

# **Scotland's Strategy to Address Violence Against Women: Questions for Discussion**

For many decades Scotland has been at the forefront of work to tackle violence against women. Protecting women and children from all forms of violence, providing support and services for those who have or are experiencing violence, and preventing violence from occurring in the first place are national priorities.

The Scottish Government and COSLA, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are currently in the process of developing a national strategy aimed at tackling all forms of violence against women which will be published in Summer 2014. Instead of a formal public consultation process, the Scottish Government are undertaking a period of focussed and targeted consultation and engagement with key stakeholders and interested parties to help inform the development of the strategy.

The SWC has used information and quotes gathered at our roadshows and conferences as research for this response. The views expressed represent the voices of various ages and backgrounds from throughout Scotland.

## OPENING COMMENTS

Women in Scotland are proud of the gender-based definition of violence. This recognises that VAW is both a cause and a consequence of fundamental gender inequality. It is therefore vital that the proposed strategy covers both violence against women and girls (VAWG).

The theme of the 57<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), held in New York in March 2013, was '*elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls*'. The main output from CSW is the agreed conclusions (ACs), which contain an assessment of progress, as well as gaps and challenges. They contain concrete recommendations for action by Governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions, as well as society overall, to be implemented at a local, national and international level.

Much of the discussion in reaching the ACs last year focused on whether girls should be included within definitions etc. It has now been internationally accepted that they should, therefore Scotland has an obligation to recognise this in the proposed strategy.

Of the work currently being done in Scotland (by the third sector, the Scottish Government, and the wider public sector) to **meet the needs of women who have experienced violence**:

- (a) What do you think is working well? Why do you think this?
- (a) What do you think is working less well? Why do you think this?
- (a) What do you think the gaps are, and how these gaps can be filled - by the third sector, the Scottish Government and the wider public sector?

### **Policy, Practice and Legislation**

The clear commitment by the Scottish Government to tackle VAWG is welcomed by women throughout the country. The implementation of policy and practices, such as 'Safer Lives, Changed Lives', the National Group to Address Violence Against Women and the creation of the Caledonian System, are all important steps towards the eradication of VAWG.

The legal protection which has been put in place by the Scottish Government and as a result of lobbying, campaigning and support from public and third sector organisations is also extremely important.

The introduction of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2011 has afforded women who have experienced violence increased access to justice.

It sends out a clear message that the courts will impose custodial sentences on men who commit offences under this legislation.

The SWC also fully supported and welcomed the introduction of the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2010. This legislation gives new and wider definitions of rape and other sexual offences. More needs to be done, however, in terms of securing convictions for this offence. Despite this legislation, conviction rates remain disappointingly low in Scotland.

It is hoped that the removal of the requirement for corroboration will increase conviction rates for rape. However, there are other contributing factors as to why so few men are brought to justice. Attitudes towards the victim in court, questions about their previous sexual partners, what they had been wearing when the rape happened and whether they had been drinking can all lead to low conviction rates.

### **Services**

Women throughout the country have praised the Scottish Government for its commitment to funding Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) services such as Women's Aid and Rape Crisis.

The value of these services is undeniable. The provision of refuge accommodation, as well as assistance with applications for housing, welfare benefits and a host of other support mechanisms allow women to recognise, survive and exit abusive relationships. VAWG services allow women and their children to move forward with their lives.

*"I wouldn't be where I am today without the support and assistance I've had from these services. They saved my life."*

There is real concern that the current economic climate, in which families are struggling to make ends meet due to job losses, pay freezes and the ever-increasing cost of living, will result in more women becoming victims of violence and abuse. Changes to the Welfare Benefits system, introduced by the Westminster Government, will also have a detrimental impact.

Under the previous system, an individual was entitled to make their own claim. Under the new system, however, the claim must be made from a household overall. The likelihood is that this will result in the man receiving the money.

Women may be put at risk of having little or no financial independence, particularly if they have an abusive or controlling partner. Safeguards need to be considered as part of this strategy to ensure there are no adverse effects as a result of this. It is vital that women have access to money of their own.

Funding for VAWG services should continue and should under no circumstances be cut, despite tightening budgets across the public and voluntary sectors.

This must be borne in mind in the development and implementation of a new strategy to tackle VAWG.

*“VAWG support agencies must be focused on helping victims, not constantly diverted by the insecurities of funding and maintaining the resources they have available.”*

How can we ensure services for women who have experienced violence are consistent across the country?

It must be recognised, as part of the strategy, that different women have different service provision needs. A ‘one-size fits all’ model does not work throughout Scotland.

### **Rural Women**

Services to support women experiencing VAWG are not always accessible in every part of the country. Many Local Authorities have specialist units, however most are based in the main towns and do not extend to outlying villages and more remote areas.

Rural Scotland accounts for 18% of the population and makes up 94% of the country’s land mass. Women who live in remote, rural and super sparse areas are not afforded the same access to services as those living in more urban parts of the country. Services such as Women’s Aid run outreach programmes. However, increasingly stretched funding and the sheer distances the workers have to travel leave too many women who have experienced violence without the help they need.

There is also a strong patriarchal culture in Scotland which is especially apparent in rural areas. This can make it extremely difficult for women to ‘speak out’ and report incidents of violence, often due to fear of repercussions within the community. VAWG is seen as a *“hidden evil”* in many rural areas and a *“behind closed doors”* mentality is often displayed.

A lack of female police officers, particularly in more remote areas, can also create barriers for women in reporting domestic abuse, rape, sexual assault etc. Both male and female police officers tend to be known in smaller communities, which can make it even more difficult to disclose incidents of violence.

*“I don’t want to be talking about my private life with the local police officer who is the son or daughter of someone I have known for years. I would feel more comfortable discussing these things with a complete stranger.”*

### **BME Women**

There are not enough VAWG services to support BME women.

*“There are some, but not many. Most women within BME communities are not aware of those which are available.”*

It is recognised that more barriers exist for BME women who seek to access VAWG services. Issues such as a lack of trust or uncertainty around organisations often prevents those who have experienced violence from accessing help and support.

*“There needs to be adverts and information in hospitals, mosques, schools etc. All it would take to raise awareness would be a leaflet on the notice board.”*

Help and advice can be complicated by language barriers and a genuine fear that cultural sensitivities can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Women who do not speak English as a first language are at a *“double disadvantage”*. For example, the use of hand gestures or varying voice pitches to explain a point can be viewed by male translators, GPs etc as hysteria or instability. These methods of expression are often common within certain cultures.

*“More female translators or women who understand cultural sensitivities on hand to help in these circumstances are vital.”*

Many BME women are unaware of services available because their abusers (in the main husbands or family members) control their movements and all access to communication. Women in this situation are accompanied everywhere. For some, even a visit to the GP can result in the doctor being instructed to speak to the woman through her husband.

Women who come to the UK with their spouse often do so without any knowledge of the rights afforded to them or of the services available to assist. Improved advocacy would increase awareness and make women more willing and able to approach services for help and guidance.

These women have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) due to their immigration status and as a result are unable to qualify for any welfare benefits or other forms of assistance. This makes it extremely difficult to leave an abusive partner, with specialist support services for BME women already stretched to capacity. The threat of losing their children is also a major deterrent.

*“If women with NRPF are able to leave an abusive relationship, the courts will often appoint the father as the children’s carer/guardian. This means these women can have little to no contact with their children. It’s fundamentally not right.”*

### **Women and the Justice System**

The establishment of specialist domestic abuse courts in locations throughout the country is welcomed.

Women have called for domestic abuse courts, or similar appropriate, community-based justice mechanisms to be set up in more areas throughout Scotland. Many women are afraid to disclose that they have been abused. If specialist mechanisms operated in more parts of the country, awareness of this type of access to justice would increase. This would, hopefully, further increase awareness of domestic abuse and take away the stigma that is too often attached to women in this situation.

Those who have experienced violence and abuse often drop charges in cases in the mainstream courts as *“financially it’s them who have to bear the brunt”*. Case processing times are different (often longer) in smaller, more outlying areas than they are in the main towns.

Many solicitors often do not fully understand the complexities of VAWG and are therefore not best placed to represent victims. Accessing specialists can be very difficult, particularly for those who live outwith main towns and cities. Many women are also unaware that they are free to seek alternative legal representation if they are unhappy with the advice they receive.

*“There just isn’t enough information available for women who are looking to get protection from the courts. This discourages too many from even trying.”*

More advocacy services are necessary, particularly for women from BME communities, disabled women and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This should be considered as part of the proposed strategy, with particular attention paid to cultural issues and specific needs.

*“Too many vulnerable women are frightened of the legal system and do not know where to turn for help.”*

Of the work currently being done in Scotland (by the third sector, the Scottish Government, and the wider public sector) to **prevent violence against women from occurring in the first place**:

- (a) What do you think is working well? Why do you think this?
- (a) What do you think is working less well? Why do you think this?
- (a) What do you think the gaps are, and how these gaps can be filled - by the third sector, the Scottish Government and the wider public sector?

While prevention work being carried out at the moment by the Scottish Government and through various third sector organisations is vital, more needs to be done to tackle the root causes of VAWG.

A change in the culture of Scotland is necessary, looking at the way in which women are viewed and how this can both stem from and lead to VAWG.

Campaigns such as 'This is Not an Invitation to Rape Me' and 'Not Ever', which were run by Rape Crisis Scotland, are excellent examples of preventative work being done. The Scottish Government should do more to endorse and run this type of advertising campaign, not only for rape and sexual violence, but across the broader VAWG spectrum.

### Young Women

Prevention work carried out in schools around issues such as domestic abuse and rape and sexual violence is also very important. Again, however, awareness on wider VAWG issues needs to be raised at this level.

The increased sexualisation of young women is an example of gender inequality which both causes and stems from VAWG. Pressure to conform, commercialism and social media are all contributing factors. Many have spoken about the difficulties in challenging stereotypical and unrealistic images presented in the media, as well as peer pressure to conform. The increased use of social media perpetuates views of how young women should look and act. It also allows anonymous comments and images to be posted of impressionable and vulnerable people. This is having a detrimental impact on young women.

Sexualised imagery is used to sell everything from computer games to grooming products. This type of advertising introduces people to the idea that women's bodies are commodities from a very young age. For example, images such as those on taxis in Glasgow which advertise lap dancing clubs are common throughout the city.

The normalisation of this 'hyper sexualisation' and blurred lines between pop culture and porn culture are extremely dangerous.

The media has a huge role to play in prevention of VAWG. The proposed strategy must recognise this. There is continuous use of sexualised images in advertising, with certain newspapers still publishing daily pictures of topless young women. Music videos often depict women as objects and accompany songs with inappropriate and derogatory lyrics.

*"The media in general presents a really skewed view of sex and sexual relationships."*

Magazines aimed at girls as young as three years old focus heavily on looks and image. Toys in these publications enforce the idea of women as passive caregivers, depicting little girls playing with dolls and toy domestic appliances such as vacuum cleaners and washing machines. In contrast, magazines aimed at boys in this age group focus on imagination, fun and adventure. Violence also comes into these themes.

*“It’s about how boys must be ‘strong’ and ‘aggressive’.”*

Much stricter guidelines must be put into place and followed by the media as a whole. Without more stringent controls, women will continue to be grossly objectified, demeaned and *“reduced to the sum of their body parts”*.

‘Sexting’ (sending sexual images via text message or social media), revenge porn (where sexually explicit images, videos etc are publicly shared by partners or ex-partners without the woman’s consent), stalking (both online and in person) are just some examples of VAWG which have come about in recent years. With sexting, for example, young women are often unaware of how quickly a sexual image can spread and ‘go viral’ without the person it involves even knowing.

*“It’s difficult to have a private life and do something as innocent as taking a picture and sending it to someone you trust when people play their lives out by social media. Sadly, you can’t be sure that other people will use the picture in the way you intended them to.”*

Pornography is more widely accessible than it ever has been, with extreme images widely available to view on the internet. The use of smartphones, tablets and mobile internet has made it even easier for images to be seen and shared amongst young people. Viewing extreme pornography can have a detrimental impact on young men.

*“Guys watch porn and think that’s how girls will act when they actually do have sex. It’s a completely distorted view of how things are.”*

Detrimental language towards women is also common.

*“People use words like ‘bitch’ and ‘whore’ as insults. Nobody seems to realise that the more they say these things, then the more it’s deemed acceptable for women to be called them.”*

The Scottish Government strategy must factor in prevention work which needs to be undertaken with young people. Both young men and young women need to be educated on and given the opportunity to talk about issues around sexualisation, access to pornography etc. Instilling in them the dangers of these at a young age would raise awareness and go some way to preventing instances of VAWG.

### **Legal Issues**

The way in which cases of VAWG are dealt with by the courts has a huge part to play in prevention. At the moment, conviction rates for rape and sexual offences are extremely low. The Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2011 has increased access to justice for those who have experienced domestic abuse. However the way in which cases are tried can severely curtail sentencing options available to sheriffs and judges.

Non-harassment orders and interdicts obtained by women to stop the perpetrators being able to contact them are not always policed effectively. Frequent breaches of bail conditions are also common.

*“There needs to be a much more pro-active approach from the police to deal with these breaches. Otherwise the victim has nothing more than a worthless piece of paper. That doesn’t send out a positive message at all.”*

More convictions and harsher sentences would make clear to those who commit VAWG offences that they will not “*get off lightly*”. This must be considered as part of prevention work within the proposed strategy.

How can we achieve a balance between activities focused on prevention and support for victims?

Both aspects are as important as each other. Despite legislation, policy and practices, awareness raising and prevention work, VAWG is still a significant issue in Scotland today. This, in turn, means that services which support women (and their children) to recognise, survive and exit violent and abusive situations are vital. More prevention work undoubtedly needs to be done in order to tackle the root causes, particularly as new forms of VAWG manifest themselves with increased use of the internet and social media.

What statistics do you think we should be collecting and monitoring to assess progress in tackling violence against women in Scotland?

Statistical data is an effective way of monitoring the progress of initiatives to tackle VAW in Scotland. One of the most important aspects of any data collected is that the information is up-to-date and relevant. Similarly, statistics should focus on a broad range of VAWG issues. For example, information is frequently available on incidents of e.g. domestic abuse or rape and sexual assault. It can, however, be more difficult to find Scotland-specific, up-to-date information around issues like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. This is achieved in a number of different ways - through roadshow, round table, conference and celebratory events. Following each event a report is compiled and issued to women who attend and relevant policy and decision makers. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.