



Violence Against Women is a Public Health Issue



Conference Learning Report

Introduction

In June 2018, the Scottish Government and COSLA published [Public Health Priorities](#) for Scotland which are intended to support national and local partners across Scotland to work together to improve health and wellbeing and reduce long-standing inequalities in our local communities.

To help support this shift, a new national body - Public Health Scotland – is due to be established in April 2020. The new organisation will provide national leadership and support to the whole system of partners in the public, private and third sector to improve health and wellbeing.

Public health reform provides a valuable opportunity to ensure that violence against women and girls (VAWG) is recognised as a public health issue at a local and national level, to strengthen local and national leadership around this agenda and to apply a whole system approach to tackling the inequality of outcomes experienced by women and children within local communities.

To help support this work, on the 25th November 2019, the Improvement Service, COSLA and NHS Health Scotland held a national conference, with support from the Public Health Reform team and the National Violence Against Women Network, to highlight why violence against women is a public health issue.

The conference brought together a wide range of delegates from across the violence against women and public health sectors to explore three critical questions:

1. What would a public health approach to tackling violence against women and girls and gender inequality look like at a local and national level?
2. What change is needed to create this shift?
3. How can the reform of public health and the national body – Public Health Scotland – support this change to be achieved?

We were delighted to be joined on the day by a number of keynote speakers who highlighted the importance of ensuring violence against women and girls is recognised as a public health priority at a local and national level. These included:

- [Ash Denham MSP, Minister for Community Safety](#)
- [Cllr Kelly Parry, Community Wellbeing Spokesperson, COSLA](#)
- Cllr Stuart Currie, Health and Social Care Spokesperson, COSLA
- [Ann Hamilton, Independent Chair of Dundee VAW Partnership](#)
- [Professor Jim McGoldrick, Shadow Chair of Public Health Scotland.](#)

[Shakti Theatre Group](#) also gave a powerful performance of 'Home', which highlighted the range of challenges families who experience domestic abuse can currently face in Scotland and the damaging impact this has on their health and wellbeing.

The conference also featured inputs from VAWG and Public Health experts who highlighted the links between VAWG and each Public Health priority and supported delegates to identify the key steps needed in order to ensure VAWG is embedded in each [Public Health Priority](#) going forward.

While the remainder of this learning report outlines the key issues and actions identified by delegates in relation to each of the Public Health priorities, a number of key messages were also identified that cut across all six priorities:



Key Messages

- A gendered approach to progressing all six Public Health priorities must be embedded in Public Health frameworks and action plans being developed at a local and national level, in order to ensure they achieve their intended impact;
- The importance of tackling violence against women and girls and gender inequality in Scotland requires increased recognition from senior stakeholders and decision-makers, and stakeholders must be encouraged to adopt a public health approach to addressing these issues;
- A joined-up, collaborative approach should be taken to recognising and responding to VAWG as a public health issue at a local and national level, shaped by the lived experience of women and children in communities across Scotland;
- While there are many examples of good practice taking place across Scotland to address the inequalities of outcomes women and children affected by VAWG and gender inequality, the impact of this work is often limited by siloed-working, a lack of person-centred pathways and short-term funding;
- Increased investment and prioritisation of prevention, early intervention and recovery is needed at both a local and national level to help reduce the long-term, negative impact that trauma and abuse can have on women and children's lives, and help ensure that everyone has the support they need to achieve their full potential; and
- There is a key role for Public Health Scotland, working in partnership with other local and national partners, to help address some of these challenges and support a whole population approach to be taken to improving the health and wellbeing of all women and children in Scotland.

[Video highlights from the day are available to view here.](#)



Visual scribe by Linda Hunter



Priority 1 – A Scotland where we live in vibrant, healthy and safe places

Where are we now?

In order to create vibrant, healthy and safe places and communities we need to tackle VAWG in all its forms and understand the greater risks to safety that women face as a result of their gender. Policy and practice need to take into account women's differing needs in terms of the built environment and transport in relation to their employment, care roles and safety concerns.

Stakeholders identified that while there is a considerable amount of good practice currently taking place across Scotland to ensure the places that women and children engage with and in are vibrant, healthy and safe - particularly in school settings – the approach to this is inconsistent across the country and at risk due to challenging funding environments.

Where do we want to be?

- Workshop delegates highlighted the importance of ensuring that the places and communities that women and children engage with are vibrant, healthy and safe is recognised by policy-makers when developing relevant strategies and service plans at a local and national level. This should include, but is not limited to, Children's Service Plans, Child Poverty Action Reports and Community Safety Plans.
- In the long term, stakeholders identified that in order for communities to be safer there is a need for a culture and learning change across sectors, a public health approach to community planning, and for gender inequality to be identified as socially unacceptable.
- It was suggested that Public Health Scotland engage on the issue of community safety with similar media outreach and public engagement to the tobacco ban and other health campaigns.
- In alignment with this approach, sustainable and equitable commissioning for relevant services should be made available to help enable strong multi-agency relationships across VAWG and Public Health.

What resources and leadership are needed?

Stakeholders identified the need for improved leadership from a wide range of stakeholders in areas including Education, Planning, Community Safety and Community Justice to help ensure women and children live in vibrant, healthy and safe spaces.

Stakeholders stressed that there is 'no one size fits all' solution and highlighted the importance of ensuring that rural communities are part of any decision-making processes to help understand and address particular challenges they may face, and ensure that actions to create safer communities can be delivered across all local authority areas.



Priority 2 – A Scotland where we flourish in our early years

Where are we now?

Ensuring that early and trauma-informed support is available to children affected by VAWG is key to ensuring they flourish in their early years, mitigate the long-term impact of trauma and adversity, and are supported to achieve their full potential later in life.

Stakeholders highlighted that there is currently a lack of shared understanding over the causes and consequences of VAWG and that partners across all sectors should have a duty to recognise and respond to the harm children experience because of violence and abuse in an effective, person-centred way.

Stakeholders noted that while there are many examples of high-quality early intervention and recovery activities taking place in schools and specialist children's services, increased levels of commitment, resource and leadership are required to ensure all children are supported to flourish in their early years.

Where do we want to be?

- Stakeholders identified the need for a sustainable and high-quality pipeline of early intervention support, including specialist recovery services, across Scotland for children and young people who have experienced VAWG.
- Stakeholders identified that a key area to address is links between child poverty, gender and VAWG, and work should focus on ensuring both children affected by VAWG, and their mothers, are able to access high-quality emotional, financial and legal support.
- Safe & Together should be fully and consistently rolled out across Scotland to support a shift in how systems respond to families experiencing domestic abuse and ensure that the wellbeing of the child is at the forefront of all service and policy responses.
- It was suggested that Public Health Scotland could provide added value through facilitating long-term data collection and analytical support to raise awareness of the impact VAWG has on early years and the progress being made to improve outcomes at a local level.
- A long-term cultural change is needed to embed gender equality practice as the norm in all policy making, commissioning and leadership in all early years work.

What resources and leadership are needed?

Stakeholders identified the need for all policy making and impact assessment to have a gendered approach to help address the complex experiences of those affected by VAWG, e.g., the gendered nature of poverty and increased risks for women and children experiencing abuse. Stakeholders stressed the need for increased resources to be directed towards evidence-based interventions that provide support for women and children affected by VAWG.



Priority 3 – A Scotland where we have good mental wellbeing

Where are we now?

All forms of VAWG are repeatedly shown to have a damaging impact on women and children's mental wellbeing.

Stakeholders discussed the current challenges of coordinating joined up working and operating within a limited funding landscape with strict service boundaries within mental health and VAWG. Support services currently face significant challenge around the complex needs and barriers as a result of the impacts of VAWG, and a public health approach would help to increase opportunities to provide support.

Where do we want to be?

- In the short term, there should be further work around education on healthy relationships, and there should be greater emphasis on the social and emotional impacts of experiences of VAWG.
- Stakeholders felt that robust and meaningful data collection would be a step towards ensuring there are trauma-informed services for adults and children which address the impact of VAWG on wellbeing.
- In the long term, it was noted that we should be able to see sustainable impact of prevention work, and a culture of good mental wellbeing will be promoted across Scotland. Rigorous protocols in intervention services will be broken down, improving pathways to community-based support and national services like CAMHS.

What resources and leadership are needed?

Stakeholders identified that all awareness and education work at a local and national level must embed a wellbeing focus. Strong local leadership is required to identify and address the links between wellbeing and VAWG and all policies in public bodies and organisations should be subject to equality impact assessments. A key resource going forward must be national and local data around mental health services and links with VAWG.



Priority 4 – A Scotland where we reduce the use of and harm from alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs

Where are we now?

While we know that alcohol and drug use doesn't cause VAWG, it can increase the incidence and severity of violence and abuse, and can also be a coping mechanism for survivors. Stakeholders noted that across VAWG and alcohol and drugs sectors there are currently very good intentions, expertise and people, but silos stop this being as effective as possible. It was acknowledged that with increased attention, there are opportunities for raising awareness and embedding a gendered approach to Priority 4 and beyond.

Where do we want to be?

- Stakeholders suggested there should be specific outcomes in Public Health Scotland's strategic plan in relation to improving outcomes for women and children affected by problem alcohol and drug use, who have experienced VAWG. It was suggested that champions of this work should be identified at a leadership level.
- In alignment with a positive leadership culture, all relevant agencies and partnerships within the problem alcohol and drug use sector should develop shared funding outcomes to evidence and report on with the VAWG sector.
- In the long term, there will be a widespread connection on the link between drug and alcohol use and VAWG, and support services will be fully accessible to women and children with multiple support needs.

What resources and leadership are needed?

Public Health Scotland should align their resources and support to local needs and embed a gendered approach to alcohol and drugs which is visible and influential. To understand future work on alcohol, drugs, and VAWG, there should be a review of existing work and impact to know the scope for embedding a gendered analysis and what needs to change or can be adapted.



Priority 5 – A Scotland where we have a sustainable, inclusive economy with equality of outcomes for all

Where are we now?

Women's social, economic and political inequality is both a cause and consequence of VAWG. Stakeholders highlighted that currently there are key challenges around women's experiences of poverty, austerity and the welfare system and the intersection of these experiences with VAWG. There is a strong ethos of partnership working which supports work in this area, and examples of good practice such as Close The Gap's Equally Safe at Work accreditation pilot programme, which addresses workplace gender inequality as a fundamental step to preventing violence against women.

Where do we want to be?

- Stakeholders identified the need for sustainable investment in the VAWG sector and justice programmes which address the economic barriers women and children face, leading to Scotland being at the forefront of good practice and legislation for sustainability.
- In a more progressive economy, all women will have access to safe and affordable housing and transport and wellbeing will be an indicator of economic progress. Scotland should also be at forefront of good practice and legislation for environmental sustainability, which takes a gendered approach to acknowledge the impact on women.
- Long term, stakeholders hoped this would contribute to creating society where VAWG and gender inequality is unacceptable.

What resources and leadership are needed?

Stakeholders identified that in order to improve women's experiences and outcomes, there should be comprehensive training for the legal sector on VAWG, and trauma-informed approaches embedded across practice. In order to take action towards an inclusive economy, all public bodies should be in the Equally Safe at Work accreditation programme. A Universal Basic Income and more progressive tax system would contribute to a cultural shift on economic inequality.

Priority 6 – A Scotland where we eat well, have a healthy weight and are physically active



Where are we now?

VAWG can impact the ability of women and children to live healthy and active lifestyles. Scotland's Public Health Priorities recognise that negative health outcomes are inextricably linked to social inequalities and that addressing health inequalities is a social justice issue. Stakeholders highlighted that currently there are a lack of safe spaces for women to participate in sport and physical activity, pressures on women around weight and body image, and a growing population of older women with health problems who have experiences of VAWG. It was recognised that there is a significant lack in data in this area showing direct links with VAWG and its impacts on health and wellbeing.

Where do we want to be?

- Stakeholders suggested that there should be increased partnership working to drive proactive intervention earlier for the health impacts of VAWG, and services should be supported to make stronger links.
- To address the gap in data collection within this priority and others, it was highlighted that qualitative lived experience data should be championed in future work and that consistent monitoring requirements across key partnerships to would strengthen the ability to report locally on VAWG and public health.
- In the long term, Public Health Scotland's influence should be visible and contribute to creating conditions where Scotland is free from VAWG and people live healthier lives.

What resources and leadership are needed?

This workshop suggested that Public Health Scotland provide resource and take ownership of VAWG and Public Health work going forward, providing further in-depth analysis on VAWG and the six Priorities which focus on the health impacts of VAWG. Stakeholders also identified the need for strong leadership to drive monitoring of public health and VAWG through performance frameworks.

Summary and Next Steps

Women and children who experience VAWG are at increased risk of experiencing inequality of outcomes throughout their life, including lower levels of physical and mental wellbeing and increased risk of harm. The physical, emotional and psychological consequences of violence and abuse are significant predictors of poor health and strong risk factors for poor health outcomes.

As delegates highlighted throughout the day, this inequality cannot be tackled and eradicated by single organisations or sectors working alone. The event highlighted that it is imperative that local and national partners take a joined-up approach in tackling this public health issue.

If we are to achieve Scotland's public health priorities, we need to recognise that VAW is a major public health issue that has enormous social and economic costs for individuals, families and communities.

Specifically, stakeholders identified the need for:

- National support to collect and analyse data within local communities to better understand and demonstrate the links between VAWG, gender inequality and each of the Public Health priorities in order to help drive forward improvements.
- Tackling gender inequality and VAWG to be identified as a Public Health priority at a local and national level, with corresponding outcomes and actions embedded in all relevant strategies and business plans.
- Further collaborative working across the VAWG and Public Health sectors at a local and national level to explore opportunities within each of the priorities to take a gendered approach to improve outcomes for women, children and communities across Scotland.
- Sustainable investment in early intervention and prevention services which address the impact of VAWG on women and children's health and wellbeing.

Public Health Scotland, COSLA and the Improvement Service are committed to working with strategic partners to ensure that these actions are progressed at a local and national level. In collaboration with local multi-agency VAW Partnerships and other key stakeholders, we will work to promote and support a public health approach to tackling VAW to be adopted across Scotland.

Additionally, Public Health Scotland will use the insights from the conference to support integration of VAWG into its work on the public health priorities at a local and national level, and to advance our commitment to embedding a gendered analysis within all aspects of public health.

