

Measuring gender equality in the UK: data on violence against women and girls

Findings from the
UK Gender Equality Index

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Foreword

Julia Gillard

**Chair of the King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership,
27th Prime Minister of Australia**

Violence against women and girls is one of the most pressing challenges we face, with one in three women globally experiencing violence in their lifetime.¹ It's both a measure of gender inequality itself and a barrier to progress for individual women, communities, and society at large. Measuring the prevalence and severity of this violence is therefore vital. Yet even in a country with a comparatively rich data landscape such as the United Kingdom, a paucity of appropriate data makes it hard to understand the extent of violence and how this might differ depending on where women live.


In this report we make four recommendations that, if adopted, would dramatically improve our ability to measure progress to address gender-based violence across the UK. The report is a call to action for all political parties, public bodies, and statistical agencies across all four nations of the UK. In this general election year, it is critical for the wellbeing and progress of UK society that parties include measurable policy proposals in their election manifestos and prioritise the elimination of violence against women and girls.

The UK Gender Equality Index

Despite significant progress over past decades, gender inequalities persist in the United Kingdom. Mounting evidence suggests that gender inequalities are experienced differently across local areas. For potential policy interventions to be effective, we need to understand the spatial variations in gender inequalities in the UK, especially given the country's high levels of regional inequality. Yet, to date, no comprehensive sub-national measurement of gender equality exists for the UK.

With funding from the Lloyd's Banking Group, the King's Global Institute for Women's Leadership is developing an Index to measure and map gender equality levels and their variation across local areas in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The UK Gender Equality Index focuses on the following domains of women's and men's lives: paid work, unpaid work, money, power & participation, education & skills, health & wellbeing, and violence against women and girls. The Index draws on existing data measured on the Local Authority District level, covering 374 areas across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Our intention is for the domain of violence against women and girls, unlike the other domains, to focus exclusively on women-specific outcomes.

In advance of the launch of the Index, we are publishing a series of thematic reports for each of the domains to document the state of gender inequalities in the UK. The first in the series, this report focuses on violence against women and girls (VAWG). It highlights the limited availability of reliable and granular data which prohibits us from consistently measuring and mapping the prevalence and spatial variation of different forms of VAWG across the four nations. Based on the definitions of different forms of VAWG covered by UK national and



international legislation, we review the data landscape to highlight conceptual and methodological gaps to propose recommendations for improvement.

With a general election on the horizon, it is critical that UK political parties prioritise the elimination of gender-based violence in pursuit of equality and higher quality of life for all. We call on parties to respond and demonstrate their commitment by including specific policies proposals in their own election manifestos that reflect the recommendations put forward in this report.

Executive summary and recommendations

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is both a cause and a consequence of gender inequalities. Moreover, research highlighting differences that outcomes can vary between local areas and neighbourhoods, including intimate partner violence,² suggests that the prevalence of different forms of VAWG will likely vary across the UK, which has one of the highest levels of regional inequality in the developed world.³ Data providing regional or local authority level breakdowns are therefore critical for understanding the causes and prevalence of different forms of VAWG and the varying demand for intervention and service provision across local areas of the four nations.

However, there are significant problems that impede the collection and publication of reliable and comparable data, and result in significant data availability and quality gaps. The most fundamental is the reporting or disclosure rate of VAWG, but beyond that, we find that datasets covering all four UK nations barely exist, making it difficult to consistently compare the prevalence of different forms of VAWG between them. Further, data sources rarely go beyond the aggregate national level, giving us little understanding of how the prevalence varies regionally and locally. Finally, data are infrequently disaggregated by characteristics other than sex. Given the intersectional nature of VAWG, there is great research and policy relevance in understanding the prevalence of gender-based violence for different groups of women. The limited data landscape poses a significant challenge to the inclusion of VAWG indicators in the Index.



Recommendations

The government's 2021 'Tackling violence against women and girls strategy' recognises the need for collaboration across government bodies to improve the data landscape to better understand and address VAWG. As a result, the Office for National Statistics has been improving quality of and access to VAWG data. We encourage the statistical agencies of Scotland (National Record of Scotland) and Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) to follow suit. Further, while cross-government partnership is important, close collaboration with sector organisations working with and supporting victims and survivors of VAWG would provide invaluable expertise and is necessary to build trust. Notably, a joint sector manifesto has been put forward calling for 'a comprehensive, whole-society approach to tackling VAWG that looks beyond the criminal justice system and centres those who face the greatest barriers to support and protection'.⁴ We encourage political parties to adopt the joint sector manifesto to holistically address and end VAWG and call on parties to respond and demonstrate their commitment to these recommendations by including specific policy proposals in their own election manifestos.

Future iterations of the Index will benefit by incorporating additional VAWG indicators, once available, to further improve our knowledge of gender equality across the UK. Focusing specifically on the improvement of the VAWG data landscape, we therefore recommend the following changes:

- Government, statistical and public sector agencies must work with women's organisations to achieve **conceptual and methodological consistency** in data production for comparison across populations of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, ideally below the subnational level.

- Government and statistical agencies must collect comparable data on VAWG that are **disaggregated by multiple protected characteristics** – at a minimum identifying the sex and gender identity of the victim and perpetrator, the relationship (intimate partner, other family member, acquaintance, or stranger), and whether there is a sexual aspect to the relationship.
- The government must implement a **‘Coordinated Community Response’** (CCR). Standing Together and other sector organisations support the implementation of a CCR, by which agencies including health, housing, social care, education, criminal justice, debt advice organisations, financial services, and communities share responsibility for safety across agencies.⁵ We suggest extending the CCR to include statistical agencies.
- As highlighted by the joint sector manifesto, it is imperative that statutory services and the Home Office introduce **data sharing restrictions** so that individuals with insecure immigration status can access support and safety from violence without fear of immigration enforcement.⁶



Introduction

Gender inequalities remain a persistent problem in the United Kingdom, affecting multiple dimensions of women's and men's lives – and violence against women and girls (VAWG) is the most extreme manifestation of the causes and consequences of these inequalities. In the UK, one in four women will experience domestic abuse and one in five will be the victim of sexual assault during their lifetime.⁷ The prevalence is alarming despite the UK government's commitment to ending different forms of gender-based violence, evidenced in the ratification of international treaties as well as national legislation and policies – for example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1986, the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, and most recently the Online Safety Bill 2023. After the Covid-19 pandemic, where rates of reported domestic abuse increased during lockdowns,⁸ the cost of living crisis is making it harder for women to leave abusive situations⁹ and further straining the resources of the women's sector to provide critical support to survivors.¹⁰

The state of violence against women and girls in the UK


In 2020, a woman was killed by a man every three days in the UK.¹¹ A recent review of domestic homicides between 2012 and 2019 found that 52 per cent of victims had contacted the police prior to their killing,¹² and poor information sharing and engagement from health bodies is also regularly referenced in Domestic Homicide Reviews.¹³ In England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates that in the year ending March 2022, 1.1 million adults above the age of 16 (2.3 per cent) experienced sexual assault, with

women (3.3 per cent) around three times as likely as men (1.2 per cent) to have been affected.¹⁴ Further, it is estimated that one in four women aged 18 to 74 experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16, compared to one in six men.¹⁵ Online abuse and harassment are more often directed at women, with a fifth (19 per cent) of girls aged 11 to 16 report receiving unwanted sexual images, rising to a third (33 per cent) of girls and women aged 17 to 21.¹⁶

In 2023, women were the victim in 73.4 per cent of domestic abuse-related cases. Over the course of that year, 1.4 million women (5.7 per cent) compared to 751,000 men (3.2 per cent) aged over 16 years experienced domestic abuse,¹⁷ yet numbers are likely far higher as four out of five (83 per cent) do not report partner abuse to the police.¹⁸ Even when reported, conviction rates for domestic abuse remain low, with only 6.8 per cent resulting in a charge and even lower charge rates – 3 per cent – for sexual offences flagged as domestic abuse.¹⁹

The intersectional nature of violence can limit access to safety and justice

VAWG is inherently intersectional in nature, in that inequalities relating to ethnicity, immigration status, economic resources, LGBT+ status, disability or other factors can put some groups of women at greater risk of violence and further obstruct their access to support, safety, and justice. The Centre for Justice Innovation finds that survivors from Black and minoritised backgrounds may experience a greater prevalence of certain forms of domestic abuse.²⁰ Further, data from 2018-2019 show that the rates of domestic abuse amongst Black and minoritised communities were higher than their White counterparts, with White victims representing 5.6 per cent of the victim population, Asian British victims 3.8 per cent, Black victims 7.1 per cent, and Mixed-race victims making up 12.9



per cent.²¹ Affected individuals from Black and minoritised ethnic communities also tend to suffer abuse for 1.5 times longer before getting help.²²

Previous negative experiences with or perceptions of public services can lead to a reluctance to reporting abuse to criminal justice agencies, as can cultural and religious factors.²³ Moreover, as pointed out by the Centre for Justice Innovation, the need to focus on safety planning, securing accommodation, and receiving emotional and mental health support means reporting can be of lesser priority. Victims who are ‘subject to immigration controls’ face additional obstacles in obtaining safety and justice, not least through their having no recourse to public funds, preventing access to welfare benefits.²⁴ While in some cases migrant women facing domestic violence can apply for a ‘Destitute Domestic Violence Concession’ to access benefits, this is preconditioned on individuals’ knowledge of their rights, sufficient language proficiency, as well as the time and resources to navigate this process.

Specialist VAWG organisations have called for government-funded research into the experiences of Black and minoritised women and argue that ‘in order to make progress towards addressing such disparities, data must allow us to identify what, how and where inequalities manifest across the protected characteristics’.²⁵

The need to look below the national level

The prevalence of different forms of VAWG likely varies across the UK, which exhibits one of the highest levels of regional inequality in the developed world.²⁶ For example, the National Police Chiefs’ Council reports that rates of stalking and harassment vary between 26 and 56 per cent of total VAWG across police force areas.²⁷ Similarly, the Femicide Census 10 Year Report from 2020 indicates that

the annual rates of femicides (per 100,000 general population) vary from 0.09 in Hampshire up to 0.34 in Cleveland and 0.32 in Greater Manchester.²⁸ Instances of domestic abuse also seems to vary, with a lower proportion of women in London (1.8 per cent) experiencing domestic abuse in 2023 compared to other regions in England and Wales (between 5.1 and 7.2 per cent).²⁹ Data providing regional or local level breakdowns are needed to better understand the extent and distribution of VAWG and the varying demand for intervention and service provision across local areas within the four nations.



Measuring VAWG on the subnational level

Ending VAWG requires policy interventions based on empirical explanations of its causes and variation across time and location. Yet this is premised on the availability of high-quality data that are collected regularly and with consistent definitions.³⁰ In the next section, we review the readily available data to assess which indicators can be included in the UK Gender Equality Index.

To guide the selection and assessment of existing data, we anchor our measurement framework in UK law that seeks to address VAWG. Having reviewed various legislation, treaties, and policy (see Appendix) we find discrepancies between the categorisation of different forms of violence are in part caused by the overlapping nature of the various acts of violence experienced. Although the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and ending violence against women and domestic violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, categorises violence as physical, sexual, psychological, or economic, our research has found minimal references towards economic violence, neither in current policies or legislation, nor in indicators measuring VAWG.³¹

The following main forms of VAWG were identified based on our review of the current UK legislative framework:


- Physical (including domestic abuse, physical abuse, homicide, femicide, maltreatment, modern slavery, and other physically violent offences)

- Psychological (including controlling and coercive behaviour, threats of harm, safety in public, and online violence)
- Sexual violence (including rape, exploitation, sexual harassment, and image-based abuse)
- ‘Honour-based’ abuse (including forced marriage, and female genital mutilation).

However, it is important to recognise that in categorising these acts some of the nuances of the violence may be lost. It may become harder to see how these different forms of violence relate and often occur as part of a continuum.³² An example of this is the lack of consideration of economic violence as its own category in current UK legislation and policies. Although mentioned by the UK Domestic Abuse Act 2021, economic violence is only examined in the context of domestic relations, thereby limiting understanding of economic abuse in other contexts, such as in nursing homes or by caregivers outside of the household.³³ Additionally, it must be acknowledged that these forms of violence are ever-changing – for example, as a result of technological developments, as recognised in the recent assent of the Online Safety Bill. As they develop, new types of violence such as online violence require conceptualising and measuring for monitoring and policy intervention.

Assessing the UK VAWG data landscape for inclusion in the Index

There are two main sources from which data on VAWG are collected. The first are population surveys, which provide nationally representative data, such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales, the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey, and Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey. The second are data routinely



gathered from relevant agencies, such as recorded crime statistics collected by the police and figures on criminal convictions in the courts. Yet these latter sources are not representative due to the high number of crimes going unreported to official agencies.³⁴ A comprehensive list with additional sources from across government, academia, and the voluntary sector is published by the ONS as the ‘Violence against women and girls: Data landscape dataset’,³⁵ though these need to be used with caution as they may not include representative samples.

To assess the data landscape, we build on previous work and review existing data measuring the different forms of VAWG outlined above.³⁶ Taking each form in turn, we match relevant indicators and assessed the geographical scope and level of measurement. Moreover, since some groups of women are particularly vulnerable to violence, we assess whether data permit intersectional analyses by providing indicators that are disaggregated by multiple protected characteristics such as ethnicity, age, or disability, in addition to sex or gender.

Findings

We find that reliable datasets covering all four UK nations barely exist. This makes it difficult to consistently compare prevalence of different forms of VAWG between countries as discrepancies in conceptual definitions in national datasets may exist. The greatest quantity of indicators disaggregated by sex are found for England and Wales, followed by Scotland, while relevant indicators for Northern Ireland are mainly provided by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Research Statistics Agency. As shown in the below table, indicators broadly relating to physical, psychological, and sexual violence can be used to cover the UK, albeit by combining distinct national data sources, which may use differing conceptual definitions and methodological approaches,

impeding reliable comparisons. Data on other forms of VAWG such as honour-based violence and online forms of violence are not collected for each nation.


Table 1. Readily available data on different forms of VAWG.*

Form of VAWG	Availability of data	UK wide data	National level	Subnational indicators (Regional or below)
Physical	27 indicators	1 indicator	12 indicators	1 indicator
Psychological	16 indicators	-	8 indicators	1 indicator
Sexual	11 indicators	-	6 indicators	1 indicator
'Honour-based'	5 indicators	2 indicators	4 indicators	2 indicators

*. Red signals that the number of indicators available are not adequate <3, Orange shows some availability of indicators <8, Green signals numbers of indicators available are acceptable >7.

Further, datasets rarely go beyond the aggregate national level, making it difficult to understand the spatial variation in the prevalence of different forms of VAWG. An exception to this is the Secure Access version of the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which is disaggregated by Local Authority Districts (total of 339 in England and Wales), Middle-layer Super Output Area (total of 7,201 in England and Wales), and Lower-layer Super Output Area (total of 34,753 in England and Wales). Yet, small samples sizes likely prohibit reliable comparisons on this granular level; the crime estimates for year ending June 2023 included a total of 30,667 respondents.³⁷

Moreover, when readily available sources do measure data on the subnational level, these are often not disaggregated by sex or gender identity. We find this to be the case in the ONS-produced Domestic Abuse tool that compares data by police force area for England and Wales collated from multiple sources: the Crown Prosecution Service, the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference, His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, and Home



Office police-recorded crime. Yet these sources are not directly comparable as they may disaggregate data differently and are collected on different units of analysis, for example, victims, crimes, suspects, or defendants.³⁸

We also find that data are infrequently disaggregated by characteristics other than sex. In some cases, as for example the Crime Survey for England and Wales, indicators are available by age groups and by sex. Other protected characteristics, relevant to gaining a better understanding of the VAWG landscape such as age, disability, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, marriage/civil partnership or pregnancy status are mostly excluded. While statistical disclosure control standards are critical to safeguarding anonymity, there is great research and policy relevance in understanding the prevalence of VAWG for different groups of women.

Leading VAWG researchers also stress the importance of measuring the prevalence of incidents of violence, as women who experience violence are more likely to suffer repeated attacks from a known perpetrator. Omitting the repetition of the attacks leads to an underestimation of the extent of violent crime, specifically domestic violence.³⁹ 2008-2013 data shows that 83 per cent of women experiencing domestic violence during this period had more than 10 crimes committed against them, compared to 17 per cent of men who had experienced such violence.⁴⁰ Similarly, the severity or level of harm of domestic violence needs to be recorded to further understand its gendered manifestation, as 77 per cent of affected women received an injury from the domestic violent crime – far higher than the 23 per cent of victimised men who experienced the same.⁴¹ Research produced by official bodies, such as the ONS, tends to use the Conflict Tactics Scale, which has been criticised for solely measuring action and recording harms separately when both are required to gain a deeper understanding of the severity of violence against women.⁴² The readily available datasets reviewed in this report

gives us little insight into severity and repetition, limiting our a picture of the extent of violence against women and girls in the UK.



Conclusion

Significant complexities exist regarding the availability of reliable and comparable data on violence against women and girls, including low levels of reporting but also in terms of conceptual and methodological discrepancies in the collection of data by statistical agencies. These complexities impede the collection and publication of reliable and comparable data, resulting in data availability and quality gaps.

We find that datasets covering all four UK nations barely exist, making it difficult to consistently compare prevalence of different forms of VAWG between them. Further, datasets rarely go beyond the aggregate national level, limiting our understanding of the spatial variation in the prevalence of different forms of VAWG within countries. Finally, data are infrequently disaggregated by characteristics other than sex. Given the intersectional nature of VAWG, there is great research and policy relevance in understanding the prevalence of gender-based violence for different groups of women. The limited data landscape poses a significant challenge to the inclusion of VAWG indicators in the Index.

Drawing together work conducted by the leading organisations working with and supporting victims and survivors of VAWG, we reiterate their recommendations to improve the VAWG data landscape. This way, we hope that future iterations of the Index can incorporate more reliable VAWG indicators to further improve our knowledge of gender equality levels across the UK.

Appendices – List of reviewed UK legislation relating to violence against women and girls

The UK targets VAWG within a tapestry of international and national legislation and policy including:

National legislation

Legislates the UK obligations under international treaties and shapes the priorities of the VAWG legislative landscape nationally.

- Domestic Abuse Act UK 2021
- Female Genital Mutilation Act UK 2003
- Sexual Offences Act UK 2003
- Stalking Protections Act UK 2019
- Modern Slavery Act UK 2015
- Forced Marriage Act UK 2007
- Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act UK 2014
- Equality Act 2010
- Online Safety Bill 2023
- Victims and Prisoners Bill UK 2023



Devolved legislation

Scotland

- Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act (Scotland) 2005
- s39 Criminal Justice and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2010
- Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018

Wales

- Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015

Northern Ireland

- Stalking Protections Act (Northern Ireland) 2022

International treaties

Formal agreements the United Kingdom is party to between one or more states or entities that promote international cooperation, establishes clear rules, expectations, and definitions.

- United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women
- The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)
- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5)

Policies and reviews

Reflects the priorities of local and national governments and key sectors such as health and justice when it comes to combating VAWG in the UK.

- [Tackling Violence Against Women & Girls England and Wales 2021-2025](#)
- [Met VAWG Action Plan \(2021\)](#)
- [CPS 2017-2020 Violence Against Women strategy and action plans](#)
- [Tackling VAWG: The Mayor's VAWG Strategy for London 2022-25](#)
- [Policing VAWG National Framework \(England and Wales\) 2021](#)
- [The Equally safe strategy: A Strategy to tackle VAWG \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#)
- [Equally Safe 2023: Scotland's strategy to eradicate violence against women](#)
- [City of Westminster: VAWG Strategy 2021-2026](#)
- [City of London: VAWG Strategy 2019-2023](#)
- [Welsh Government: VAW, domestic abuse and sexual violence: strategy 2022-26](#)
- [Greater Manchester: Gender-Based Violence Strategy](#)
- [Our Vision for the Women's Health Strategy for England](#)
- [South Wales Police - Tackling VAWG a Joint Strategy](#)
- [Drive Project \(2020\) - A Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Strategy for England and Wales](#)
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