



Written evidence for the Social Justice and Social Security Committee session on violence against women and girls February 2022

1.0 Introduction

Close the Gap is Scotland's policy advocacy organisation working on women's labour market equality. For more than 20 years, we have been working strategically with policymakers, employers and unions to influence and enable action that will tackle the causes of the gender pay gap.

Close the Gap welcomed Equally Safe, Scotland's national strategy to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls, and in particular the explicit recognition that in order to prevent violence against women and girls, it is necessary to tackle gender inequality more widely. VAW affects all aspects of women's lives and the workplace is no exception. The gender pay gap, and women's propensity to have a caring role, means that they experience higher levels of economic inequality. Economic inequality reduces women's financial independence, and restricts their choices in employment, and in their lives.

Equally Safe sets out that all sectors of society, including employers, need to take action if men's violence is to be prevented. A necessary step is gender mainstreaming, which means that gender equality is integrated into policies, programmes, services and budgets to distribute power and resources more equally. However, despite gender mainstreaming being a requirement of the public sector equality duty, there is little evidence of gender mainstreaming happening in practice¹. This is a significant barrier to the prevention of VAW. Scottish Government's current review of the public sector equality duty needs to take account of this, and the mainstreaming duty should be strengthened with sufficient resources allocated to build capacity in the public sector to do gender mainstreaming well, and design policy, programmes and services that prevent VAW.

¹ Engender (2021) *What Works for Women: Improving gender mainstreaming in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/WHAT-WORKS-FOR-WOMEN---improving-gender-mainstreaming-in-Scotland.pdf>

2.0 How VAW affects women's labour market participation

VAW is perpetrated at epidemic levels, with three million women in the UK affected each year. The prevention of men's violence is intrinsically linked to addressing women's inequality in all areas of society. This is because VAW is a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Women's labour market is also caused, and sustained, by wider gender inequality. Women's labour market and economic inequality reduces their financial independence, restricts their choices in employment, and creates a conducive context for VAW. Financial dependence and poverty make it harder for women experiencing violence or abuse to move on, and access and maintain employment. Addressing women's labour market inequality is therefore a prerequisite for ending VAW.

The gender pay gap is the key indicator of women's labour market inequality, and the persistently divergent experiences men and women have in the workplace, in education, training, care and other domestic labour, and around men's violence.² The causes of the pay gap are well-rehearsed³ and include a range of societal and economic factors which inter-relate in complex ways:

- Occupational segregation, where gender norms and stereotyping about women's and men's capabilities and preferences results in women and men doing different types of work and different levels of work, with women under-represented in senior roles.
- The economy-wide undervaluation of "women's work" such as care, admin, cleaning and retail, in which women's employment, and part-time work is concentrated.
- A lack of quality part-time and flexible working which results in women's under-representation at management level and in senior grades, and their concentration in lower grades; as a result many women are working below their skill level.
- Women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and the length of time women have worked part-time in order to combine their caring roles with employment.
- Biased and untransparent recruitment, development and progression practices.

² Close the Gap (2018) *The Gender Penalty: Exploring the causes and solutions to Scotland's gender pay gap*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/The-Gender-Penalty-Feb-2018.pdf>

³ Ibid.

- Male-orientated workplace cultures that do not feel inclusive to women, nor meet the needs of their lives.
- Discrimination embedded within pay and grading systems, which results in women being paid less than men for doing equal.
- The increasing precarity of women’s employment generally, with women more likely to be on zero hour and temporary contracts, and in other types of insecure work.

Women are not a homogenous group, and their experiences are shaped by their multiple, intersecting identities. While there are commonalities experienced by all women at work, Black and minoritised women⁴, disabled women⁵, single parents⁶ - 91% of whom are women, lesbian, bisexual and trans women⁷, young women⁸, older women⁹ and refugee women¹⁰ experience different barriers to participation in the labour market, and to progression within their occupation.

Work by Close the Gap¹¹ shows that the increasing precarity of women’s employment has been compounded by Covid-19 as pandemic-related job disruption disproportionately affected the jobs and sectors where women work. Women are 79% of Scotland’s key workers but are undervalued, underpaid and underprotected. Covid-19 has pushed more women into poverty, especially women who are single parents, Black and minoritised women and young women, who have particularly struggled with job losses, having their hours cut and being furloughed on reduced pay. The pandemic has also intensified women’s experiences of VAW, especially during periods of lockdown, as reductions in services, protracted homeworking and self-isolation and social distancing measures created additional risks for women, and made it more difficult to access support networks and specialist support services¹².

⁴ Close the Gap (2019) *Still Not Visible: Black and Minority Ethnic Women’s Experiences of Employment in Scotland*, available at: https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/1557499847_Still-Not-Visible.pdf

⁵ Close the Gap (2018) *Response to the Scottish Government Consultation on Increasing the Employment of Disabled People in the Public Sector*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Close-the-Gap-Response-to-Consultation-on-Increasing-Employment-of-Disabled-People.pdf>

⁶ JRF Scotland (2021) *Freeing low income single parents from in-work poverty’s grip* available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/freeing-low-income-single-parents-work-povertys-grip>

⁷ Stonewall (2014) *The Double-Glazed Glass Ceiling: Lesbians in the workplace* and House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (December 2015) *Transgender equality*

⁸ YWCA Scotland (2016) *Status of Young Women in Scotland*

⁹ Scottish Commission on Older Women (2015) *Older Women and Work: Looking to the future*

¹⁰ Scottish Refugee Council (2014) *One Step Closer*

¹¹ Close the Gap (2021) *One Year On: How Covid-19 is affecting women’s employment in Scotland*, available at: <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/One-Year-On---How-COVID-19-is-impacting-womens-employment-in-Scotland.pdf>

¹² Scottish Women’s Aid (2021) *Crisis and Resilience: The impact of a global pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and service providers in Scotland*, available at: <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/SWA-COVID-Report.pdf>

VAW has a profound impact on women's capacity to work and victim-survivors are often targeted in and around the workplace. Women report experiencing trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of men's violence and routinely struggle to find appropriate support in the workplace. VAW can also affect victim-survivors' capacity to work with men, particularly in situations where there is an existing gender or power imbalance.

Women's subordinate position in the labour market creates a conducive context for VAW. Women in precarious work, who are often among the most marginalised women, are more vulnerable to sexual harassment. Where women on zero hour contracts are reliant on securing shifts, especially when shifts need to accommodate their caring responsibilities, they feel less able to report sexual harassment when it happens for fear of being denied work. Domestic abuse is more likely to be found in households with a wider gap between male and female earnings. Women who have experienced domestic abuse, when asked which interventions would be most effective and helpful, list childcare, housing, income support, and education and skills above refuges.¹³

2.1 How domestic abuse disrupts women's employment

Domestic abuse can create significant barriers which prevent women going to work and sustaining employment. It is common for victim-survivors to be targeted in and around the workplace, and domestic abuse therefore has a profound impact on women's capacity to work. It can have long-term consequences for women and causes damage to women's physical health, mental health and wellbeing, and victim-survivors routinely struggle to find appropriate support in the workplace. Domestic abuse can have an effect on women's ability to manage challenging situations, interact with others, or experience career advancement and development in a labour market which is characterised by gendered power imbalances.

Perpetrators of domestic abuse often use a number of tactics to disrupt women's employment including:

- Using workplace resources such as phone and email to threaten, harass or abuse them;
- Sending abusive and threatening phone calls, text messages or emails to their personal phone while at work;

¹³ Engender (2014) *Common Weal: Eradicating gender inequality and violence against women*, available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/common-weal-eradicating-gender-inequality-and-violence-against-women/?tag=vawg>

- Preventing them from going to work by locking them in, or by hiding their keys or purse;
- Controlling their finances to prevent them from paying transport costs or tampering with their car to prevent them from going to work;
- Following them into their workplace or waiting outside for them;
- Isolating them from their colleagues by not allowing them to attend social events;
- Verbal harassment, assault or threats of assault when women leave to go to work;
- Destroying personal documents which may prevent them from applying for jobs;
- Preventing them from attending development or training courses;
- Sabotaging their work clothes;
- Offering to provide childcare and not turning up;
- Threatening to take the children if they go to work
- For non-English speakers, preventing them from learning English which would enable them to work; and
- Discouraging them from applying for promotion or positions where they would become the primary earner in the household.¹⁴

By restricting a woman's ability to progress or improve her economic position, perpetrators make it more difficult for women to leave. Economic abuse can have a long term impact on women, including restricting their long term employment prospects. Some women are forced to take long absences or are unable to complete training qualifications which in turn reduces their earning potential and financial independence.

3.0 Employer responses to VAW

Despite the high prevalence of VAW, it is generally not understood as a workplace concern. It is rare to see employment practice which adequately supports victim-survivors, and rarer still for employers to recognise their role as key primary prevention actors. There is, however, a clear business case for supporting victim-survivors at work, and preventing VAW.¹⁵ VAW can affect women's ability to do their job effectively. This can be because of trauma, stress or physical injuries that can make it difficult to do their work as normal. Victim-survivors often require to take

¹⁴ Close the Gap (2019) *Think Business, Think Equality guidance on domestic abuse*, available at: <https://www.thinkbusinessinkequality.org.uk/files/tbtefinaldomesticabuse.pdf>

¹⁵ Close the Gap (2019) *Guidance for line managers on violence against women and work*, available at: <https://www.equallysafefeatwork.scot/resources/ESAW-guidance-for-line-managers-on-VAW-and-work.pdf>

time off work to seek help from specialist support agencies, attend doctor's appointments or access legal support. Some women also leave their job as a result of the impact of VAW and are forced to move to a role which is not commensurate with their skill level. This represents a significant loss of female talent to employers, with many organisations missing out on women's skills and experience. It therefore makes good business sense for employers to support employees who have experienced gender-based violence, and to take steps to address gender inequality at work and prevent VAW.

4.0 The cost of violence against women

It is estimated that VAW costs the UK economy £40 billion each year.¹⁶ This includes the cost to public services and the lost economic output of affected women. Domestic abuse is estimated to cost the UK £16 billion per year¹⁷, which includes an estimated £1.9 billion lost due to decreased productivity, administrative difficulties from unplanned time off, lost wages and sick pay.

The cost of VAW includes a significant cost to public services, at a time when there is increasing downward pressure on public spending. Because of VAW and wider gender inequality, 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 for children, disabled people, sick people or older people;
- Less likely to be financially independent; and
- More likely to be experiencing poverty, including in-work poverty.

Women's higher levels of poverty, and economic inequality underscores the need for primary prevention approaches to VAW.

5.0 Social security

The current social security system is particularly failing to meet the needs of domestic abuse victim-survivors, and enables perpetrators to misuse benefits and control resources. Poverty resulting from the benefit cap or other social security cuts can leave victim-survivors trapped with an abusive partner as they are unable to

¹⁶ Jarvinen, J., Kail, A., & Miller, I. (2008) *Hard Knock Life: VAW – a Guide for Donors and Funders*. London: New Philanthropy Capital.

¹⁷ Walby, S. (2009) *The Cost of Domestic Violence: Update 2009*.

afford to leave¹⁸. Restricted access to bank accounts, the five-week wait for support, the two-child limit and the risk of notification of a new claim before they have left are all repeatedly raised by women as reasons to remain or return to an unsafe home.¹⁹

The single household payment of Universal Credit is especially problematic for women experiencing domestic abuse, making them more vulnerable to financial abuse and denying them access to an independent income. Close the Gap, along with Scottish Women's Aid, Engender, Scottish Refugee Council, and Carers Scotland called on Scottish Government to introduce automatic split payments of Universal Credit, with entitlements relating to children allocated to the main carer and elements for disability, unpaid carers and housing dispersed accordingly.²⁰ In 2018 Scottish Government committed to introducing split payments of Universal Credit so that everyone has access to an independent income²¹. This commitment is very welcome, but progress on developing this with the Department of Work and Pensions has been delayed because of Covid-19. Scottish Government should accelerate action on split payments so that women experiencing domestic abuse have access to an independent income. The working group on improving housing outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse also called on Scottish Government to expedite the process²².

The working group on improving housing outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse also recommended that there be financial support for victim-survivors. It recommended that Scottish Government should explore options for a dedicated support fund or entitlements with clear guidance and capable of delivering short-term recurring payments to support women leaving an abusive partner. This should include essential crisis costs to enable a woman to leave and to

¹⁸ Women's Budget Group (2019) *Benefits or Barriers? Making social security work for survivors of violence and abuse across the UK's four nations*, available at: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Benefits-or-barriers-4-nations-report.pdf>

¹⁹ Engender (2020) *Submission to the Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee inquiry on the role of Scottish Social Security in Covid-19 recovery*, available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Engender-submission-of-evidence-to-the-Scottish-Parliament-Social-Security-Committee-inquiry-on-the-role-of-Scottish-Social-Security-in-Covid-Final.pdf>

²⁰ Close the Gap, Engender, Scottish Women's Aid, Scottish Refugee Council and Carers Scotland (2016) *Securing Women's Futures: Using Scotland's new social security powers to close the gender equality gap*, available at: <https://www.engender.org.uk/content/publications/Securing-Womens-Futures--using-Scotlands-new-social-security-powers-to-close-the-gender-equality-gap.pdf>

²¹ Scottish Government (2018) *Offering flexibility to Universal Credit recipients*, available at: <https://www.gov.scot/news/offering-flexibility-to-universal-credit-recipients/>

²² Scottish Women's Aid and Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland (2020) *Improving housing outcomes for women and children experiencing domestic abuse*, available at: <https://womensaid.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Improving-Housing-Outcomes-for-Women-and-Children-Experiencing-Domestic-Abuse-Report.pdf>

bridge the gap between leaving and the first payment of a Universal Credit payment.²³ Close the Gap strongly supports this call; current social security policy exacerbates women's experiences of domestic abuse, and sustains gender inequality. Social security needs to take account of financial abuse, and women's higher levels of poverty if gender equality is to be advanced.

6.0 Equally Safe at Work: A primary prevention intervention

Close the Gap delivers the innovative, world-leading employer accreditation programme, Equally Safe at Work²⁴. It is a key primary prevention intervention which support the delivery of Scotland's national strategy, Equally Safe. Equally Safe at Work enables employers to develop improved gender-sensitive employment practice and prevent VAW. It was piloted with a small number of early adopter councils and in 2021 and four received bronze accreditation. Due to the high level of interest in the pilot, a shadow group of councils was convened, with a further 20 councils participating. During the pilot the shadow group functioned as a community of practice to share learning from the pilot. The shared learning model continues, but the shadow groups also now serves as a pipeline for future participation in Equally Safe at Work accreditation.

The Equally Safe at Work standards framework comprises six standards which align with women's workplace equality: leadership, data, flexible working, workplace culture, occupational segregation, and VAW. Each standard includes criteria, separated into bronze, silver and gold tiers, which enables councils to improve their employment practice.

Employers are required to undertake a wide range of activity to develop improved employment practice including:

- establishing a cross-directorate working group to oversee delivery of the accreditation workplan;
- demonstrating leadership commitment to gender equality and VAW;
- developing and refreshing employment policies;
- facilitating capacity building for line managers;
- developing improving data gathering systems;
- developing initiatives to reduce occupational segregation;
- supporting the quantitative and qualitative data collection on women workers' experiences of gender equality and VAW; and
- delivering internal awareness raising campaigns.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See <https://www.equallysafeatwork.scot/>

Councils developed a wide range of improved employment policies and practice as a result of Equally Safe at Work. Some examples include:

- Developing VAW policies that set out the role of HR and line managers, the support available for victim-survivors, and the links between VAW, the workplace and gender equality.
- Introducing support mechanisms for victim-survivors such as referrals to the local Women's Aid and Rape Crisis, safety planning, and provision of paid special leave²⁵.
- Implementing a new centralised data system to gather intersectional data on employee experiences of VAW.
- Developing an initiative to address the under-representation of women in gardening and waste management.
- Developing a programme of job shadowing for women in lower and middle management to enable women's progression.
- Developing a targeted recruitment campaign to address the under-representation of women among joinery and plumbing apprentices.
- Improving organisational communication with women catering workers by providing them with a laptop and protected time to check emails and the staff intranet.

To support employers in the accreditation process, Close the Gap has developed a range of resources including:

- Capacity building for line managers on gender- and VAW-sensitive flexible working;
- Capacity building for line managers on VAW and work;
- Guidance for line managers on VAW, supporting women during Covid-19, and VAW and work during Covid-19; and
- A short animation²⁶ on the link between VAW, women's labour market equality and gender equality, to be used as a training resource and an awareness raising tool.

The evaluation of the Equally Safe at Work pilot found that the programme has been effective in engaging employers on VAW and gender equality, and has enabled positive changes to employment practice which contribute to the advancement of

²⁵ Special leave of up to ten days is made available for victim-survivors of VAW of up to ten days. Reasons employees may use special leave may include taking time off to attend doctor's appointments, counselling appointment, solicitor's appointments, bank manager appointments to change accounts, moving schools, moving to a new house or police investigations.

²⁶ See <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/news/blog/whats-violence-against-women-got-to-do-with-womens-labour-market-inequality-close-the-gaps/>

women's equality. The programme has built capacity in councils to better understand, respond to, and prevent VAW. It has also enabled councils to progress work on gender equality by developing improved employment policy and practice; gathering data that are critical to gender equality at work; and developing initiatives to address occupational segregation.

Equally Safe at Work is in the early stages of being expanded in local government. Phase two will see three cohorts of councils working towards bronze and silver accreditation. A new development tier has also been designed as an early entry point into the accreditation process for employers. It will support employers to get ready for working towards bronze accreditation.

Close the Gap is also developing pilots of Equally Safe at Work with NHS boards and third sector organisations, as part of the Gender Beacon Collaborative initiative which originated as a recommendation of the First Minister's National Advisory Council on Women and Girls. Scottish Government will also be participating in the accreditation process for this work.