



Briefing for Scottish Government Debate: 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence

November 2023

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

Close the Gap welcomes the debate on the 16 Days of Activism for the elimination of violence against women and girls, which 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 communities and workplaces. Violence against women affects women from all backgrounds irrespective of age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, education level, culture, and socioeconomic demographic. Women are not a homogenous group, and their experiences of men's violence are shaped by the intersecting and compounding inequalities they face.

This year's theme, '**Imagine a Scotland without gender-based violence**', is focussed on the importance of social change, changes in attitudes, actions and behaviours and the role the government and society has in challenge gender inequalities that underpin violence against women. This is a vitally important theme, as Covid-19, and the cost-of-living crisis have led to a further intensification of VAWG, exacerbated existing inequalities and generated new threats to women's equality. However, it is critical that effective prevention strategies be implemented if VAWG is to be eradicated.

Equally Safe, Scotland's strategy to prevent and eradicate VAWG, has a welcome focus on prevention. It crucially recognises that VAWG is a cause and consequence of wider gender inequality. In order to prevent VAWG, there needs to be action to address women's inequality in all aspects of society including the workplace. 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. Action on women's inequality and women's poverty is therefore a prerequisite for ending VAW. Despite the strengths of Equally Safe, the lack of focus on gendering anti-poverty measures and economic policy undermines Scottish Government's commitments on preventing VAW. There needs to be policy coherence across Government so that there is a clear understanding of primary prevention so that gender is mainstreamed in policy development.

2. Violence against women is 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 experience violence against them each year¹**, 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.² 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.

Research has found **over 70% of women reported having experienced or witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace in Scotland.**³ Experiences ranged from unwanted jokes and sexual comments to serious sexual assaults.⁴ **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 reported they have not reported because they feel VAW is so widespread and commonplace at work there is no point in trying to challenge it.⁵ At

¹ 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*

² 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

³ 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>

⁴ Women and Equalities Committee (2018) *Sexual Harassment in the workplace*, available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/725/72502.htm>

⁵ 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>

the same time, other women have expressed their frustrations with existing reporting procedures which are ineffective.

Sexual assault and rape can have a significant impact on women's ability to maintain employment, as a result of needing to take extended periods of 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.

Employers therefore have a significant role in supporting victim-survivors in the workplace, as well as challenging VAW as primary prevention actors. However, **VAW is generally not understood as a workplace concern, and it is rare to see employment practices which adequately support victim-survivors or for employers to recognise their role in primary prevention**. There is, however, a clear business case for supporting victim-survivors at work and preventing VAW.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.

3. Equally Safe at Work: A primary prevention intervention

Close the Gap delivers an innovative, world-leading 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. **Following this most recent phase of**

⁶ 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>

⁷ 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>

activity, 14 employers achieved accreditation taking the total number of ESAW accredited employers to 18.⁸

ESAW supports employers to improve their employment practice by addressing the barriers women face at work, and highlights that employers have a key role in supporting victim-survivors and preventing VAW. As part of the programme, employers have developed policies on VAW; delivered internal awareness raising campaigns on VAW and work; reviewed employment policies; developed interventions to tackle occupational segregation; and introduced special leave for victim-survivors of domestic abuse, 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.

4. The cost of violence against women

VAW is estimated to cost the UK economy around £66 billion.⁹ 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.¹⁰** 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 stronger primary prevention approach to eliminating VAW.

5. Conclusion

⁸ 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

⁹ 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

¹⁰ Walby, S. (2009) *The Cost of Domestic Violence: Update 2009*

VAW is a cause and consequence of gender inequality, so gender needs to be integrated into Scottish Government policymaking. Strong primary prevention approaches need to include cross-Government action on gender equality such as tackling women's poverty, women's economic inequality, and the gender pay gap. Employers also have an important role in tackling VAW as primary prevention actors, and developing improved gender-sensitive employment practice to support victim-survivors. Effective primary prevention interventions such as Equally Safe at Work, require sustainable investment so that employers can be supported to deliver equality for women in the workplace.