



## **SELF DEFENCE IS NO OFFENCE**

**Challenging patriarchy through the provision of feminist personal  
safety information and skills**

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## Equality

We have lived a painful history,  
we know the shameful past,  
but I keep on marching forward,  
and you keep on coming last.

Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.

Take the blinders from your vision,  
take the padding from your ears,  
and confess you've heard me crying,  
and admit you've seen my tears.

Hear the tempo so compelling,  
hear the blood throb in my veins.  
Yes, my drums are beating nightly,  
and the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.

Maya Angelou

## Format of Report

This report has been published in response to recent queries and statements made by feminists and others in relation to personal safety courses and consists of five sections;

1. Introduction
2. Current Context
3. Women's experience of male violence
4. Future Action

Women's voices will be included throughout the report, taken predominantly from consultations and course evaluations.

# 1. Introduction

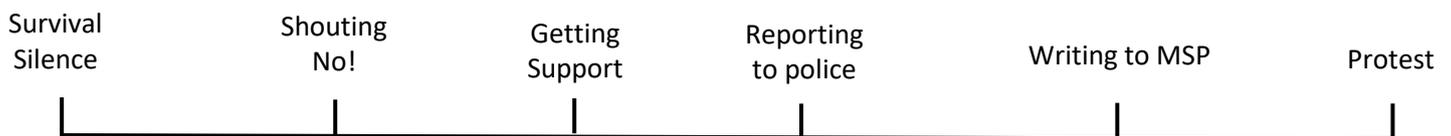
Wise Women, funded by Glasgow City Council, was set up in 1994 to address women’s fears and experiences of crime and violence, through the provision of free 20-hour Personal Safety and Confidence Building Courses for women in local communities. The courses make the links between different forms of male violence, challenging women-blaming attitudes, providing support and information on relevant services, and building skills to help women **identify, avoid and escape** potentially dangerous situations.

Wise Women has a proven reputation for successfully providing focus groups for women wishing to meet with others who have shared experiences and discriminations. These include survivors of abuse, BME women, disabled women, deaf women, women seeking asylum, refugee women, young women, older women, LGBT women, women dealing with complex social circumstances such as homelessness, addiction, commercial sexual exploitation, and poor mental health.

The organisation provides what Liz Kelly and Corinna Smith (2003) referred to as “Women Centred Personal Safety” (Against the Grain: Self-Defence Training for women and girls across Europe). This form of personal safety recognises the complexities of women’s experiences of violence and abuse and the legitimacy of women’s responses to the violence they experience, ranging from silence and appeasement to physically fighting back. Wise Women does not believe there is a hierarchy of either violence against women (VAW) or women’s response to it. We recognise the variety of influences on how women respond in any one situation, including the relationship with the perpetrator, perceived consequences of self-defence actions, such as safety of children and the woman’s assessment of how successful any action would be.

Wise Women recognise the value of all resistance, either as an individual or within a collective group. Feminism has promoted all forms of resistance through the years, of which personal safety is one.

## Continuum of Voice



Wise Women is a feminist organisation and any support for women is informed by feminist theory. We believe only men are responsible for male violence against women. Women should be able to live their lives without fear, whether or not they are wearing earphones, drinking alcohol or walking in the dark at point of the attack. Perpetrators exploit the power society gives them whether physically, emotionally, sexually and / or financially over women, both on an individual and societal basis.

Women and girls often adjust their behaviour to try to avoid VAW, it is the reality of being female. Feminist personal safety aims to provide women with the space to discuss VAW, practice some tactics that may help them escape, but more importantly to increase women’s confidence to reclaim space in their communities.

“Thank you for the chance to do this course. It has given me a sense of safety back and I feel less frightened of the world around me.”

(Participant)

## 2. Current Context

Wise Women recognises that some responses to women who experience VAW can be less than satisfactory.



(Suffolk Police, 2019)

The call for women to remain indoors and/or avoid particular behaviours, such as drinking alcohol, and the accusation that women are somehow responsible for male VAW are offensive and do not either increase women's confidence / safety or challenge male abusive and violent behaviour. These messages however are prevalent and do not seem to be reducing. Add to this the low conviction rates of perpetrators of sexual violence and other forms of abuse in the UK and the message is clear, that women are at least in part responsible for the violence and abuse of men, and it is unlikely that those men will be held accountable for their behaviour. Until such times that men are held accountable and women's human right to safety are achieved Wise Women believes that personal safety offers women space, skills and confidence to **identify - avoid – escape** male VAW.

"A guy got stabbed in a nightclub ... I was a witness ... I was quite drunk at the time but my credibility as a witness was ok then!"

(Participant)

In Scotland the Government has produced the Equally Safe Strategy to Eradicate Violence Against Women and Girls. The Strategy's 4 priorities are welcomed;

1. Scottish society embraces equality and mutual respect, and rejects all forms of violence against women and girls
2. Women and girls thrive as equal citizens – socially, culturally, economically and politically
3. Interventions are early and effective, preventing violence and maximising the safety and wellbeing of women, children and young people
4. Men desist from all forms of violence against women and girls, and perpetrators of such violence receive a robust and effective response

Unfortunately since the strategy was first produced in 2014 Scotland has seen an increase in reporting, particularly in sexual assault, 3,405 reported in 2013/14 and 13,547 reported in 2018/19, and a decrease in conviction rates, 12% decrease in conviction rates for sexual offences between 2008/09 and 2017/18, (Recorded Crime in Scotland). The Equally Safe Strategy does however offer a framework to tackle violence against women and recognises all forms of abuse, violence and exploitation within its definition.

### 3. Women's Experiences

The Scottish definition of violence against women recognises the wide variety of forms of violence women experience, including commercial sexual exploitation. In 2017 Wise Women undertook a consultation for the Scottish Government's Equally Safe Strategy.

Violence against women and girls encompasses (but is not limited to):

1. physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family (including children and young people), within the general community or in institutions, including domestic abuse, rape, and incest;
2. sexual harassment, bullying and intimidation in any public or private space, including work;
3. commercial sexual exploitation, including prostitution, lap dancing, stripping, pornography and trafficking;
4. child sexual abuse, including familial sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and online abuse;
5. so called 'honour based' violence, including dowry related violence, female genital mutilation, forced and child marriages, and 'honour' crimes.

(Equally Safe Strategy to Eradicate Violence Against Women and Girls.)

The 112 women consulted had experienced 515 different forms of male violence, stretching across their lifecycle, to date. Despite the prevalent nature of male VAW little is known of the complexities of the impact across women's lives, e.g. are there different impacts of domestic violence on women who have experienced child sexual abuse?

Kelly (1988) recognised male violence against women as being on a continuum, (Surviving Sexual Violence). This approach recognises that despite the variety of male violence against women, there exists commonalities across, perpetrators, majority are men; impacts on women, injury, mental health, poverty; and effects on society, low representation of women in positions of power, child poverty etc.

#### Types of violence and abuse

1. Domestic Abuse	71%
2. Sexual Assault	53%
3. Rape	52%
4. Sexual Harassment	42%
5. Stalking	41%
6. Child Abuse	40%
7. Child Sexual Abuse	39%
8. Hate Crime	37%
9. Pornography	24%
10. Mugging	23%
11. Prostitution	13%
12. FGM	12%
13. Forced Marriage	09%
14. Something else	07%

Furthermore the continuing invisibility of abusers and focus on women's behaviour as contributing to male violence against women, reduces society's ability to recognise the power imbalance that underpins male VAW.

#### 3a. Power to / Power over

Yoder and Khan (2016) recognised that power comes in two forms;

**Power to:** personal empowerment

**Power over:** the domination or control of one person or group over another.

Within the context of male VAW this model can help us to name not only the perpetrators of violence, but also the impact of power imbalances and the form that interventions should take.

## Male violence

Women

Undermines

Power over

Power to

1. Perpetrate violence and abuse.
2. Limited legislative response.
3. Limited protective services.
4. "Victim" blaming.
5. Silence of "victim".

1. Live free from violence.
2. To protect oneself.
3. Escape violence and abuse.
4. Control the narrative.
5. Be heard.

### Required societal response

1. Strong and robust criminal responses to violence and abuse.
2. Perpetrators access to potential victims limited.
3. Perpetrators are recognised as fully responsible for violence and abuse, regardless of circumstances.
4. Survivors influence development of responses and services.

### Required societal response

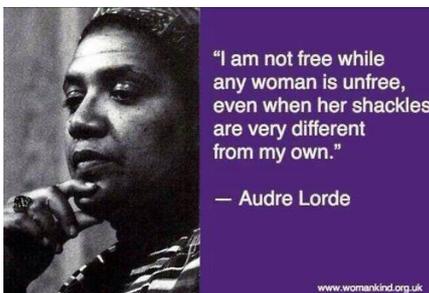
1. Access to resources, including finances, fit for purpose housing.
2. Refuge space.
3. Personal Safety
4. Strong criminal response to perpetrators.
5. Access to resources, including finances, fit for purpose housing etc.
6. Narrative recognises perpetrator responsibility.
7. Survivors influence strategy
8. Survivors influence services

Beatrix Campbell highlighted that "Patriarchies solicit women's subordination and participation, and of course seek women's consent", (End of Equality, 2013, p.55). Personal safety disrupts this hegemonic pressure on women to conform. This not only creates safe spaces to share stories and raise consciousness, but also provides alternative options for women who have continually been told they cannot, under any circumstance, confront male violence and abuse. It also reinforces that women have as much right to fill public and private space as men.

"Its bad enough struggling to get into the building but when you get in there and you have to spend the first 15 minutes raising their awareness and challenging their assumptions or being patronised, you're bloody exhausted."

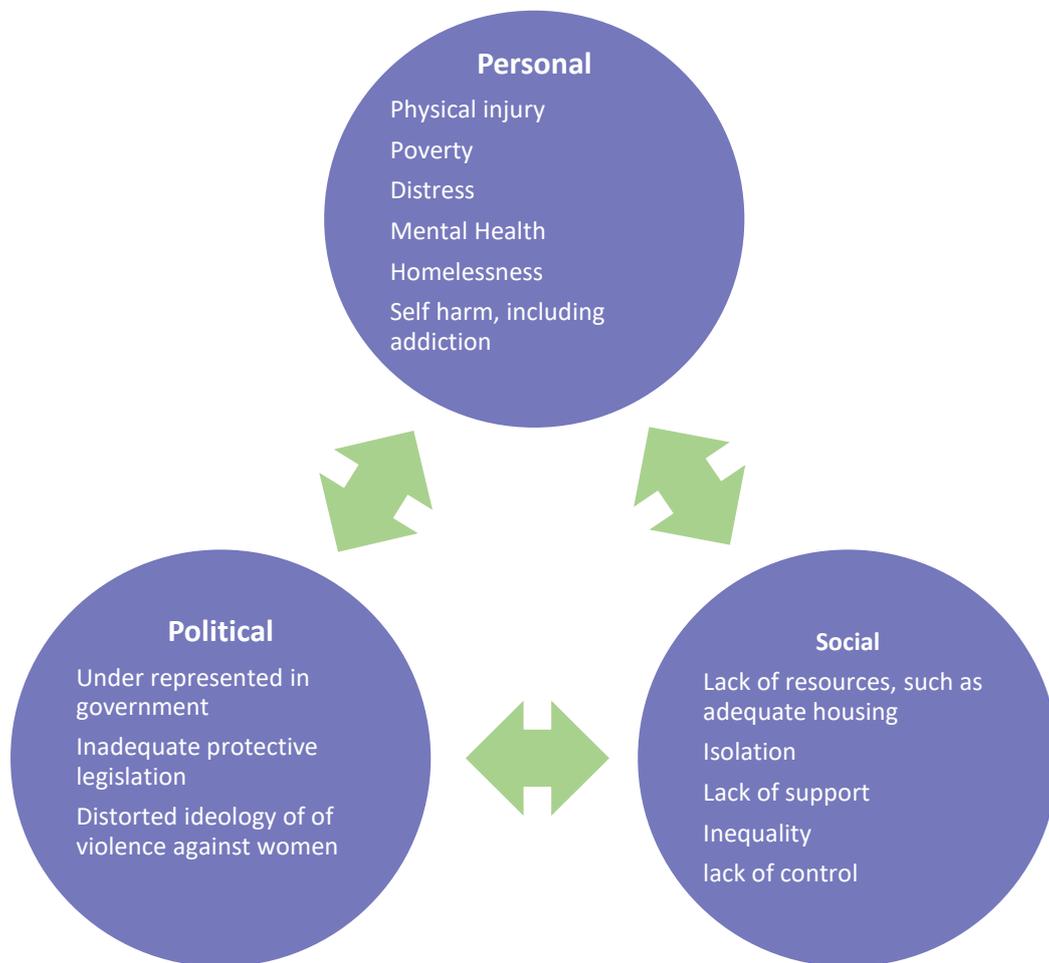
(participant)

## 4b. Impact



The impact of violence against women is significant on individual women and also across the community of women. Service provision with a focus on individual women alone isolates women and reinforces that the abuse she experiences is unique to her and her situation.

Feminist theory recognises male violence as a political act of oppression and therefore the practice with women must be anti-oppressive, increase women's power and control and challenge patriarchy.



The priority for the violence against women services is the immediate safety of the woman, and her children where required. This can require safe, single sex, anonymous accommodation, which, as with personal safety, would be seen as a legitimate response until men are held accountable and desist from perpetrating abuse.

## 5. Future Action

As society changes women's safety needs are unavoidably affected.

In the past 30 years knowledge on male violence against women has increased dramatically. Society now recognises that various forms of male violence against women and children is prevalent and legislation has been put in place to hold abusive men to account. This however has had little impact on the numbers of women reporting historical and current violence and abuse or any increase conviction rates.

The introduction of the internet, with its many benefits, has also provided a further space not only to harass, bully and increase access to girls and women by abusers, but it has also contributed to a pornified culture, both through influence over consumerism and influencing sexuality.

As access to freely available pornography increases through the internet, we have seen a 90% increase in men using "rough sex" as a defence for murder. This has led defence

### Gaps In Services?

Yes	70%
No	07%
Not sure	23%

#### Including:

1. Inconsistent or no specialist units at Police stations.
2. Inconsistent or no specialist units in hospitals.
3. Limited opening hours.
4. Limited Services in rural areas.
5. No drop-in services.
6. Few or no Law Centres.
7. Post code service provision restrictions.
8. No alternative therapy services for dealing with women.

lawyers to use stereotypical perceptions of sexually active women, as open to violent, misogynistic behaviour in their intimate relationships, in order to acquire not guilty verdicts or lower sentencing, often successfully.

Any future action on personal safety should consider all areas of safety for women. Wise Women has been piloting an “Informed Women” programme of events, which includes Internet Safety workshops, where we challenge the stereotypes of women seen online, through pornography and social media, as well as increasing women’s confidence and knowledge in interacting with the internet safely.

Physical safety in the community remains one of the key safety concerns for women and these are not reducing. The levels of reported domestic abuse approximately 58,000, in 2018/19, up from 36,000 in 2000 and 2,426 reported rapes/sexual assault in 2018/19, up from 996 in 2010 are increasing. Regardless of whether women are reporting more often as knowledge increases, male violence against women continues to be a significant safety issue.

It is the opinion of Wise Women that it is not enough to leave women to deal with the threat of physical violence until such times men change their behaviour. Women are also influenced by patriarchal society and shame and guilt can arise from internalising negative and unrealistic expectations of women’s responsibility in relation to male violence.

Wise Women talked about it at a group. Just hearing what they said helped me talk about it. I didn’t choose this, I have nothing to be ashamed of.”  
(Participant)

Women only safe space is essential for women to be able to discuss their fears, concerns about their own behaviour and future action, to build confidence to **identify, avoid and escape** potentially dangerous situations and where appropriate report to the appropriate authority.

*”My life changed, people who know me noticed something had happened. Its impact allowed me to access education and development. Life experiences through education expanded and enhanced my life enormously.”*

*(Participant in Stakeholder meeting)*



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