

Exploring the intersections between Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and Substance Use

Executive summary

This research and engagement project was developed to explore the prevalence of, and relationship between, Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and substance use.

From March – December 2025, the Improvement Service coordinated a series of engagement activities which aimed to:

- Better understand and respond to the needs and experiences of women affected by VAWG and substance use.
- Identify the barriers, enablers and opportunities for improvement informed by women's experiences of VAWG and substance use, including sharing good practice examples.
- Identify actions and recommendations to improve support provision for women affected by VAWG and substance use.
- Explore opportunities for national and local partners to embed joined up, collaborative working approaches that will improve women's experiences of navigating systems and services across VAWG and substance use.

Project activities



A review of existing evidence and research on the prevalence of and relationship between violence against women and girls (VAWG) and substance use;



Consultation activities with stakeholders working in relevant organisations to capture learning on issues and potential improvement actions;



Consultation with women with lived experience conducted in collaboration with specialist organisations working within VAWG and substance use.

National strategic drivers

The response to VAWG and substance use in Scotland is underpinned by a range of national policies which collectively emphasise prevention, trauma-informed practice, and joined-up responses:

- [Equally Safe Strategy on Preventing and Eradicating Violence Against Women and Girls & Equally Safe Delivery Plan.](#)
- [Preventing Harm, Promoting Recovery Strategic Plan.](#)
- [National Mission on Drug Deaths.](#)
- [Charter of Rights for people affected by substance use.](#)
- [National Trauma Transformation Programme \(NTTP\).](#)

Women's Needs and Experiences of VAWG and Substance Use

Prevalence and impact of VAWG and substance use



Perpetrators often use substances as a way to continue to exert control and cause further isolation and dependence in an abusive relationship, and post separation.



Many women reported using substances to cope with the loneliness, anxiety, depression, and trauma they experienced due to experiences of VAWG. **Women who have experienced domestic abuse are eight times more likely to use substances than those who haven't.**



There are **specific risks and experiences for women involved in selling or exchanging sex who use substances** including increased health risks and reduced ability to consent. Substance use was cited as both a pathway into selling or exchanging of sex, and as a coping mechanism for its effects on mental health and wellbeing.



Women often experience **judgement, discrimination and exclusion** from the wider community, family members and practitioners, leading to **fear of engagement** with services due to concerns about further stigmatisation, information sharing, and whether or not disclosures will be taken seriously.

Challenges accessing universal and specialist support



Many women also shared **concerns around the fear of children being removed from their care, or repercussions to child contact**, if they were to disclose their experiences of VAWG and substance use.



Women with lived experience consistently highlighted **that housing insecurity and homelessness causes significant challenges when accessing support** for their experiences of VAWG and substance use, with many women being offered **unsafe or inappropriate emergency accommodation**.



Costs associated with **transport and child-care can prevent women from accessing support**, particularly for women who live in rural and remote areas, or who have to travel to get specialist support in line with their needs. Many women are excluded from support due to childcare.



Flexible service design and delivery, including drop-in appointments, location of services, trauma-informed policies, and **assertive outreach support is key** to enable women to access appropriate and timely support



Safety planning and protections should recognise and respond to both experiences. This could include both protective measures to reduce risk of harm from VAWG as well as risks to wellbeing from substance use.

Barriers in systems and services

Mainstream services often treat women and men as a homogenous “addictions” group, masking the distinct experiences of women and reinforcing a system-led rather than a person-centred approach.

Unstable and insufficient funding limits the capacity of services and restricts collaboration. This lack of, or limited, partnership working means that **mainstream services may lack the understanding and skills to respond effectively to the intersecting issues of VAWG and substance use**. The funding environment can result in difficulties recruiting and retaining staff, increasing caseloads, and, in some instances, forcing services to pause referrals or waiting lists.

Lack of holistic and trauma-informed support across both mainstream and specialist services prevents women from receiving comprehensive care tailored to their needs.

There is a general **lack of specialist services for all women with intersecting needs and protected characteristics** who experience VAWG and substance use across Scotland. **Specialist, culturally competent services and collaborative working are essential** to address intersecting needs effectively.

Priority Areas for Improvement

Five priority areas for improvement were identified through the project's key findings. The full report sets out detailed recommendations for national strategic partners and local systems to support implementation.

Joined up and person-centred service design and delivery that ensures women receive the support they need where, when and how they need it.

“So if there was people that were trained in all aspects. And rather than, let's just say, oh, we have domestic abuse, go to women's aid services, oh, I need to go to that place. So you're having to bounce about to different places, whereas if they could do it under the one roof, and then again, it saves you having to repeatedly get through your experiences.” (Lived Experience Engagement).

Strengthened links across strategic policy agendas to increase resource and capacity towards a whole systems approach.

“VAWG and substance use briefs appear to work in silos and this is reflected in how services are set up. This is resultant in ineffective services for many women.” (Call For Evidence).

Collaborative workforce development to upskill both universal and specialist services.

“There is need for more training in trauma-informed practice, women's rights, housing, legal protections and immigration. And also understanding how substance use is often caused or exacerbated by experiences of gender-based abuse. Services also need to be trauma-informed workplaces, offering supervision, manageable caseloads, and emotional support so staff can provide safe and compassionate care.” (Call For Evidence).

Priority Areas for Improvement

Preventative approaches including education, awareness raising, and promotion of available services.

“We should, as a collective whole, I think we should all be given more awareness to the signs of maybe that somebody’s in an abusive or controlling relationship... like kind of like how we do with mental health now, like try and teach and ensure that everybody knows how to access the support services that are available.” (Lived Experience Engagement).

Lived experience being at the heart of service design and delivery, including peer support opportunities.

Peer support [at Saoirse] is the key to basically recovery for, well, anybody... what one needs is continuous peer support where other people can empathise and understand what you’re going through... the peer support is what brings things to the surface. It’s connection, isn’t it?” (Lived Experience Engagement).

Next steps



The Improvement Service will scope opportunities to embed the learning from this project in relevant policies, strategies and mechanisms responding to VAWG and substance use in Scotland.



We will communicate the learning, develop tailored resources to support implementation of the recommendations, and actively engage key partners and leadership.



Stakeholders involved in the research, including victims and survivors and professionals, will have ongoing opportunities to inform how the recommendations are taken forward.