

The Scottish Women's Convention's
report on:

Male Violence Against Women & Girls



July 2022

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The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This report presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.

Organisations Represented

While many women contributed to this project in an individual capacity, we are grateful to the following organisations for supporting this project by sharing their expertise and encouraging women from their networks to contribute.

African Women's Group Scotland	Argyll & Bute Rape Crisis
Aura	Ayrshire Women's Hub
Caledonian System	Diamonds in the Community
Edinburgh Rape Crisis Centre	Feel Good Women's Community Group
Glasgow North West Improvement Team	GMB
Grampian Rape Crisis	Hemat Gryffe Women's Aid
Inverclyde Women's Aid	Lyell Centre at Herriot-Watt University
MECOPP	Moir Anderson Foundation
Monkland's Women's Aid	Perth and Kinross Rape Crisis
Perthshire Women's Aid	Place to Be
Sacro	Shakti Women's Aid
She Scotland	Sikh Sanjog
Waverley Care	Women in Action
Zero Tolerance	

Premise

Evidence shows that domestic abuse rates increased significantly during the pandemic. Being unable to go out meant women had to spend more time with perpetrators, and tension caused by the uncertain circumstances often intensified the nature of abuse. Moreover, high profile femicides such as Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa have heightened public awareness of the dangers women face in public spaces.

The Scottish Women's Convention commissioned a project in February 2022 to better understand women's lived experiences of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in this context. This consisted of two online roundtable events, one in-person roundtable event, an online survey, and a conference to encourage a broad range of women to be able to participate. The women who contributed represented a range of services supporting women and girls, as well as many survivors themselves.

The main topics that were explored were:

- types of abuse affecting women and girls
- how the pandemic impacted on VAWG
- challenges facing services in the VAWG sector
- ideas to reduce VAWG and the norms that perpetuate it

It is hoped that the findings of this project can be used to inform decision-making at all levels of government to move us closer to a society that is truly safe for women and girls.

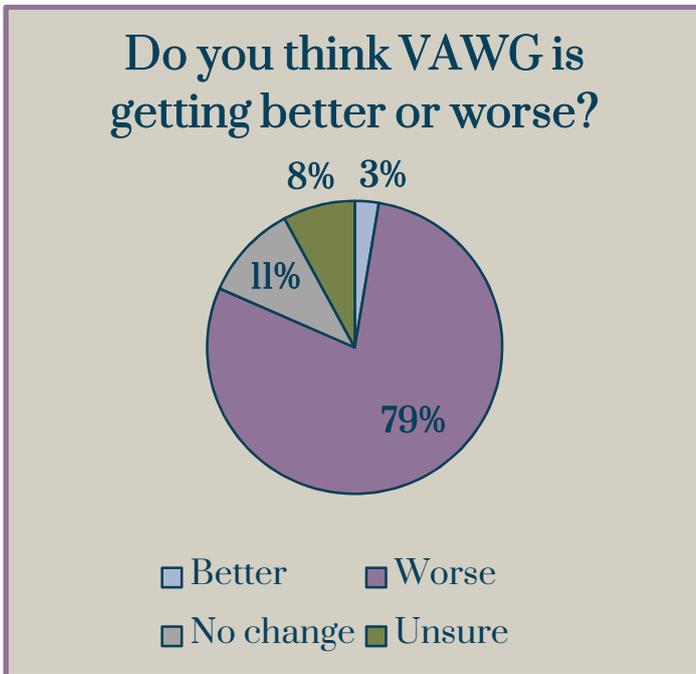
Key Findings and Recommendations

1. **79% of women felt VAWG is getting worse, and 41% did not feel Scotland is a safe place for women and girls.**
2. **Stricter laws need to be implemented around digital abuse, and the police need more training around how technology is used in coercive control.**
3. **Honour-based violence needs to be added to domestic abuse legislation.**
4. **VAWG services need to be given more resources and longer-term funding to increase capacity, improve planning, and provide stability for workers.**
5. **Court waiting times are too long after the pandemic, putting women's lives at risk.**
6. **More support and advocacy are needed for women reporting abuse, and trauma-informed training should be required of all police officers.**
7. **A cultural shift within social work is needed to end stigma against mothers who have survived abuse.**
8. **Education around gender stereotypes, healthy relationships, and self-esteem should begin in Early Years and continue throughout school.**
9. **Domestic abuse must be added into the Scottish Women's Health Plan.**
10. **Listening to women and active engagement with grassroots organisations must be at the heart of any VAWG strategy.**

VAWG in Scotland Today

Is VAWG getting better or worse?

Women overwhelmingly felt that the issue of VAWG is getting worse. 79% of the women we spoke to shared this view, and only 3% thought it was getting better.

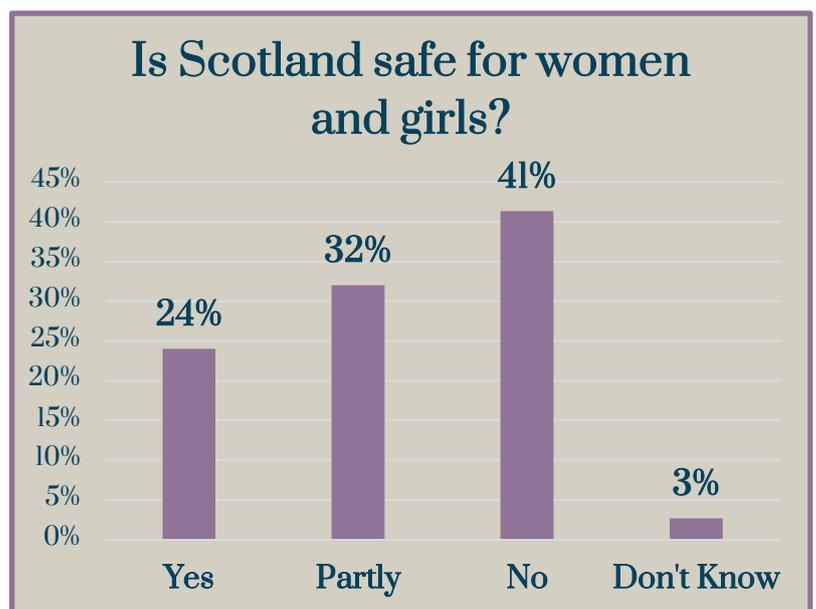


- “The experience of lockdown and the current cost of living crisis are raising stress levels and psychological distress which is increasing domestic abuse within the home setting.”
- “I feel VAWG is being highlighted more however, I don't see any changes for the better yet.”
- “You would hope things would get better over time and the referrals would reduce. They don't, and the services are so overwhelmed and overstretched, and the demand is just increasing.”
- “Awareness is there but it is getting worse and that's something we need to dig deeper to understand why that is happening in this day and age.”

Is Scotland safe for women and girls?

Less than a quarter of women felt that Scotland was a safe place for women and girls, and 2 in 5 firmly believed it was not.

- “It's more a question of ‘Do I feel like I've been equipped to be safe in Scotland?’ and I don't feel like I have. I have to go out and research it myself... It feels like this sort of dirty secret that I'm having to go out and look for.”
- “I don't think anywhere that men are would be fully safe. It can be anyone and it can be anywhere.”
- “It's definitely going to be after my generation before we see significant changes in how females are viewed and, until then, there's always going to be violence against females.”



Forms of VAWG

Digital Abuse and Social Media

The type of VAWG women had most concerns about was digital abuse as it takes so many forms and neither the police nor VAWG services are given enough training to fully understand its extent.

- “The pop-ups for chats come up on games; the technology’s so sophisticated. We have some very vulnerable teenagers who feel they’re not being listened to, or no one understands them, so they reach out in these chat rooms, and you don’t know who’s on the other end.”
- “Facebook right now is talking about encrypting messages which means they won’t be flagged as potential child sexual abuse. Some of the broader, global policies that we don’t have much control of have a really big impact.”
- “As agencies we’re not really getting the training on technology... A lot of the time perpetrators download your contacts, access your cloud, your work times, and the next thing you know, they’ve got your location, know exactly who you’re talking to, access to text messages, emails, you name it.”
- “The police routinely overlook NHOs (non-harassment orders) in online spaces.”
- “With gypsy travellers, shame pages on Facebook are a big thing just now... a lot of women commit suicide or attempt suicide on the back of these, which are photos of young women maybe undressed or who’ve split up with their partners.”

“The police system hasn’t kept up with the technology. Your bobby on the beat does not actually know how to gather evidence from technology. All they know is there’s a process that takes months to get the messages off a phone.”

Overlooked Forms of VAWG

Women wanted to see more action on the following forms of VAWG that they felt were consistently overlooked.

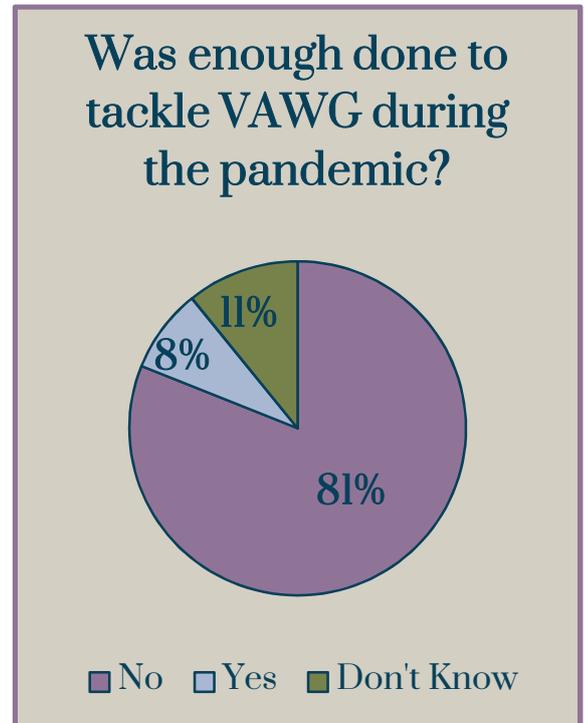
Grooming	CSE/Prostitution	Violent Pornography	Children as Leverage
Sexual Violence	‘Everyday’ Sexism	Coercive Control	Young Women
Rape	Online Abuse	Rural Women	Childhood Sexual Abuse
FGM	Domestic Abuse	Systemic Failings (e.g. justice)	Financial Abuse
Emotional Abuse	Verbal Abuse	Post-Menopause	Honour-Based Violence
Stalking	Street Harassment	In Schools	Workplace Harassment

VAWG During the Pandemic

It was clear that women did not think the Government's response to VAWG during the pandemic was sufficient, with 81% expressing that they did not think enough was done.

Intensification of Abuse

- "The pandemic enabled perpetrators to act with complete impunity against court orders."
- "Women have reported that throughout the months of lockdown, life was a living hell. Physical and sexual violence increased and the regulated, controlled environment they were already living in was made worse by not being able to go anywhere."
- "The pandemic provided perpetrators with an ideal opportunity to exert greater power and control, using the threat of catching the virus to control their victims even more... 'If you bring that virus back here you could kill the children, it'll be all your fault' - discouraging women from going anywhere, keeping them in the home where they were at the mercy of the perpetrator."
- "I was very aware of women who would be absolutely terrified, who might not know if they would even survive through to the end of lockdown."
- "Suicide safety plans have gone right up in the last six months, so that's another effect that covid has had because they couldn't see a way out and they thought anything is better than living the way I'm living. A lot of them thought that if they were in hospital for that period of time then help would jump at them, but it didn't. They just get sent home feeling really let down."



Services Affected by the Pandemic

"The Government putting pretty posters online does not help the situation. What was needed was direct action, more intervention, and allocating funding to charities."

- "I left my situation during 2020, and I can say that I would have left that situation sooner if I wasn't so isolated from the world. When I did get support, I was on a waiting list for a really long time, and I did report it to the police, but everything was a lot slower."
- "Because of Covid we couldn't have any shared accommodation. That has obviously reduced refuge spaces for women and kids, it obviously all depends on the size of the family whether you could share, but there would often be times it would be 2 single women who wanted to share to have that wee bit of support off each other."
- "During both lockdowns, we had a decrease in referrals but a spike of around 30% increase once restrictions ended. What survivors were telling us was they had no safe space to actually access support so that's been a huge concern for us."

Services

Funding and Resources

Women were emphatic that there needs to be more reliable funding for VAWG services. Short-term funding cycles mean precarious contracts for workers, and there is simply not enough money to support all the women who need help.

- “We’re continually advertising for posts because we get people in who will stay for a year, 2 years, saying I love the job, but I don’t know where my next bit of funding is coming from. I think that is a huge issue in terms of the Scottish Government’s commitment to action against VAWG. Fund it properly.”
- “The people are there, and they’ll give 100% even without funding, but give us the resources to make that infrastructure even stronger and then we’ll do it even better.”
- “At Caledonian, we’re given funding just for that 2-year period of the man’s court order but, during Covid, these orders were running to 36 months... We have a woman at the moment, the first time it went to court was in September 2019. It was deferred so many times we will have been working with her for 4 years, but that’s not been recognised as our funding was renewed at the same rate as back in 2009.”

Support for Workers

Many service-providers we spoke to shared how the vicarious trauma they experience is often downplayed, and more support is needed

- “It can be a burden, to try to support, encourage and help people. It can often be to the detriment of our own mental health and physical health.”
- “We have workers who, despite having really good internal and external support, are experiencing burnout... I think that’s a huge thing we need to take into account in planning our services and our workforce.”
- “You can’t support somebody with something you don’t have, so I decided to take up some counselling sessions... so I would encourage all of us to seek that support from somewhere.”

Remote vs Face-to-Face

During the pandemic, most services could only be provided remotely by Zoom, online chats or phone calls. With restrictions lifted, many organisations are having to make tough decisions about how they balance quality and capacity on a limited budget.

- “There was one woman who had been saying on the phone she’s not in a relationship, but you go into the house and there’s men’s pants on the radiator and she’s actually pregnant. Everything has just been superficial on the phone. There’s not been the body language and the tell-tale signs. It ticks boxes but it doesn’t give quality.”
- “When we were working from home and not doing any face-to-face, we were able to deal with a lot more clients... I’ve already had workers coming to me with complex cases that maybe take up a whole afternoon where before she could support four women in an afternoon. That’s going to impact on the number of referrals we’re able to juggle.”
- “Phone calls aren’t the safest way to work. You don’t know who’s in the house or what’s going on. In most cases, if they don’t know you, you’re not getting the best from that conversation.”

Realities of Life After Abuse

"I live with a panic alarm; my whole world has exploded. I've spent £20k-£30k to get away from him, and that is just extending now because I can't work."

"By coming forward, I am now in the firing line. I walk out each day waiting for a knife or a bullet behind me because he has threatened it."

"It's alright the law saying to you we'll do this and that for you, but they're not there 24/7. You're just left, and I've been left like that for the last 15 years waiting to get murdered."

Experiences of Reporting

Women cannot be expected to report abuse unless support during this process improves.

- "Dealing with the police was so traumatising. I felt like I was the abuser getting questioned a lot of the time... I was already so traumatised and in shock. I was expected to go through hours' worth of interviews when mentally I was not able. I was expected to be this big, brave woman that, to be honest, at that time, I just did not feel like."
- "When they're desperate and they're pleading with you, 'Please, we can't have him doing this to any more families.' That's great, but that's also putting a lot of pressure on someone who has just been traumatised, that's lost their children, that their children have been hurt."
- "They promised to put me in a Women's Aid, but then what? It's not just the perpetrator, it's their family, their friends, the internet and how easy it is to find people. Even if you do get put in a refuge, a lot of them have been used for twenty odd years so people know exactly what that house is. The idea that you're safe is just an illusion."

Social Services

A theme that emerged was how survivors with children felt so stigmatised by social services, their experiences were tantamount to continued abuse.

- "I'm grateful to those foster carers, but they judged me through that process. I've been labelled a monster, and that's been passed onto my children, but that's not the way it was."
- "When I worked in the NHS, I had quite a lot of women experiencing the children's hearing process and child protection register... Foster carers were encouraged to talk about the mum in a negative way at the hearing. I often found myself challenging social work at these meetings because a lot of the reports they handed in contained inaccurate information."
- "There's no work done with the foster parents, about how you can't think they've had a poor life so let's overindulge them and overcompensate for it. That's not realistic, and it just makes mum feel even more hopeless. It's a continued abuse in a way because she thinks 'My partner made me feel rubbish, and now the social work and foster carers make me feel even worse. Why would they even want to come back and stay with me when they've got this life?'"

Tackling VAWG

Women shared ideas for how they thought society can work together to end VAWG for good.

“When I'm around guy friends, I do hear really misogynistic comments about women, their bodies, what they look like, and how a woman only has value if she is sexually attractive.

I've been challenging that, but it's hard because I've changed in their eyes from fun to confrontational. I've had enough of being quiet around those comments. Of being obedient, meek, palatable. It's hard to challenge your own friends but it starts within those little groups.”

Listening to Women

- “I would say listen to the women. Listen to their voices. They're the experts, they know what it's like. People much higher up the chain don't. They live in a bubble, so listen to the women.”
- “The answer is not to keep throwing money at loads of different things. Give money but then get the evaluation and listen to the evaluation. Not listening from a management and strategic level but from grassroots, from people who can say 'Here's my experience. Here's where it's still not working,' and then review everything again on a regular basis.”
- “Listen to what women are saying. Don't just tick boxes, actually listen and follow through with what you say you're going to.”

Education from a Younger Age

- “Third or fourth year in high schools is too late, especially when you think young people are susceptible to pornography at roughly nine or ten years old. I think we have to start much earlier. It's not just about folk finding out about what domestic abuse is, what coercive control is, it's also about self-esteem and being able to build self-worth in young people.”
- “We can't just focus on academia in schools. We need to teach life skills and resilience.”
- “I think it could even start in Early Years. Right from the word go you can definitely share these thoughts with regard to respect. Also, parents can be brought into the equation much more easily and there's scope for tying it into parenting programs.”
- “We need to teach girls what is a healthy relationship, but I think boys need to get taught what is acceptable, respectful behaviour regardless of what they've seen in the house. Otherwise, they'll just mirror what they're seeing and think there's nothing wrong with it.”

Scottish Government

- “I love the fact we have a Women's Health Plan, but I was really sad to see that domestic abuse isn't sitting in there. It is a public health issue and all of us on here know that if we could fix anything in this world which is really going to make a difference for women, it's domestic abuse.”
- “All the organisations where I've had help have actually empowered me to help myself, but I'd love to see that empowerment from the people with the power, sitting on these big chairs and making all the big decisions.”
- “I think the laws coming in are brilliant, but my partner got away with everything, even though he was caught by the police doing it. There needs to be something backing it up.”

“We need cross-party political muscle to tackle this; no point scoring, just working collaboratively using research for informed decision-making and taking action. Violence against women needs to stop and become an abhorrent rare occurrence.”

Thank-You

The SWC would like to thank all the women and organisations who contributed towards this project. We know that it was a very sensitive topic, and we applaud your courage for sharing your experiences with us. We will share this report with the UK Government, Scottish Government, and local councils, and will continue to engage with women across Scotland to keep this issue at the forefront of discussions.

Rape Crisis Scotland	Helpline: 08088 01 03 02	Website: https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/
Scottish Women's Aid	Helpline: 0800 027 1234	Website: https://womensaid.scot/

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