

**VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN
AND GIRLS
ROUNDTABLE
REPORT**

MAY 2026

Introduction

Our roundtable sessions were held both in person and online. Our aim was to hear directly from women and girls about their lived experiences, and from organisations who deliver frontline support services.

The findings from these sessions will help shape our response to the Scottish Government's consultation on 'Protections in the Justice System for Women and Girls'.

During the sessions, the women spoke about the current justice system, the barriers they face when reporting violence and abuse and the changes they believe are needed to improve prevention, offer support and ensure accountability.

The discussions focused on several of the main areas covered in the consultation, including:

- **Non-fatal strangulation**
- **Spiking**
- **Online and image-based abuse, including deepfakes**
- **Access to justice**
- **Trauma, reporting and court processes**
- **Prevention and education**
- **Women's lived experiences of reporting systems**
- **The need for lived experience to shape policy and practice**

A clear message came through from across the roundtables: the current system does not meet the needs of women and girls. Women felt that the system is too reactive and as a result, they continued to face significant barriers when trying to access justice and support. There was a strong agreement that more preventative measures must be implemented to address and counteract these ongoing challenges.

“The police will just say ‘Well it hasn’t happened yet so there’s nothing we can do about it’”



Non-Fatal Strangulation and the Normalisation of Sexual Violence

Non-fatal strangulation emerged as a major concern throughout our discussions and is an area of work the SWC is particularly interested in gathering evidence on.

One organisation shared findings from its recent work with young women:

- **“Eighty-nine percent of our young women had experienced non-fatal strangulation... that is not okay.”**

The women we spoke to were deeply concerned that many young women now see non-fatal strangulation as normal or as part of a healthy sexual experience.

- **“They all just felt it was normal...that’s just what sex is.”**

Some domestic abuse survivors also spoke about how non-fatal strangulation had become part of their everyday lives.

- **“Non-fatal strangulation became a normality, a daily thing in my life...I could be cooking tea and I’d be strangled.”**
- **“A lot of the time the problem with non-fatal strangulation is you black out...that leads to difficulty in remembering certain circumstances”**
- **“If it’s such a thing that appears in a High Court case, then why did nobody prompt me to discuss it more?”**

Participants also discussed the role of pornography, social media and online content in shaping harmful attitudes towards women, sex and relationships.

- **“...young women had direct experiences of explicit images being sent and shared... it was viewed just as an inevitable part of growing up.”**
- **“Society is more worried about men being falsely accused, despite the rarity, than women experiencing abuse.”**

It was stressed that there was an urgent need for there to be public recognition that this type of behaviour constitutes violence.

- **“Stop protecting men’s feelings in conversations at the expense of women’s lives.”**

Spiking

The women at our sessions described the lack of meaningful education and prevention around spiking and online abuse. They explained how persistent attitudes and awareness campaigns often place responsibility on women to manage their own safety rather than addressing the perpetrator's behaviour.

There was concern that current spiking awareness campaigns are superficial and fail to explain the following:

- What spiking actually feels like
- How to recognise the warning signs
- How peers should respond safely
- How men and boys can help challenge harmful behaviour

It was discussed that when women are spiked the onus often falls on members of staff in bars and clubs to be more vigilant which is an unfair notion. Awareness campaigns can easily be spread across social media and so the initiatives set up to protect women are commonly known by men.

- **“There's lots of awareness in toilets and pubs, but very little actual education.”**

Women also described victim-blaming attitudes when they sought help.

- **“We've had women telling us about them being spiked, but then when they've went to hospital, it was like well, what have you had to drink? And it's almost as if you were out drinking, it's your fault you've been spiked.”**

There was also a lack of trust in police responses. In many cases, women relied more on friends, peers or community support.

- **“I had an experience when I was in uni when I was spiked... it took time for me to even accept what had happened.”**



Online and Image-Based Abuse

The women we spoke to voiced concerns around deepfakes, image-based abuse and technology platforms feeling that these issues are too often treated as par for the course rather than forms of violence against women and girls.

- **“Especially with deepfakes they’re being framed as a technological issue... and not a criminalised issue.”**
- **“There needs to be real repercussions for the app developers and the tech companies.”**
- **“There’s a real policy silence over this.”**

They were also frustrated that social media companies and app developers were not being held accountable enough for hosting, spreading information or failing to remove harmful content.

- **“The online side of things isn’t going away. It’s here to stay.”**
- **“You have to prove who you are, but the person creating the fake account doesn’t.”**

Several of the women felt that institutions were struggling to keep pace with technological developments.

- **“Technology is moving so fast. It can be really difficult for laws to be put in place, for people to be trained on them and then for them to be enacted.”**

One stark example identified that legislation does not always protect women when non-sexual images are shared without consent, even where this can place minority ethnic or Muslim women at serious risk due to their cultural differences.

- **“Image-based abuse requires images to be of a sexual nature, leaving minority ethnic women unprotected when non sexual images are shared without consent...exposing them to honour based abuse and forced marriage risks.”**

One particular group of women discussed international examples where swift action was taken to remove harmful content and questioned why similar approaches were not being implemented more widely in Scotland and the rest of the UK. They recommended stronger expertise, clearer reporting routes and greater accountability for social media platforms and technology companies.

- **“There needs to be an intersectional lens to look at to address all these issues.”**

The current cultures, politically and amongst services, are quite misogynistic.

- **“We have seen women’s rights rolled back in all sorts of different ways.”**

Access to Justice

The women at our sessions agreed that the justice system is failing women and girls affected by violence in several key areas. They described the lack of trauma-informed practices, poor responses from first responders and the police, long delays, low conviction rates and a total lack of trust in the system.

- **“To get their day in court it can takes years, understandably many women don’t want to go through that further trauma.”**

Participants said that wider patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes still shape how women are treated by institutions. They felt that the system often fails to understand the seriousness and long-term impact of gender-based violence.

- **“The safest thing for me to do is to let him get away with it.”**
- **“Women know that if they speak up, the perpetrator is still out there.”**
- **“Until women see harmful behaviour actually being addressed, they won’t feel safe.”**

Women also raised concerns about being labelled as “hostile witnesses” when they are still traumatised, scared or unable to repeatedly relive their experiences.

- **‘Hostile is such an awful word to use when describing traumatised women.’**
- **“If they’re not the ‘perfect victim’, they don’t get treated properly.”**
- **“Women shouldn’t have to prove they are traumatised in the ‘right’ way.”**

Workplaces were also discussed and participants felt that misogyny is often treated as a personal or relationship issue, rather than a serious form of harm.

- **“There is still a lot of processes that don’t recognise certain aspects of VAWG like misogyny.”**

Pressure on crisis services was also discussed.

- **“Sadly, services are so backlogged and underfunded many crisis centres have very long waiting lists.”**



Unequal Access to Support

A strong theme across our sessions was that women from marginalised communities often face even greater barriers when trying to access support. These included women who do not speak English as a first language, or at all, refugee and migrant women, women with protected characteristics and women in rural and island communities.

Participants were concerned that as a consequence of this consultation and policy processes often only hear from women who already feel safe and confident enough to take part. Many other women remain excluded.

- **“There are whole groups of women whose voices we never hear.”**
- **“The conversation is still centred around a certain type of woman.”**
- **“Everything is standardised, but women’s experiences are not.”**

Women called for more community-based engagement, culturally experienced services, accessible interpretation services and outreach that meets women where they are.

System Failures, Reporting and Trauma

Women felt that professionals and support services need better training in order to ask the right questions and understand survivors’ individual experiences. Without this, important information can be lost.

- **“If somebody doesn’t prompt you with the right questions, you don’t give that information freely.”**

Participants agreed that current reporting systems are not designed around trauma. Many women said the first point of contact, particularly with the police, can be a major barrier to justice.

The women felt that generic reporting routes are failing too many survivors. They recommended that any disclosures of domestic abuse should be directed straight to specialist teams, instead of women having to go through general reporting systems first.

- **“You’re at stage one and you’re being failed.”**
- **“The first point of contact is the police, and there’s a massive gap between what’s going on with us and that first point of contact.”**
- **“They’re expecting women to follow their safety plan, call the police, do everything right. And then they’re not doing it right.”**

- **“We need to get better at giving better options earlier on. Women shouldn’t have to get to the crisis stage when things are not acceptable.”**

The women at our sessions identified several gaps in law and policy. They were particularly concerned that the Misogyny Bill was not taken forward as standalone legislation, and that merely adding sex to existing hate crime law would still not be enough to address the harm that women experience.

- **“The misogyny bill would have addressed all these concerns but was never passed!”**

Another major concern was the emotional impact of having to repeat traumatic experiences to several different professionals and services.

Women described having to tell their story to police, support services, courts, specialist organisations, healthcare workers and other agencies.

- **“You have to repeat it to every single person that you come across.”**
- **“There’s nothing more difficult than dealing with all these different people, you’re absolutely mentally destroyed.”**

Women also felt that repeatedly retelling their experiences can make survivors appear emotionally detached, which may then affect how professionals treat them.

- **“By the end of it, you desensitise yourself.”**
- **“There should be a single front door, so you don’t have to keep repeating.”**

Gaps in Support Services

The women at our session described serious gaps in support, especially around refuge accommodation and specialist services. One woman described receiving very little support because services were so severely understaffed.

- **“It was the loneliest time of my life.”**

Most women understood that support organisations are under huge pressure because of underfunding and limited resources. However, they were clear that this leaves women even more vulnerable.

- **“You can’t have a crisis service that’s constantly in crisis.”**
- **“Women need to leave right now, and there’s nowhere for them to go.”**

- **“...they are stretched because we know there is an epidemic of violence. And they’ve only got so much that they can do, and that’s not helping you because you’re in that situation.”**
- **“...dead people don’t normally phone back.”**

There was strong support for women’s services, especially services dealing with violence against women and girls, to be treated as essential public services. Women felt these services should never have to rely on short-term funding.

Housing and Accommodation

Housing emerged as a key barrier in preventing women from leaving abusive relationships. The women described a lack of suitable accommodation options and voiced concerns about being displaced from support networks, employment and schools.

- **“I think a massive issue as well is with like the housing crisis as well, which just seem to be the case in every single council. And women need to leave, like, right now, and they need to leave for their children, and there's nowhere for them to go.”**

Many women felt that staying in an abusive situation could often seem like their only option, because leaving could even create new risks and practical difficulties

- **"How can leaving an abusive situation be the easiest step, not the hardest step?"**

It was unanimously agreed that secure housing was fundamental to women’s safety and recovery.

Education and Prevention

The women we spoke to agreed that preventative action must start early. They called for education on consent, bodily autonomy, healthy relationships, pornography, online harm and misogyny from a young age.

- **“We need to go back to basic relationship education... how people speak to each other and treat each other.”**
- **“Children are being educated through their phones now.”**
- **"We've got a generation that are basically thrown in the ocean and [they're not] being taught to swim."**

Participants felt that violence against women and girls is rooted in wider gender inequality and harmful attitudes.

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Participants felt that violence against women and girls is rooted in wider gender inequality and harmful attitudes.

- **“Attitudes take far longer to shift than behaviours.”**
- **“Girls are growing up believing they just have to accept certain behaviours.”**

The importance of working with boys and young men was widely discussed at our sessions. Male role models and male allies were seen as essential, but the women were clear that men must actively challenge harmful behaviour, not simply avoid taking part in it.

- **“There needs to be education for boys and men about how to challenge misogyny in their peer groups.”**

Young people also need safe spaces outside of school where they can speak frankly and be supported by adults that they trust.

- **“[they] told us that they want to talk about these issues but they don't have spaces.”**
- **“Education for the parents... it needs to be continued at home.”**

Education and awareness were seen as the most important long-term ways to prevent violence against women and girls.



Funding and the Role of Support Services

The women generally praised third sector organisations and the work that they do. However, they were clear that these services are underfunded, overstretched and expected to carry too much.

- **“Third sector organisations are carrying an enormous amount on their shoulders.”**

Participants said what was needed long term was more engaging person-centred support, more coordinated engagement between agencies, more investment in community based services and proper recognition of specialist support workers.

- **“We don’t need to reinvent the wheel ... there are fantastic organisations already doing this work.”**
- **“Women’s support services are doing crisis intervention while being underfunded and overstretched.”**
- **“You cannot provide trauma-informed support with exhausted, underpaid staff.”**
- **“We shouldn’t have to sit around this table talking about this... it should already come as standard.”**

Lack of Awareness Around What Constitutes Harm

Several participants indicated that some women do not always recognise certain experiences as abuse or criminal behaviour. This was especially clear in discussions about non-fatal strangulation, spiking and online harm.

Women said that harmful behaviours are too often normalised, minimised or treated as something women should expect.

Participants were clear that public understanding needs to improve. Women and girls need clear information about what abuse is, what support is available and how to report it safely.

They also felt that professionals must be better trained to recognise forms of harm that are not always obvious, especially when women may not have the language to describe what has happened to them.

The Importance of Lived Experience in Policy and Law

The women we spoke to strongly supported the involvement of survivors in future policy development and service design. They did stress however that responsibility for improving systems should not rest solely on survivors and instead should be an ongoing collaborative process.

- **“The burden shouldn’t be on survivors.”**

Participants felt that lived experience must shape law, policy and practice in a meaningful and accessible way. However, this must be done carefully, safely and without placing further pressure on survivors. They recognised that not all survivors are able to speak about their experiences. Some women do not survive abuse. Others are unable or unwilling to revisit trauma.

- **“Years down the line, some survivors can talk about it but not all.”**

Accountability

Our session highlighted certain concerns around the fact that current responses do not necessarily act as a sufficient deterrence for abusers. There was a strong feeling that legal protections, bail conditions and non-harassment orders have not kept pace with changing forms of abuse, particularly on online harm.

- **“If men don't think they're going to get punished for it, it becomes normalised.”**
- **“What does it take to make women and girls in Scotland feel safe? That should be the objective.”**

It was recommended that clear sanctions, effective enforcement and consistent messaging from government are vital to reducing violence against women and girls.



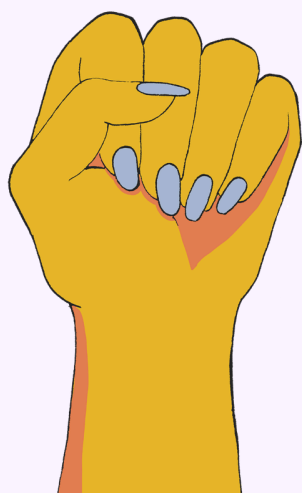
Key Messages for the Scottish Government

- The current justice system is not delivering proper justice for women and girls.
- Trauma-informed practice must be embedded across police, courts, NHS, education, social work and other public services.
- Scotland needs stronger legislation on misogyny, online abuse, deepfakes and image-based abuse.
- The experiences of minority ethnic and Muslim women must be properly reflected in law and policy.
- Women must be believed when they report violence or abuse.
- Prevention must start early through education, youth work, parent engagement and work with boys and men.
- Technology platforms must be held accountable for harmful content.
- Specialist women-only services need to be increased and properly funded.
- Women's voices must shape policy in accessible and meaningful ways.
- Adequate housing and shelter for women experiencing violence and abuse which is suitable for their needs.

Conclusion

The roundtable sessions highlighted clear and consistent concerns that Scotland's response to violence against women and girls is not good enough. Women described a system where abuse is too often normalised, reporting is difficult, justice is slow, vital support services are underfunded and women's voices are too often ignored.

They also made clear that change is possible. However, this requires government, institutions, services and communities to listen properly, act urgently and place women's safety, dignity and lived experience at the centre of reform.



Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention thank the women who took part in this important discussion.

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