Scotland, the chosen theme for this year's campaign is 'Imagine a Scotland without violence against women and girls'. This theme is more critical than ever and with the refreshed Equally Safe delivery plan published earlier this year, it provides an opportunity to emphasise the importance of advancing gender equality in all areas of society, a necessary step in preventing VAWG.

2. Equally Safe at Work: A Primary Prevention Intervention

Violence against women (VAW) has a detrimental impact on all areas of women's lives, including their experiences at work. **Employers have an essential role to play in**

preventing VAW by developing employment policies and practice that take account of women's needs and experiences.

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. The programme was 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. **The total number of ESAW accredited employers is now 18.**¹ The programme was opened to new employers earlier this year and currently **a further 15 employers from across the public and third sector are working towards accreditation.**²

Equally Safe at Work 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 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 policies on VAW and sexual harassment; delivered internal awareness raising campaigns on VAW and work, including one council who used bin lorries to share data on VAW and helpline numbers; reviewed employment policies; developed interventions to tackle occupational segregation; and introduced special leave for victim-survivors of VAW, amongst other action.

Evaluation of ESAW has shown the programme is an important lever in enabling employers to take substantive action to help address VAW, by building employer capacity to better understand, respond to, and prevent VAW. The programme has supported employers to progress work on gender equality, and provides them with the opportunity to demonstrate leadership on gender equality and challenging VAW.

3. Violence Against Women as a Workplace Issue

VAW is a systemic and widespread human rights violation that is perpetrated at epidemic levels, and the workplace is no exception. **Three million women in the UK**

¹ Accredited employers include: Aberdeen City Council; Midlothian Council; North Lanarkshire Council; Shetland Islands Council; Angus Council; East Ayrshire Council; Fife Council; Glasgow City Council; Highland Council; Inverclyde Council; Perth and Kinross Council; West Dunbartonshire Council; NHS Ayrshire and Arran; NHS Dumfries and Galloway; NHS Health Improvement Scotland; Public Health Scotland; Voluntary Action North Lanarkshire; and, Chest, Heart and Stroke Scotland

² Current employers in the programme include: NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, NHS Lothian, NHS Education Scotland, NHS Shetland, Dumfries and Galloway Council, City of Edinburgh Council, Glasgow City Council, Orkney Islands Council, Hanover Scotland, Muirhead Outreach, Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, Advocard, Lothian Community Transport Service, Care Inspectorate and Improvement Service.

experience violence against them each year³, with many more living with past experiences of abuse. **1 in 4 women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime in Scotland, and three-quarters are targeted at their place of work.** Abusers often use workplace resources, such as phones and email, to threaten, harass or abuse their current or former partner, acquaintances or strangers.⁴ 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 overall wellbeing, with victim-survivors routinely struggling to find appropriate support in the workplace.

An Equally Safe at Work employee survey found that 1 in 4 respondents had experienced sexual harassment over a 12-month period.⁵ Survey respondents comprised staff working in the 14 participating employers across local government, NHS and the third sector. **Other research has found over 70% of women reported having experienced or witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace in Scotland, with this figure rising to two-thirds of women aged 18-24.⁶** Experiences ranged from unwanted jokes and sexual comments to serious sexual assaults.⁷

Evidence shows that the vast majority of women (80%) who experience sexual harassment in the workplace will never report it due to fears of being blamed, not being believed, or losing their job. Some women have stated they have not reported because they feel VAW is so widespread and commonplace at work there is no point in trying to challenge it.⁸

Research from the World Health Organisation indicates that 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced rape and sexual assault in their lifetime. In Scotland, similar to other forms of VAW, rape and sexual assault is significantly underreported. Only 22% of victim-survivors of rape reported it to the police.⁹ Experiences of rape and sexual assault can have a significant impact on women's ability to maintain employment, as a result of needing to take extended periods of

³ End Violence Against Women & Equality and Human Rights Commission (2009) *Maps of Gaps 2: The postcode lottery of violence against women support services in Britain*

⁴ CIPD (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

⁵ 2,780 respondents completed the survey and reports 586 cases of sexual harassment in the last 12 months.

⁶ Zero Tolerance (2017) *Sexism is a waste...': the need to tackle violence and misogyny in Scotland's Workplaces*, available at: <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Sexism-is-a-waste---the-need-to-tackle-violence-and-misogyny-in-Scottish-workplaces-15.pdf>

⁷ Women and Equalities Committee (2018) *Sexual Harassment in the workplace*, available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/725/72502.htm>

⁸ 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>

⁹ Scottish Government, *Scottish Crime and Justice Survey, 2019-2020: Scottish Crime and Justice Survey 2019/20 - gov.scot* (www.gov.scot)

time off because of the emotional and physical impact. Victim-survivors often experience trauma which can make it increasingly difficult to be in work situations which involve groups of men, or being alone with men.

There is a clear business case for supporting victim-survivors at work and preventing VAW.¹⁰ As **VAW 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 or leaving their job and moving into a role not commensurate with their skills.¹¹ **This represents a significant loss of female talent, with many employers missing out on women's skills and talents.** Therefore, it makes good business sense for employers to support women affected by men's violence, and take steps to address gender inequality at work and prevent VAW. To ensure employers can support victim-survivors appropriately and address VAW, it is imperative that sustainable investment is made into programmes, such as ESAW, to build influence action in the workplace.

4. The Cost of Violence Against Women

VAW is estimated to cost the UK economy around £66 billion.¹² This figure includes the cost to public services and lost economic output from affected women. In addition, **domestic abuse is estimated to cost the UK £16 billion, which includes an estimated £1.6 billion lost due to decreased productivity, administrative difficulties from unplanned absences, lost wages, and sick pay.**¹³ Again, there is a clear business case for addressing VAW and supporting victim-survivors.

The cost of VAW places significant costs on public services, at a time when there is increasing pressure to reduce public spending. Due to VAW 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 need for a strong primary prevention approach to eliminating VAW.

5. Conclusion

Employers have a significant role in supporting victim-survivors in the workplace, as well as challenging VAW when it happens. However, VAW is generally not

¹⁰ Close the Gap (2019) *Guidance for line managers on violence against women and work*, available at:

<https://www.equallysafeatwork.scot/resources/ESAW-guidance-for-line-managers-on-VAW-and-work.pdf>

¹¹ 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>

¹² Oliver, R., Alexander, B., Roe, S., and Wlasny, M. (2019) *The economic and social costs of domestic abuse*, UK Government, Home Office, Research Report 107

¹³ Walby, S. (2009) *The Cost of Domestic Violence: Update 2009*

understood as a workplace issue, and it is rare to see employment practices which adequately support victim-survivors. In addition, employers are often unaware of their role in primary prevention and without understanding and addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality they will continue to struggle to ensure women's safety in the workplace. Effective primary prevention interventions such as Equally Safe at Work, require sustainable funding from Scottish Government so that employers can be supported to deliver equality for women in the workplace.