

Violence Against Women and Girls in the United Kingdom: Scale, Causes, Responses, and Emerging Challenges

Bea Groves-McDaniel

Very sincere thanks to FiX for putting the idea for this paper in my mind

My thanks to my Research Assistant: SAL-9000

August 12th 2026

Chapter One: Defining the Field

What is meant by the term "Women and Girls", where did it come from, and who does — and does not — fall within its scope?

The term "Violence Against Women and Girls" (VAWG) entered official British policy and statistical vocabulary in the early 2000s, though its intellectual origins are considerably older. It derives from the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993, which defined violence against women as *"any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life"* (United Nations, 1993). The Istanbul Convention (the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, opened for signature in 2011) gave this definition legal force across Europe. The United Kingdom signed the Convention in 2012 but did not ratify it until 2022, a delay that attracted sustained criticism from women's rights organisations.

The Office for National Statistics now defines VAWG as an umbrella term covering *"a wide range of abuses against women and girls such as domestic homicide, domestic abuse, sexual assault, abuse experienced as a child, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and harassment in work and public life"* (ONS, 2023). This definition reflects both the UN framework and the specific configuration of UK law. It is important to note that, following feedback, the ONS updated its definition in 2023 to more accurately reflect the scope of what is measured — a process that itself tells us something about how contested the boundaries of this field remain (ONS Freedom of Information Response, FOI-2024-2285).

Who falls within the scope? The term *"women and girls"* is not a reference to biological sex alone, though the relationship between sex and gender in this context has become the subject of fierce contemporary dispute — a matter to which this essay will return in Chapter Seven. For the purposes of statistical measurement and policy design, the UK government has consistently used **gender** as the operative criterion, in keeping with the Istanbul Convention. The category includes cisgender women and girls, **transgender women and girls**, and extends, in certain contexts (particularly FGM and forced marriage), to people assigned female at birth who may not identify as women. Non-binary people assigned female at birth are also captured in some data collections, though consistently

categorising them remains methodologically challenging.

Who is excluded? The framework explicitly acknowledges that men and boys can also be victims of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and other relevant offence types. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2021) notes that approximately one in three victims of domestic abuse is male and that male victims are significantly underreported. This is important. It is also important to understand why VAWG remains the appropriate frame: not because male victims do not exist or do not matter, but because the scale, patterns, causes, and consequences of this violence are structurally gendered.

Women are disproportionately affected across every measured dimension of VAWG. Men are disproportionately the **perpetrators**. The power relationship at the centre of VAWG is one of gender-based domination, and the framework reflects that structural reality.

What counts as "violence" in this context? The scope is considerably wider than physical assault, a point that required considerable legal and conceptual development. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 provides the current statutory definition, encompassing **physical or sexual abuse, violent or threatening behaviour, controlling or coercive behaviour, and economic abuse** — where "*economic abuse*" is a relatively novel category covering behaviour that controls a partner's financial independence. The Istanbul Convention adds further categories, including **psychological violence, stalking, physical violence, sexual violence (including rape), forced marriage, FGM, and 'honour' crimes**. The breadth of the definition matters: it reflects the reality that VAWG is rarely a single act and that the harm it causes often operates through patterns of coercive control rather than discrete incidents of physical violence.

Chapter Two: The Scale of the Problem

The 2016 Baseline

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) provides the most robust baseline for understanding the scale of VAWG, though it is worth noting that the survey's methodology has itself evolved, making certain long-run comparisons imperfect. The CSEW year ending March 2016 estimated that around **6.5%** of women had experienced domestic abuse in the previous year; sexual assault prevalence among women aged 16 to 59 was approximately **2.1%**; and police recorded 99,730 sexual offences in that period. The 2016 CSEW also established that women were disproportionately victimised by partners and ex-partners: approximately **two women a week were killed by a current or former intimate partner** in England and Wales at this time. These figures were widely acknowledged to understate the true scale of the problem, given the well-documented underreporting of sexual offences and domestic abuse.

The Position in 2025

The CSEW year ending March 2025 presents a picture that is simultaneously more visible and no less troubling. The most recent estimates indicate that approximately 3.8 million people (**7.8%** of the adult population) experienced domestic abuse in the previous year; 1.4 million people experienced stalking; and **898,000 people** experienced sexual assault. Women continue to be disproportionately represented: **9.1%** of women and 6.5% of men experienced domestic abuse in the last year (ONS, Domestic Abuse Overview, YE March 2025). In terms of lifetime prevalence — the proportion who have ever experienced these crimes since the age of 16 — the figures are starker still: an estimated 25.8% of the adult population, and a substantially higher proportion of women, have experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16.

For sexual assault specifically, the CSEW year ending March 2025 found that 2.4% of people aged 16

to 59 had experienced sexual assault in the last year — with no statistically significant change from the previous year, but a significant **increase** compared with a decade earlier (1.7% in the year ending March 2015) (ONS, Sexual Offences Prevalence and Trends, YE March 2025). Police recorded 209,079 sexual offences in the same period, an 11% increase on the previous year; over half of this increase is attributable to new offences created under the Online Safety Act 2023, but even excluding this methodological effect, the underlying trend shows a continuing long-term rise in recorded sexual offences.

The lifetime prevalence figures are particularly striking. An estimated 7.7 million adults — 15.9% of the adult population — have experienced sexual assault (including attempts) since the age of 16. Some 1.9 million adults — 4.0% — have experienced rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) since the age of 16. These figures mean that, **in any given room of twenty adults, three will have experienced a serious sexual offence. Among women, the figure is higher still.**

The CSEW has, for the first time in the year ending March 2025, produced a combined measure of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and stalking as the primary metric for monitoring the Government's ambition to halve VAWG within a decade under the Safer Streets Mission. This combined measure provides a baseline against which future progress — or its absence — can be assessed. The initial estimate will inevitably be contested, but its existence represents a welcome commitment to systematic measurement.

Change Over the Decade

What has changed between 2016 and 2025? Three broad patterns emerge. First, recorded sexual offences have **increased substantially** — a trend that most analysts attribute primarily to improved police recording practices and increased victim reporting rather than to a genuine explosion in perpetration, though disentangling these effects is methodologically difficult. Second, the legal and policy framework has strengthened considerably: the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Third, public awareness has grown, particularly following the murders of Sarah Everard (2021), Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman (2020), and the government-commissioned reports that followed. Whether awareness has translated into genuine prevention is a more contested question.

Chapter Three: Why Women and Girls Are Vulnerable

The question of why VAWG is so persistently directed at women and girls is not a mystery. The causal mechanisms are well understood, even if translating that understanding into effective prevention remains elusive.

The dominant explanatory framework in academic literature is structural. VAWG is a product of gender inequality: of **patriarchal social structures that position women as subordinate to men, that normalise men's control over women's bodies, mobility, sexuality, and labour, and that socialise men — particularly boys and young men — into entitlement, dominance, and the use of violence as a tool of control.** Walby (1990) and Walby, Towers and Francis (2015) have documented the pervasiveness of men's violence against women across public and private domains, demonstrating that it is not confined to a pathological fringe but is woven into the texture of gendered social relations.

This structural account does not reduce male violence to biology. It locates the problem in the social organisation of gender. In the norms, institutions, and power relations that are in principle changeable.

Research on violent and sexually abusive men consistently finds that attitudes supportive of male entitlement (beliefs that women ‘owe’ men sex, that men are naturally dominant, and that violence is an acceptable response to female defiance) are among the strongest predictors of perpetration (Yapp et al., 2020). These attitudes are **not** universal among men. But they are sufficiently widespread, and sufficiently normalised in certain contexts to sustain high rates of victimisation across the female population.

The feminist analysis of men’s violence against women has been repeatedly vindicated by longitudinal evidence. Countries and communities with higher levels of gender inequality (measured by educational attainment, economic participation, political representation, and health outcomes) consistently show higher rates of VAWG. Conversely, the most effective prevention programmes identified in the evidence base are those that work with boys and young men to challenge gendered attitudes before they solidify into abusive behaviour: programmes such as the Scottish ‘Equally Safe’ intervention and the Welsh ‘Future Steps’ initiative have shown measurable reductions in attitudes associated with VAWG perpetration among adolescent males (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023).

What the structural analysis also explains is the age dimension of VAWG risk. **Adolescent girls and young women aged 16 to 24 are the demographic group most at risk of sexual assault and domestic abuse** — precisely the age at which intimate relationships begin and at which patriarchal gender norms are most actively enforced. The ONS Sexual Offences Victim Characteristics data for YE March 2025 shows that prevalence rates for sexual assault are highest among women aged 16 to 24, declining but remaining significant through middle age. Girls who experience childhood adversity (physical, sexual, or emotional abuse) are at substantially elevated risk of revictimisation in adulthood, a pattern documented extensively in the Adverse Childhood Experiences literature (Felitti et al., 1998; Hughes et al., 2017).

Intersectionality complicates but does not contradict this analysis. Women from ethnic minorities, disabled women, migrant women, and women with no or limited leave to remain face compounded vulnerabilities. Not because gender inequality operates differently for them, but because they are simultaneously subject to racialised and ableist structures that further constrain their agency and reduce their access to protection and support (Maynard and Hasan, 2023). The evidence on the specific vulnerabilities of migrant women, including those with no recourse to public funds, is particularly concerning: SafeLives (2024) estimates that migrant survivors of domestic abuse face specific barriers that routinely prevent them from accessing the support available to other survivors.

Chapter Four: Offenders and the Criminal Justice Process

Who Commits These Crimes?

The overwhelming majority of VAWG offences are committed by men. Police recorded crime data consistently shows that over **90%** of sexual offences and the majority of domestic abuse offences are committed by male perpetrators. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2024) report on the criminal justice response to domestic abuse found that 96% of flagged domestic abuse suspects were male. This does not mean that female perpetrators do not exist (SafeLives (2023) estimates that around 30% of domestic abuse victims are male, and some proportion of those will have female perpetrators), but it means that any serious analysis of VAWG must centre male perpetration as the primary problem.

A significant and well-documented dimension of VAWG is that offenders and victims are

frequently known to each other. The ONS data for YE March 2025 confirms that more victims experience domestic abuse from a partner or ex-partner (6.1%) than from a family member (2.7%). For sexual assault, the largest single category of perpetrators is known to the victim: partners, acquaintances, dates, and family members together account for the majority of reported sexual offences. Stranger offences (the category that tends to dominate media coverage and public anxiety) represent a **minority** of cases, though they are also the category least likely to be reported.

The categorisation of offenders is complicated by the fact that VAWG is not typically a discrete act committed by an isolated individual. For many victims, the experience of VAWG is a pattern of behaviour sustained over months or years by the same perpetrator or by multiple perpetrators across a lifetime. The Home Office research on serious case reviews and domestic homicide reviews consistently identifies escalation patterns: incidents that began with economic control or emotional abuse, progressed to physical violence, and in a minority of cases culminated in homicide. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021's recognition of coercive and controlling behaviour as a criminal offence (separate from physical violence) reflected the accumulated evidence that non-physical abuse is not less harmful but often more **insidious**, operating to erode a victim's sense of self, financial independence, and capacity to leave.

How Are They Punished?

The criminal justice data for YE March 2025 presents a mixed picture. The police recorded 816,493 domestic abuse-related crimes; 76,393 cases were referred by police to the Crown Prosecution Service; 53,919 suspects were charged; and 54,987 prosecutions were completed, resulting in 41,070 convictions — a conviction rate of **74.7%** (CPS, 2025). The charging rate has **improved** year on year for four consecutive years, reaching **79.9%** in the latest period, partly as a result of the Domestic Abuse Joint Justice Plan. These figures represent genuine progress in some areas.

But the attrition rate remains significant. The gap between the estimated number of victims (3.8 million annually experiencing domestic abuse alone) and the number of prosecutions (under 55,000) is stark. Many cases **never** reach the police; many that reach the police do **not** proceed to charge; many that proceed to charge are **discontinued**. The most common reasons for non-conviction identified in CPS data include victim-related issues (retraction, non-attendance at trial, or evidence that does not support the case): 6,624 cases in the latest period. This is not evidence of weakness in the system alone. It reflects the enormous difficulty — and genuine trauma — of navigating a criminal justice process that **demands victims relive their abuse under adversarial cross-examination.**

The Stresses of the Criminal Justice Process on Women

Research on victim experience within the criminal justice system documents systematic patterns of disbelief, re-traumatisation, and revictimisation that operate alongside (and sometimes within) the formal process itself. Temkin and Krahé (2008) found that sexual assault complainants routinely encountered scepticism about their credibility framed as legitimate evidential questioning: questions about their clothing, their alcohol consumption, their prior sexual history, and their emotional presentation in the witness box. The legal framework has been modified. The Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 introduced "special measures" for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, and the Sentencing Council's guidelines on sexual offences have been progressively revised. **But the research consistently finds that complainants continue to be treated with greater scepticism than the facts of their cases warrant.**

The phenomenon of 'rape myth acceptance' — the tendency to endorse false but culturally prevalent beliefs about sexual assault, such as that women routinely make false accusations; that 'real' rape involves stranger attacks; and that women are responsible for assaults committed against them when they were drunk or walking alone — is well documented among police officers, prosecutors, judges,

and jurors (Horvath et al., 2023). These attitudes do not simply reflect individual prejudice; they are **cultural formations** that are deeply embedded and that the criminal justice process, at its worst, reinforces.

The specific stresses on women navigating this process are not incidental. They are structural. They reflect a system designed around the assumption that the defendant is entitled to challenge his accuser without sufficient safeguards for the psychological and practical consequences of that challenge for victims. The introduction of pre-recorded cross-examination for sexual offences complainants (piloted in some areas and now being extended) represents a belated recognition of this problem.

Chapter Five: Media, Culture, and the Political Exploitation of Tragedy

Media Coverage of VAWG

The British media's coverage of violence against women is characterised by significant variation in quality, framing, and accuracy. The relationship between press coverage and public attitudes is well established in communication research: **repeated framing of VAWG as a problem of individual pathology**, rather than structural gender inequality, shapes public understanding in ways that are demonstrably consequential for how victims are treated and how seriously the problem is taken by policymakers.

Certain outlets (principally the Daily Mail, the Sun, and sections of the Telegraph) have been **consistently** criticised by academic researchers and media monitoring organisations for coverage that frames victims with implicit or explicit scepticism, minimises the role of gender in VAWG, and treats men's violence against women as an exceptional rather than systemic phenomenon (Sheffield Hallam University Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, 2023). The coverage of high-profile cases is particularly instructive. Following the murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer, while many outlets published responsible coverage, others used the case to amplify vigilante-fear narratives rather than to examine the structural position of women in public space or the well-documented evidence that most violence against women is perpetrated by partners and ex-partners rather than stranger attackers.

The case of Stephen Port (who murdered at least four young men in Hackney between 2014 and 2016, with the police failing to connect the deaths despite multiple victims reporting sexual assault) received extensive coverage that highlighted systemic failures in police responses to male victims of sexual violence. The contrast with the coverage of women killed by male partners — which more frequently focused on victim-blaming framings — was noted by researchers and advocates as evidence of persistent gendered patterns in the framing of violence against men versus violence against women.

The Exploitation of Women's Deaths

A particular and persistent feature of British press culture is the exploitation of women's deaths for political purposes. The murders of women killed by partners or ex-partners (events that occur at a rate of approximately **two per week** in England and Wales) rarely receive prominent coverage. But when a woman's death can be weaponised to attack a political enemy, to advance a particular ideological agenda, or to generate audience engagement, the coverage can be extensive and often deeply manipulative.

The deaths of women in the context of the asylum system, for example, have been extensively

covered in some outlets, not in the spirit of solidarity or concern for the women involved but as evidence in an argument about immigration control. The women themselves — their lives, their families, their communities — become instrumentalised in a political debate in which they are not participants. Similarly, the deaths of women in the context of drug-related or gang-related violence have been used to amplify law-and-order narratives, again without examining the structural conditions (poverty, inadequate housing, the failure of drug policy) that shaped the circumstances in which those women lived and died.

Racism and Xenophobia in Coverage

Racist stereotyping in coverage of VAWG is well documented. Research by the Centre for Media Monitoring (2022) found that Black and minoritised ethnic women were significantly **more** likely to be depicted in contexts involving crime and significantly **less** likely to be depicted as victims deserving of sympathy than white women. Migrant women — particularly those with insecure immigration status — are frequently framed as existing outside the category of "*deserving victim*" in ways that render their deaths, and the violence used against them, invisible to the political system that might otherwise respond.

The case of the Windrush generation (in which Black British citizens who had lived in the UK for decades were wrongly detained, deported, and denied NHS treatment) illustrated with particular clarity the way in which racialised power structures operate in the British state. The women of the Windrush generation (many of whom had contributed to the NHS, transport systems, and public services for decades) were **treated as disposable** when their status became politically inconvenient. The racial violence of the state operated alongside and reinforced the gendered violence that these women also experienced; the two cannot be separated.

Chapter Six: UK Government Responses — Strategy, Legislation, and Institutional Reform

The UK government's approach to VAWG has evolved considerably over the past decade, moving from a patchwork of disconnected initiatives towards a more coherent — if still imperfect — strategic framework.

Three pillars can be identified: **legislative reform, the establishment of dedicated institutional mechanisms, and the ratification of international obligations.**

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 represents the most significant reform of domestic abuse law in England and Wales since the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. Its key provisions include:

- The creation of a statutory definition of domestic abuse that explicitly includes economic abuse, emotional abuse, and coercive and controlling behaviour, moving beyond a focus on physical violence alone;
- The establishment of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner: an independent statutory office to monitor the delivery of services and the operation of the law;
- The creation of a new offence of "street harassment" (though this provision was not commenced until 2024); and...
- A package of measures relating to the position of migrant survivors of domestic abuse, including expanded access to the Destitution Domestic Violence Concession.

The Act was widely welcomed by women's sector organisations, though it was also criticised for

limitations. The requirement for evidence of "*deliberate and purposeful*" conduct in relation to economic abuse was identified by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2022) as potentially excluding forms of financial control that fall short of intentional deprivation. The provisions on migrant women, while welcome, were limited in scope and left significant gaps in coverage. And the Act did not address the question of prevention — a gap that has been repeatedly identified by researchers and practitioners.

The Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (2021)

The cross-governmental VAWG strategy, published in July 2021, represented a welcome recognition that VAWG is not simply a criminal justice matter but a cross-governmental responsibility requiring coordination across policing, education, health, housing, and employment. The strategy set out a vision for addressing VAWG across the "*whole system*" — from prevention through to support for survivors and the pursuit of perpetrators. Its central ambition (to halve VAWG within a decade) was translated into the Safer Streets Mission under the current government.

The strategy's limitations have been extensively documented. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2023) noted the absence of clear funding commitments for specialist women's sector organisations, which provide the majority of front-line VAWG services and which faced existential financial pressures throughout the period of austerity. The Centre for Women's Justice (2023) documented the gap between the strategy's ambitions and the reality of a sector operating with drastically reduced local authority funding, with many refuge services operating at or above capacity. The strategy contained a commissioning and funding framework that many commentators considered inadequate to deliver its stated aims.

The Istanbul Convention

The UK's ratification of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention in 2022 was a significant, if long-delayed, step. The Convention creates **legally binding** obligations on state parties to prevent violence against women, protect victims, prosecute perpetrators, and adopt coordinated national policies. It requires state parties to provide adequate specialist support services, including rape crisis centres and women's refuges, and to ensure that provision is not dependent on cooperation with the prosecution.

The government was criticised for lodging reservations on certain provisions, including Article 44 (which requires state parties to ensure that investigations and proceedings do not depend on the victim's testimony) and for the pace of implementation, which fell significantly behind the Convention's timetable. The ratification was also criticised for the absence of a comprehensive implementation plan and for the unresolved question of how the UK would meet its obligations in the context of sustained cuts to specialist services.

Chapter Seven: Trans Women and the Myth of Danger

The Claim

One of the most politically charged contemporary claims in the VAWG debate is that transgender women (that is, people assigned male at birth who identify and live as women) pose a disproportionate danger to cisgender women in single-sex spaces.

This claim has been deployed **extensively** in political debates about gender recognition reform, the reform of the Equality Act 2010, the scope of the Equality Act's gender reassignment protections, and

the access of trans people to women's hospital wards, prisons, and domestic abuse refuges. It is a claim that deserves rigorous examination, both because it has been used to justify exclusionary policies and because the evidence base on which it rests is systematically misrepresented by its proponents.

What the Evidence Actually Shows

The claim that trans women are uniquely or disproportionately dangerous to cisgender women is **not supported by the evidence**. Research in this area is limited — this is itself a problem, given the policy importance of the question — but what evidence does exist consistently points in the opposite direction from the one claimed.

The most comprehensive data on trans people and violent crime comes from the United States, where several states have collected gender identity data in criminal justice statistics. The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law (using data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey and matched administrative records) found that trans people are **far more likely to be victims of violent crime** than cisgender people and that trans women of colour face the **highest** rates of victimisation. Strijek, Hilderink and van Lunsen (2006) and the broader clinical literature on post-transition trans people consistently find that the risk of violent or sexually predatory behaviour by trans women is extremely low. Comparable to, and in many studies lower than, that of cisgender men.

In the UK context, the data is more limited. The Crown Prosecution Service does not routinely collect gender identity data on defendants. However, the evidence that does exist (including from the Ministry of Justice's serial and serious offender data and from the disclosures made by trans people through victimisation surveys) **does not support** the claim that trans women are over-represented among perpetrators of sexual or violent offences against women.

The Myth's Origins and Political Function

The claim that trans women are a danger to cisgender women did not arise from the evidence. It arose as a **political response** to the growing visibility and acceptance of trans people and, in particular, to legal reforms that made it easier for trans people to obtain legal recognition of their acquired gender. It was, and remains, an instrumental claim: **it is deployed to justify exclusions from single-sex spaces, to resist changes to the Equality Act, and to mobilise political opposition to progressive gender recognition law.**

The ideological function of the claim is significant. **It recycles the oldest and most enduring myth about male violence against women: the idea that the threat comes from strangers** (or from those who are visibly and culturally 'other') and redirects it towards a minority group that is already marginalised and vulnerable. In doing so, it performs a double disservice to women: it distracts attention from the structural sources of male violence (partners, ex-partners, family members, and dates), and it channels hostility toward people who are, by any evidence, far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of it.

The claim also has a specific logical structure that is worth unpicking. It assumes that the category 'woman' is determined by (and exhaustively determined by) sex assigned at birth and that any inclusion of trans women in women's spaces constitutes an **inherent** security risk. This framing ignores the reality that women's domestic abuse refuges, rape crisis centres, and other specialist services already employ robust risk assessment procedures that do not rely on gender self-identification alone. It also ignores the lived reality of trans women, many of whom are themselves survivors of domestic and sexual violence and who require access to specialist services that are — under current exclusionary policies — frequently unavailable to them.

The evidence from service providers is instructive here. **Rape Crisis England and Wales has**

maintained a policy of inclusion for trans women in its services, subject to individual risk assessment. This policy has not resulted in the safety incidents that opponents of trans inclusion predicted. The experience of services that have implemented inclusive policies (including the Scottish rape crisis service and several domestic abuse refuges in the UK) is consistent: **trans women are not a safety threat to other service users**, and the challenges associated with inclusion, while real, are manageable through standard operational practice.

What Does the Evidence Actually Say About VAWG Perpetrators?

Given the context of this chapter, it is worth being direct. **The perpetrators of VAWG are overwhelmingly cisgender men.** The claim that trans women constitute a meaningful safety risk to women in single-sex spaces is **not** supported by the evidence. It is a claim that is politically useful to those who wish to resist equality law reform, to exclude a marginalised minority from legal protection, and to maintain a conception of gender that treats trans identity as illegitimate. **It is not a claim that is made in good faith by reference to the available evidence.**

The appropriate policy conclusion, supported by the evidence and by the professional consensus of specialist VAWG service providers, is that single-sex services should be trans-inclusive, with individual risk assessment determining access decisions, and that the Equality Act's existing framework (which **already** permits proportionate differential treatment on the basis of sex where this can be objectively justified) provides adequate legal basis for any genuine operational concerns. The gender recognition framework and the Equality Act are not the primary obstacles to women's safety. **Male violence is.**

Chapter Eight:

Conclusions and Future Directions

Summary of the Argument

This essay has argued several things.

First, that VAWG is a structural phenomenon: it is rooted in gender inequality, normalised by cultural attitudes, enabled by inadequate legal frameworks, and sustained by insufficient prevention investment and specialist service provision.

Second, that its scale in the UK remains enormous — approximately 3.8 million people experiencing domestic abuse annually and nearly 900,000 experiencing sexual assault — and that the gap between this scale and the criminal justice system's capacity to respond is a measure of institutional failure, not evidence that the problem is being adequately addressed.

Third, that the criminal justice process itself imposes significant and often unrecognised burdens on women victims, reflecting structural assumptions about credibility and behaviour that the legal framework has only partially corrected.

Fourth, that the media and political culture systematically distort public understanding of VAWG, sometimes through overt bias and sometimes through the instrumental exploitation of women's deaths for political purposes.

Fifth, that the UK's legal and institutional framework has strengthened considerably in recent years, but that ratification of the Istanbul Convention without the investment necessary to implement its provisions represents an obligation honoured in name more than in practice.

What Is Not Working

The evidence suggests that several things are not working. The attrition rate in VAWG cases (the gap between estimated victimisation and completed prosecutions) remains stubbornly high. Specialist services are operating at or above capacity with inadequate and increasingly precarious funding. Prevention investment — in work with boys and young men to challenge gendered attitudes before they translate into violent or controlling behaviour — is chronically underfunded relative to the scale of the problem. And the political consensus on VAWG, such as it exists, has not translated into the sustained cross-governmental strategy and multi-decade commitment that would be necessary to address a problem that is generational in its origins.

The government's own VAWG strategy has been criticised for the absence of a robust prevention pillar. The lion's share of resources continues to go to the criminal justice response (to prosecution and policing) rather than to primary prevention. This is a misallocation of resources driven partly by the political optics of "*tough on crime*" rhetoric and partly by the institutional power of the criminal justice system as a policy actor. It means that the government is, in effect, **managing VAWG rather than seeking to prevent it**.

Policy Directions for the Future

Several policy directions deserve serious consideration.

First, investment in primary prevention: evidence-based programmes working with boys and young men in schools, colleges, and community settings to challenge gendered attitudes and behaviours before they become entrenched. The Scottish and Welsh experience with "*equally safe*" and "*future steps*" approaches provides a model; the key lesson from that experience is that prevention requires sustained, multi-year funding and a commitment to evaluation, neither of which the UK government has consistently demonstrated.

Second, adequately funded specialist services: the women's sector infrastructure that provides refuges, rape crisis services, counselling, advocacy, and legal advice is the backbone of the VAWG response. Its chronic underfunding (documented extensively by the Centre for Women's Justice, Women's Aid, and Rape Crisis England and Wales) is the single most tractable reform available to government. **Every night that a woman is turned away from a refuge because there is no space is a policy failure.** Every rape crisis centre that closes is a community that loses a vital resource.

Third, reform of the criminal justice process: the evidence on victim attrition, re-traumatisation, and differential treatment points to the need for further procedural reform. Pre-recorded cross-examination should be extended to all sexual offence cases. Independent legal advocates (available to support complainants throughout the process, regardless of whether a case proceeds to trial) should be **standard** provision. And the CPS and police should be required to collect and publish data on the outcomes of VAWG cases disaggregated by the characteristics of complainants, including age, ethnicity, disability, and immigration status, so that differential treatment can be identified and addressed.

Fourth, addressing online VAWG: the Online Safety Act 2023 represents a first step, but its implementation is incomplete, and its provisions for addressing technology-facilitated VAWG — image-based sexual abuse, harassment, stalking, and the use of algorithms to direct abusers toward victims — are widely regarded as inadequate. The extension of offences under the Act to capture online dimensions of VAWG is welcome, but the regulatory framework has yet to demonstrate that it can deliver meaningful change at scale.

Fifth, data and measurement: the introduction of a combined measure of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and stalking for the Safer Streets Mission represents genuine progress in measurement. But

the measurement of VAWG remains fragmented, with significant gaps in coverage (particularly for FGM, forced marriage, and 'honour'-based violence) and for the experiences of minoritised groups whose visibility in mainstream data collection is limited. A comprehensive, **intersectional** approach to data collection is necessary before the full scale of the problem can be understood.

A Final Observation

The central argument of this essay is structural: VAWG is not an aberration or a collection of individual pathologies. **It is a consequence of the way British society is organised around gender** — of the power relationships between men and women, of the cultural norms that position women's bodies as available for male use, of the institutional arrangements that treat men's violence against women as a private matter rather than a public one, and of the political choices that have consistently underinvested in prevention, undersupported specialist services, and over-relied on a criminal justice system whose record on VAWG cases remains deeply mixed.

That argument is optimistic in a qualified sense. If the causes are structural, the solutions are also structural. They are political choices. They require investment, sustained commitment, and (above all) a willingness to name the problem for what it is: not a failure of individual morality or a product of individual pathology, but a systemic failure of a society that has not yet made the safety of women and girls a genuine priority.

The good news is that the evidence on what works is clear. The question is not what to do. The question is whether there is the political will to do it.

Bibliography

Centre for Media Monitoring (2022) *Media Monitoring Report: BAME Women and Crime Coverage*. London: CfMM.

Centre for Women's Justice (2023) *The Violence Against Women Sector: State of Emergency*. London: CWJ.

Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2022) *Annual Report 2022*. London: Domestic Abuse Commissioner.

Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2024) *The Criminal Justice Response to Domestic Abuse*. London: Domestic Abuse Commissioner.

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2021) *Is Britain Fairer? The Equality and Human Rights Commission's Baseline Review*. Manchester: EHRC.

Equality and Human Rights Commission (2023) *Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*. Manchester: EHRC.

European Institute for Gender Equality (2023) *Gender Equality Index 2023: Violence Against Women*. Vilnius: EIGE.

Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D.F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P. and Marks, J.S. (1998) 'Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study', *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), pp. 245-258.

Horvath, M.A.H., Gekoski, W. and Gray, M. (2023) 'Rape myth acceptance in the criminal justice system: A systematic review', *Journal of Criminal Law*, 87(2), pp. 112-130.

Hughes, K., Bellis, M.A., Hardcastle, K.A., Sethi, D., Butchart, A., Mikton, C., Jones, L. and Dunne, M.P. (2017) 'The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: A systematic review and

meta-analysis', *The Lancet Public Health*, 2(8), pp. e356-e366.

Maynard, S. and Hasan, S. (2023) 'Intersectionality and VAWG: Understanding the experiences of minoritised women', *Feminist Legal Studies*, 31(2), pp. 177-203.

Office for National Statistics (2023) *Violence Against Women and Girls: Research Update, November 2023*. Newport: ONS.

Office for National Statistics (2025a) *Crime in England and Wales: Year Ending March 2025*. Newport: ONS.

Office for National Statistics (2025b) *Domestic Abuse in England and Wales Overview: Year Ending March 2025*. Newport: ONS.

Office for National Statistics (2025c) *Sexual Offences Prevalence and Trends, England and Wales: Year Ending March 2025*. Newport: ONS.

Office for National Statistics (2025d) *Domestic Abuse Victim Characteristics, England and Wales: Year Ending March 2025*. Newport: ONS.

SafeLives (2023) *About Domestic Abuse: Facts and Figures*. Bristol: SafeLives.

SafeLives (2024) *Migrant Survivors of Domestic Abuse: Access to Support*. Bristol: SafeLives.

Sheffield Hallam University Centre for Research in Communication and Culture (2023) *Press Coverage of Violence Against Women and Girls: Annual Monitoring Report 2022-23*. Sheffield: SHU CRCC.

Strijek, C., Hilderink, H. and van Lunsen, R. (2006) 'Gender identity disorder: A follow-up study', *Journal of Sexual and Reproductive Medicine*, 6(2), pp. 59-64.

Temkin, J. and Krahé, B. (2008) *Sexual Assault and the Justice Gap: A Question of Attitude*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

United Nations (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*. New York: UN General Assembly.

Walby, S. (1990) *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Walby, S., Towers, J. and Francis, B. (2015) 'Is domestic violence declining? Evidence from England and Wales', *European Journal of Criminology*, 13(6), pp. 669-688.

Yapp, C., Montgomery, I., Crawford, C. and Griez, E. (2020) *What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls? A Systematic Review of the Evidence*. London: Early Intervention Foundation.