Cumberland Lodge Police Conference 2025

CONFERENCE REPORT

THINKING AHEAD

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

NOVEMBER 2025

THE POLICE FOUNDATION
The UK's policing think tank

About Cumberland Lodge

Cumberland Lodge is an educational charity and social enterprise that exists to empower young people to lead the conversation around social division – providing them with the skills, perspective, and confidence to question, challenge, and understand some of the most complex social issues of our time.

Day-to-day our buildings and facilities operate as a social enterprise, hosting conferences, meetings, and similar events on a commercial basis. We use the profits to support our educational programme, promoting progress towards more peaceful, open, and inclusive societies since 1947.

About the Police Foundation

The Police Foundation is the only independent think tank focused exclusively on improving policing and developing knowledge and understanding of policing and crime reduction. Our mission is to generate evidence and develop ideas which deliver better policing and a safer society. We do this by producing trusted, impartial research and by working with the police and their partners to create change.

About the Cumberland Lodge Police Conference

For more than 40 years, the annual Police Conference held at Cumberland Lodge has provided an inclusive and collaborative space for police leaders, practitioners, academics, civil society groups and others to discuss the pressing policing issues of the day. Since 2023 the conference has been organised by the Police Foundation, under the guidance of the Conference Steering Committee.

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Foreword

Society is undergoing a revolution in attitudes towards sexism, misogyny, and gender-based violence. The rise of the #MeToo movement has shone a much-needed spotlight on behaviours and crimes that were for too long overlooked or under-reported. As a result, sexual offences, particularly those previously hidden from view, are now being reported in higher numbers, and we are beginning to better understand the full scale of the challenge we face. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is no longer seen as a peripheral issue. It is now rightly recognised as a national priority, with the government making a public commitment to halve VAWG over the next 10 years.

In this context, it is all the more important for those tasked with tackling VAWG to take a step back and consider the road ahead. The theme of the 43rd Cumberland Lodge Police Conference **'Thinking ahead: Future directions in tackling violence against women and girls'** presented just such an opportunity. Over a long weekend in June 2025 senior police officers, practitioners, academics, technologists and representatives from non-profit and private sector organisations, gathered, heard expert testimony and engaged in focused conversations around how gender-based violence impacts not only women and girls, but our wider society and democracy.

This report is an interpretation of conversations that happened over that long weekend. It aims to capture the key content and spirit of those discussions and bring them, alongside the pre-event briefing paper (provided by the Police Foundation), to a wider audience. In this way, we hope to encourage others to reflect and question what policing and wider society should do to tackle VAWG now and in the future.

We were privileged to be joined by a diverse range of speakers and contributors, each bringing valuable perspectives to the discussion. What came from the conference was the sense that while the police have done a huge amount to improve the support they give to victims and to bring offenders to justice, there is a great deal more that needs to be done. Moreover, since VAWG is everybody's problem, every sector, individual, and leader must own a piece of the solution

I'd like to offer my thanks to Cumberland Lodge and the Police Foundation, along with the Conference Steering Committee, for convening such a high-quality and absorbing event. We are immensely grateful to the speakers and delegates who gave up their weekends to share their insights, expertise and knowledge at the conference.

Thank you once again for joining us.

Jason Hogg

Chair of Cumberland Lodge Police Conference Steering Committee and Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police

Conference speakers

Fergus Drake OBE, Chief Executive, Cumberland Lodge

Deputy Chief Constable Katy Barrow-Grint, Gloucestershire Constabulary

Giles Herdale, Director, Herdale Digital Consulting Ltd

Michael Simon, Chief Strategy Officer, Zencity

Andrew Fahey, Public Affairs Director, Forensic Analytics

Gemma Sherrington, CEO, Refuge

Maggie Blyth, Temporary Chief Constable, Gloucestershire Constabulary and National Police Lead for Violence Against Women and Girls

Professor Katrin Hohl OBE, Criminology and Criminal Justice, City St George's, University of London; Independent Adviser to the UK government on criminal justice responses to sexual violence, and co-lead Operation Soteria Bluestone

Dr Sajjan M. Gohel, Guest teacher at the LSE, International Security Director at the Asia-Pacific Foundation and Chairman of NATO DEEP's Global Threats Advisory Group

Chief Constable Serena Kennedy KPM, Merseyside Police

Professor Olga Jurasz, Professor of Law and Director of the Centre for Protecting Women Online

Cllr Chantelle Lunt, Councillor, Writer, Lecturer, PhD researcher and activist

Clare Moody, Police and Crime Commissioner for Avon and Somerset

Penny East, CEO of the Fawcett Society

Dr Esther Flanagan, Behavioural Science Lead, College of Policing

Danny Shaw, Conference rapporteur, Commentator on policing, criminal justice, prisons, security and immigration; Ex-BBC home affairs correspondent and former adviser to Yvette Cooper MP

KEY THEMES FROM THE 43RD CUMBERLAND LODGE POLICE CONFERENCE: 13TH -15TH JUNE 2025

Ruth Halkon (Police Foundation)

1. Introduction

There has been a revolution in attitudes towards male violence against women. Police chiefs have recently recognised Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) as a 'national emergency' and more women than ever before are choosing to report abuse. Initiatives such as Operation Soteria are changing police practice and improving outcomes for victims, while VAWG is now rightly recognised as a national priority, with the government making a public commitment to halve it over the next 10 years.

However, despite much positive progress, efforts to tackle VAWG face new and evolving challenges. Social media and the Internet of Things are enabling new types of offending, while gender-based misinformation and disinformation are having real world consequences for democracies and for the lives of young men and women who are shaped by it (Hughes, 2024). For the police, the daily operational struggle to deal with demand leaves little capacity to consider these new threats.

For policing to effectively play its part in fulfilling the government's mission, the service needs to direct its gaze beyond the current demand posed by the VAWG 'epidemic' and consider what the future challenges will look like and how they can best be met. The 43rd Cumberland Lodge Police conference provided just such an opportunity. The police cannot solve VAWG alone, so policing needs to be part of a much larger conversation. By bringing together experts and practitioners from across agencies and disciplines, the conference enabled such conversations to take place.

2. Safe space

As a conference topic, VAWG can be an intensely personal – as well as political – subject to discuss. Its pervasiveness in society, including in many forms which are normalised and considered acceptable, means that few are untouched by it (Hagemann-White et al, 2010). The conference opened by acknowledging that since one in five women in England and Wales experience domestic abuse annually, and one in four will experience it in their lifetime, delegates may have endured or witnessed it themselves. For some women present, the conference, operating under the Chatham House Rule, provided a safe space to share their own VAWG stories. One speaker, for instance, revealed her experience of being in a coercive controlling relationship as a teenager, describing how the violence perpetrated by her abuser was so normalised she did not think to report it. Others spoke about being abused both online and in person for having the 'temerity to be women in public life'. Some men also shared their concerns around the influences their sons may be absorbing and their anxiety over being positive role-models. Misogyny thrives in shame and silence, the conference heard. But it can be countered through supporting women who speak out, and through helping men to robustly challenge unacceptable behaviour.

3. An epidemic of VAWG

These shared personal stories provided a valuable reminder of the human impact of VAWG even as delegates tried to grapple with the enormity of the problem. The conference heard that male violence against women and girls had reached 'epidemic' proportions, meaning that police and partners were at risk of being overwhelmed by the scale of demand and forgetting that each data point represented an individual victim. One speaker gave data from the recent VAWG Strategic Threat Risk Assessment (STRA) (2024), published after VAWG was recognised as a national security threat alongside serious organised crime and terrorism. It shows VAWG constitutes at least 20 per cent of all crime recorded in England and Wales and that there had been a 37 per cent increase in reported offending since 2018/2019. The STRA shows stalking and harassment accounts for 40 per cent of recorded VAWG, while domestic abuse makes up 37 per cent and rape and serious sexual offence 10 per cent. However, these figures are likely to be underestimates since VAWG is often underreported, particularly among minoritised communities.

Survey data gathered exclusively for this conference shows women feel VAWG is commonplace, is getting worse, and is underreported (Zencity, 2025). Of the 1,796 women aged 16 and above surveyed, 75 per

cent named VAWG as a serious problem and almost 70 per cent said a woman or girl they personally know has experienced violence or harassment in the past year. Among those surveyed, 42 per cent thought the problem had got worse over the past year, rising to 46 per cent of those who have seen violence against a woman they know. During the day, women feel most unsafe on public transport (42 per cent) and in parks and open spaces (40 per cent). Notably, over a quarter (26 per cent) say they feel unsafe online, indicating *"digital spaces now rival physical ones in shaping women's day-to-day perceptions of safety"* (Zencity, 2025).

Much offending happens both online and offline. One speaker explained how VAWG exists on a 'continuum'; as a spectrum of violence that seamlessly spans both domains. Data from the charity Refuge (2021) shows one in three women in the UK have experienced online abuse and most women (94 per cent) of women who are targeted on social media also face physical, emotional, emotional or financial abuse from the same perpetrator.

A speaker said that she rarely met a survivor of domestic abuse whose case didn't involve technological elements, whether digital tracking, stalking, threats or sharing of intimate images, adding this offending is *"all pervasive in all its forms"* and becoming more complex. She gave the example of a domestic abuse victim who had fled with her children to a shelter, only to find her abuser had concealed an AirTag tracking device inside her child's teddy bear.

Technology, however, also empowers victims. Over the past decade, online movements like #MeToo and Everybody's Invited have increased public awareness and led more women to speak out. Consequently, some of the shame, silence and stigma around VAWG that deters women from reporting has diminished. And yet underreporting is still an issue, and women are even less likely to report online forms of VAWG. 78 per cent of respondents to the Zencity (2025) survey said they would report rape and serious sexual assault to police, but just 38 per cent said they would report online harassment. Speakers said data from other surveys corroborate the underreporting problem. For example, one UK-wide study found 15 per cent of women (around three million) experience online VAWG annually and yet only four per cent report it to the police, compared with 56 per cent who reported it to the platform on which it occurred (Jurasz, 2024). The conference heard this is the result of women not knowing how to report, not knowing if what happened to them is a criminal offence, and most soberingly, not believing they would be listened to and taken seriously by police if they did. The Zencity (2025) survey revealed underreporting was driven by a lack of trust in the police: 41 percent of women and nearly half of Black women feel their local force does *not* take VAWG seriously.

4. VAWG and the data challenge

Recent high-profile reports have identified persistent failings in the police response to VAWG including inadequate investigations, inconsistent risk assessments, low charge rates and poor attitudes among officers, which led women's organisations to declare rape and other offences had been 'effectively decriminalised' (Vera-Gray et al, 2025; Centre for Women's Justice et al, 2020). Delegates said there had been a great deal of police activity relating to combating VAWG in the past but questioned how much had been achieved. Another speaker said that, at a time when the police can't keep up with demand and the public are *"clamouring"* about more action on stolen cars and burglary, police need to be more *precise* about what they are going to do to tackle the VAWG emergency and more effectively use the vast amounts of data available.

A speaker said that, if the police were serious about contributing to halving VAWG they should, by now, be doing their part to fix the problem, not still working out what the problem is. The conference heard that policing has its *"head in the sand"* about the relationship between online and offline offending. Despite the fact they had been dealing with online VAWG for the past 20 years, the police continue to treat it as a new thing and are always playing *"catch up"* with the technology used to perpetrate it. The conference also heard that police recorded 123,000 technology-enabled VAWG offences in 2023, and yet the same police data counted 400,000 incidents of stalking and harassment (Herdale et al, 2025). One speaker commented this showed huge amounts of under-recording since it was impossible for there not to have been some technology involved in the vast majority of these stalking and harassment offences. Several delegates said the policing response to VAWG suffered from a core data issue.

Even as police try to increase reporting and respond better to online offending, they risk being *"overwhelmed by a rising tide of data".* The answers may be in the data, yet the police currently lack the capacity and capability to find them. For example, in terms of communications data, one speaker said that, 20 years ago, those investigating the 7/7 bombings

in London had to contend with 100,000 rows of telecommunications data, but now that amount of data would be collected in one average stalking case. Similarly, a delegate said, while the police record a huge amount of intelligence data, a lot of it is *"flaky"* and inconsistent, as were the practices around processing and sharing it. They concluded that if we are to survive on this *"fast moving train",* policing needs to have a consolidated view on how to better process, analyse and share data relating to VAWG offending.

The conference heard that data relating to offences against children was particularly lacking. One speaker said official statistics on domestic abuse, as captured by the Crime Survey for England and Wales, only relate to women and girls over the age of 16, and yet research shows those younger than 16 are particularly vulnerable. The speaker shared data from one police force, which showed that 12 per cent of all rapes and other sexual offences and four per cent of strangulation offences reported to them in the year to May 2025 involved young people under the age of 16 (Gloucestershire Police, 2025). Much of this offending would have occurred within relationships, yet, since adolescent domestic abuse is not formally recorded as such, there is limited awareness and support for younger teenagers with abusive partners. The speaker gave the example of Hollie Newton, 15, who was murdered by her ex-boyfriend after she ended their relationship, and yet her age meant her death was classified as knife crime but not domestic homicide (Brown, 2024). The speaker said that in order to stop other young girls being murdered, police need to better record the number of reports of rapes, sexual offences and strangulation offences committed against under 16s, and work with partners, on a local and national level, to improve recognition, prevention and intervention.

But, given the right technology and skills, the police can respond to VAWG more effectively. For example, the conference heard the Metropolitan Police's Operation Atlas pilot aims to improve the investigation of stalking offences by increasing the 'digital IQ' of investigating officers and supervisors. By gathering digital evidence of stalking, particularly relating to suspects' locations, officers in the Operation Atlas pilot reduced the time it took to investigate cases from 137 to 31 days, on average, and took the burden off victims to prove an offence had taken place. Stalking cases progressed through Operation Atlas achieved a charge rate of 59 per cent compared to 12 per cent before the pilot (College of Policing, 2025).

5. Changing police cultures

The conference acknowledged that the police had too often failed victims. Partly this was due to the overwhelming scale of demand and the complexity of VAWG, but it was also caused by the closed, negative cultures that had been allowed to flourish. For example, one speaker said she had been in briefings about combating sexual harassment and yet seen the very behaviours they were being warned against happening in the briefing room. She added she had seen interviewing officers subjecting victims to secondary victimisation by speaking as though they believed the perpetrator or thought that the victim was somehow to blame for what had happened to them.

One speaker attributed these misogynistic cultures to poor leadership and failures of oversight and training, adding that while VAWG is complex and hard to investigate, providing officers with the professional assistance and care they need to do their job is not. The speaker said there was a disconnect between senior leaders and lower ranks and raised questions about how much chief officers understood cultures in their own forces, and whether, for instance, sergeants were being held accountable for their own and their teams' behaviour. Another speaker shared research on what works to change attitudes. This showed that who the message comes from matters most. Police officers are more likely to trust their peers than senior officers, therefore having frontline leaders model good behaviour is all the more important. Moreover, approaches based on procedural/organisational justice, such as treating officers fairly and seeking to create an environment that promotes wellbeing and supports learning and development, are more effective than enforcing or mandating certain behaviours.

It was recognised that while some police officers who commit misconduct had joined the service with misogynistic views or had previously exhibited deviant behaviours that vetting systems missed, others had been changed by pervasive cultures and practices. It was suggested that treating officers with kindness and understanding would do much to prevent misconduct and promote good behaviours. One speaker said: *"I do think kindness is the ultimate professional advantage in policing,"* adding: *"how can we expect police to be the best people on the worst day of someone's life if we create an environment that doesn't care about them?"* Of course, this should be coupled with an effective misconduct system that identifies and

challenges unacceptable behaviours and ensures those perpetrating them are appropriately held to account.

When it comes to changing culture, the point was made that simply *"telling officers not to believe rape myths is like telling people not to eat ultra processed food, humans don't work like that."* The conference heard the success of initiatives like Operation Soteria lay in the fact that it did not set out to win hearts and minds first, but that it changed processes and practices first and let the hearts and minds follow.

Operation Soteria focused on improving outcomes in rape and serious sexual assault cases through integrating scientific evidence with innovative practice, to produce a victim-centred, suspect-focused and context-led approach. This approach means that victim rights and needs are centred throughout the investigation process, that investigators hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes and officers take the context of the offence into consideration from the beginning.

One speaker said bad cultures had arisen because officers had been demoralised and fatigued by the ineffectiveness of the previous *"groundhog"* day approach of addressing offences on a case-by-case basis and dealing with the same offenders over and over again. This changed once they moved to a system based on using long term pattern analysis and data sharing to identify and address the most dangerous repeat offenders. She said the *"swiftness"* of cultural change was *"incredible"* once officers were empowered to be able to make a difference. She added: *"seeing something working, getting case after case charged, seeing victims having good experience, that's what puts soul back into policing."* Relationships with other parts of the sector such as the Crown Prosecution Service and Independent Sexual Violence Advocates have also improved. Speakers said Soteria was a *"beacon of hope"* showing that cultural change can happen and that such a process was *"massively transferable"* to other forms of VAWG.

The conference heard that Project Bright Light was seeking to tackle domestic abuse in a similar way. This initiative, being trialled with Avon and Somerset Constabulary, had a comparable six pillar model, aimed at both treating each case on its own and *"looking at the whole story, focusing on perpetrators, intervening early, managing and disrupting offending and, if they're dangerous, convicting them"* (Topping, 2025).

However, Project Bright Light faces a mammoth task, hampered by the sheer breadth of offending covered by the domestic abuse category. A speaker called for the definition to be narrowed to intimate (ex)partner violence so that, for example, assaults resulting from disputes between non-intimate family members would not be investigated in the same category.

6. A new national centre

The conference heard that, building on the success of Soteria, the government had recently launched the National Centre for VAWG and Public Protection (NCVPP). Run by the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing, the Centre seeks to use the best available evidence to transform the way policing responds to child sexual abuse, rape and sexual offences, domestic abuse and stalking (Home Office, 2025). It aims to strive for a "whole system approach to prevent harm, give confidence to victims, survivors and witnesses to come forward and bring more offenders to justice" (NCVPP, 2025). The NCVPP will draw on methodologies used to combat terrorism and serious organised crime, will professionalise business, set national standards and seek to improve performance. This new approach will also focus on breaking silos between different parts of policing, recognising that the perpetrators of VAWG are sometimes those committing serious organised crime and terrorist offences, and that each department of the police has a duty to ask what they could do to tackle VAWG.

Currently, while there is evidence that behaviour change programmes can prevent perpetrators offending further, such programmes tend to be poorly advertised and receive only short-term funding and so are underused by officers. The NCVPP will seek to encourage better organisation, evaluation and funding of such programmes, while acting at all times with the knowledge and support of victims. The new Centre will also recognise that charge and conviction are not the only answer. Instead, it will develop other ways of dealing with perpetrators and meeting the needs of victims that are more effective at changing attitudes and reducing reoffending. However, a speaker identified an *"elephant in the room",* which means the new Centre faces an uphill struggle. The government has provided £13m for the Centre, compared to the £1bn budget given to counter-terrorism, and until the Home Office's VAWG Strategy is published later this year, there will be no baseline from which to measure progress. Nevertheless, through the VAWG STRA (2024) mentioned above, the launch of the Centre has found a direction of travel.

One speaker said the launch of the Centre coupled with government commitments to halve VAWG marked a *"moment in time [to bring about real change] that we must not lose."* Delegates expressed the hope that the government's VAWG strategy would reaffirm this by providing a standard definition of VAWG and related offences so that performance can be effectively measured. The conference hoped the strategy would encompass offences against those under the age of 16 and, since policing cannot resolve VAWG on its own, would involve a joined-up approach across several government departments.

7. Misogyny and extremism

The conference heard that seizing this *"moment in time"* is crucial, since, if we do not, we will be powerless in the face of a future 'tsunami' of VAWG. The boys currently being radicalised by misogynistic influencers will soon be entering the workplace and, unless their mindsets change, they risk taking these dangerous attitudes and behaviours with them. Worryingly, they could become the police officers of the future, and hopes of creating a police service that meets victims' needs and effectively tackles VAWG would be lost. One delegate quoted research from Hope not Hate on the impact of misogynistic influencers which showed more than half of young boys already consider that feminism has 'gone too far'. (Dea, 2024). Another delegate said misogynistic influencers operated by seducing young boys with their displays of power and money and then convincing them that the violent control and repression of women would help them achieve the same. A speaker said this process of indoctrination can happen overnight – or over a summer holiday – giving the example of one school where boys came back after the holidays aggressive and dismissive of girls, which she attributed to exposure to misogynist influencers. Boys and men who espouse such views are more likely to support VAWG more generally and be more willing to commit interpersonal violence (Rottweiler et al, 2024).

The conference heard that without education on healthy relationships, children are learning about sex on the internet, with one speaker citing research from the Children's Commissioner (2023) which showed 27 per cent of 11-year-olds are seeing extreme pornography online. One speaker said violent pornography has a *"massive role"* in killing empathy and respect for women. It remains to be seen whether the recent introduction of age verification under the Online Safety Act will change this.

Research has recognised that grievances and resentment against women not only underpin different manifestations of VAWG but often underlie acts of *"public"* violence, including terrorism (Rottweiler et al, 2024). As one delegate put it, *"misogyny is the antechamber for the recruitment of terrorists,"* adding terror attacks such as the Manchester bombings were motivated by a pathological hatred of women and girls. One speaker quoted Phelan et al (2023) which describes how anti-feminist and hypermasculine language in online forums run by far-right terrorists socialises and normalises misogynistic and sexist beliefs, which in turn influences behaviour. The conference heard such radicalisation is made possible through the *"algorithms of hate,"* which social media companies use to make money by generating attention, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. Using the example of Beran A who was behind a foiled Islamic State-inspired plot to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna in 2024, the speaker described a *"radicalisation funnel",* in which men are exposed to increasingly extreme content until they develop aspirations to commit acts of terror. Yet, while terrorists may be held accountable, those who radicalise them are often left free to radicalise others.

8. ''Misogyny is the system''

The conference heard that however hard the police work to change practices and bring about better outcomes for victims, their efforts will be futile unless we act as a society to address the wider drivers of VAWG. One speaker said that this begins with understanding that misogyny is not just the product of a broken system, *"it is the system".* Misogyny is not just a women's issue but a societal one; part and parcel, as one speaker put it, of wider issues such as the spread of misinformation and disinformation and the rise of authoritarianism.

This 'system' has damaged the health of democracies across the globe, by creating barriers for women entering public life. A speaker said female politicians and public figures who challenge systemic abuse suffer further abuse; for example, MP Jess Phillips received 600 death threats in one night, while feminist writers such as Caroline Criado Perez and Laura Bates are regularly targeted, and even schoolgirl Amika George received death threats after campaigning for free sanitary products in schools. This abuse is much worse for Black and minority ethnic women. One study of 177 women MPs found the 20 minoritised female MPs received almost half (41%) of the abusive tweets on Twitter with abuse in particular against Diane Abbott

being *"off the charts"* (Amnesty International, 2017; Dhrodia, 2017).

Historically, while it may have been possible to shut the front door on such abuse and escape into the private realm, now social media means it is all pervasive and there is no escape. The speaker said generative AI was increasingly being used to undermine, shame and discredit women in public life, for example by producing deep fake images. Although abuse may focus on a woman's appearance, it is really about punishing her for the *"temerity to be in a position of power"* and dissuading other women from following in her footsteps. Thus, violence against women in politics is not only a threat to women, but a threat to democracy.

9. A whole society approach

Speakers said that the public expects the solutions to come from policing, with 65 per cent of those surveyed by Zencity (2025) putting the onus on police (and 56 percent on men and boys themselves) to reduce VAWG. Yet while the police may 'own the problem' in the public's view, the answers do not lie with them alone. Instead, they are to be found in a whole society approach that focuses on challenging gender norms and misogynistic systems, on improving education, and in better online regulation and platform accountability.

A comparison was made between Child Sexual Abuse Material, (CSAM) and VAWG. In the case of CSAM, which is illegal globally, there is a clear responsibility placed on technology companies to take down content and to report those posting it. The same is not true for VAWG, where there is less impetus on social media and online dating platforms, for example, to share the data they hold about sexual predators and those who had been thrown off the platforms. The available legislation, such as that contained in the Online Safety Act, was described by one delegate as a *"toothless tiger".* She said, while there had been some movement around non-consensual intimate images, the Act had been a *"missed opportunity"* to bring about real change.

This does not mean, however, that we are powerless to stop such content being shared. One speaker gave the example of the whole-society approach used 10 years ago, to put pressure on the social media site Ask.fm to stop it allowing its platform to be used by ISIS. This collective pressure could work again – but the speed of change and the pace at which algorithms evolved meant this would have to be a continuous process.

Even as we tell young boys to refuse to listen to the violent fantasies offered by misogynist influencers, we should model a more equitable world. Speakers said since such radicalisation starts early, so must interventions. Prevention is all the more important, since unlike most crime, we cannot expect boys and young men to age out of it – while young men may grow out of committing knife crime for example, someone who is committing domestic abuse aged 15, unless he is stopped, may well do the same at 50.

Education should focus on reducing the acceptance of abuse, on promoting healthy relationships and behaviours and on teaching boys that being men does not involve being hypermasculine or hating women. Moreover, delegates said this was not women's problem to tackle alone, but that men should stand up and challenge misogyny when they saw it. They suggested there should be more support and guidance for men about being better allies and men should talk about the *"soft issues"* even as women discuss the *"hard"* ones. One speaker quoted Helen Lewis's (2016) phrase that the best way of being a male ally was to "pick up a mop" and take on their share of unpaid labour.

10. Conclusion

The conference ended on a message of hope. One speaker said the new government offered a better opportunity for change than had existed in a long time: *"There may be constrained finances, but they are committed to tacking VAWG, they get it, and they want to make progress."*

But the conference heard if the government is to achieve its mission to halve VAWG within the next decade, it needs a new approach to tackling VAWG that is as multifaced as the problem it aimed to tackle. This new approach must:

1. Clearly define the term 'violence against women and girls' and the offences that fall within that definition to ensure that different organisations across government, police and the third sector can measure rates and focus attention in a consistent way.
2. Set a baseline that captures the true scale of VAWG so that police and partners understand exactly what the problem is.
3. Ensure that relevant offences relating to under 16s are classed as domestic abuse so that offences are recorded and victims properly supported.

4. Be clear about how it assesses interventions so that funding goes towards what works. This should start by making sure the right data is collected.
5. Set aside sustainable long-term funding for prevention initiatives that have been shown to work.
6. Create an overarching national policy framework that highlights how all parts of government and society need to work together to end gender-based violence. This could be modelled on Australia's National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 (NCVPP, 2025).

Since VAWG is everybody's problem, every sector, individual, and leader must own a piece of the solution. Each delegate was asked to consider what difference they could make when they returned to their workplaces.

Above all, the conference heard, those fighting to combat VAWG, whoever they are, must not give up hope. Although VAWG, like climate change, seems inevitable, it is in fact a man-made problem, and like climate change, the solutions are man-made also.

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Thinking ahead: Future directions in tackling Violence Against Women and Girls

Ruth Halkon, Alishya Dhir and **Kat Roshan** (Police Foundation)

In the time it takes to read this briefing, two women around the world will have been killed by a male partner or relative (UN Women, 2024).[3] During the three days you are at this conference, one woman in the United Kingdom will have been murdered, most likely in her own home by someone known to her (Home Office, 2025). By the time you are back at your desk, one woman will have died by suspected suicide after experiencing domestic abuse (Hoeger et al, 2024). And before they died many of these women would have suffered for years and there would have been many missed opportunities for police and other services to intervene (Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office, 2025).

Such tragedies are not isolated but are part of a continuum of attitudes, beliefs, and actions that support and enable violence against women and girls (VAWG). This continuum includes everyday occurrences, such as verbal harassment (which may be minimised within society) and crimes defined in legislation, such as rape. Many women experience multiple forms of abuse in their life, none of which can be put into a hierarchy, but share a 'common character' – men's desire to control women (Kelly, 1987).

A recent National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) statement reported that VAWG has reached 'epidemic levels' in England and Wales, in terms of its scale, complexity and impact, with two million women affected by 2.3 million perpetrators in England and Wales every year (NPCC, 2024). Yet reporting is low, meaning the true levels could be even higher (ibid).

While movements like #MeToo and the Everyday Sexism Project have created safer online spaces for disclosure (Burke, 2025), digital platforms also foster abuse. The recent Netflix drama Adolescence has raised public awareness about the ways in which algorithms promote strongly misogynistic online material, and how boys and young men are being radicalised by their exposure to it. Online abuse disproportionately targets Black women, especially those in public life (Oliviera and Slupska, 2023).

Last year the government pledged to halve VAWG in a decade (Home Office, 2025). Yet radical change is needed if the police are to rise to the challenge. Systemic failures and underfunding over many years have resulted in chronic shortages of detectives and specialist support services, while 'shockingly low' charge rates expose a system that struggles to hold perpetrators to account and keep victims safe (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2022).

Moreover, few interventions are aimed at addressing root causes and preventing the cycle of violence (Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office, 2025). As a result, "public confidence in the ability of the criminal justice system to respond to reports of rape, to support victims and survivors, and ultimately, to bring perpetrators to justice, is at what could be its lowest point" (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2022).

Change can happen, but it requires a national effort, which is why the Police Foundation and the police conference organising committee have chosen tackling VAWG as the theme for this year's Cumberland Lodge Police Conference.

Our intention is to ask important questions, enabling delegates to look beyond the current demands and imagine what a future free of violence against women and girls might look like and how we might get there.

Questions for conference:

The conference will address the following questions:

- How is VAWG changing and how will this manifest in demand on the police?
- How well are the police responding to VAWG and what future direction should the police response take?
- How is the global and online threat likely to develop and how do we need to configure our response?
- What should be done to tackle sexism and misogyny within policing?
- What can be done to stop the rising tide of misogynistic attacks on women in public life?

1. The changing nature of Violence Against Women and Girls

Prevalence

Globally, almost one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their life, mostly at the hands of a current or former intimate partner (UN Women, 2024). In England and Wales, one in five women have experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16 (ONS, 2024). In the year ending March 2024, there were 108 domestic homicides; 83 of these victims were women, and most of these women were killed by a partner or ex-partner, as Figure 1 shows. (ONS, 2025).

Suspected suicides linked to domestic abuse now outnumber homicides committed by a current or former partner, with 98 recorded in the year ending March 2024, according to the Domestic Homicide Project (Hoeger et al., 2025). Most cases involved known abusers and were preventable (Wong, 2025). As a result of the report, the NPCC has committed to charging more abusers with manslaughter following victim suicides (Wong, 2025).

2 This conference briefing was given to all delegates ahead of the conference.

3 140 women and girls die every day at the hands of their partner or close relative, which means one woman or girl is killed every 10 minutes

Figure 1 Relationship of homicide victims aged 16 years and over to principal suspect, England and Wales, year ending March 2024 (ONS, 2025)

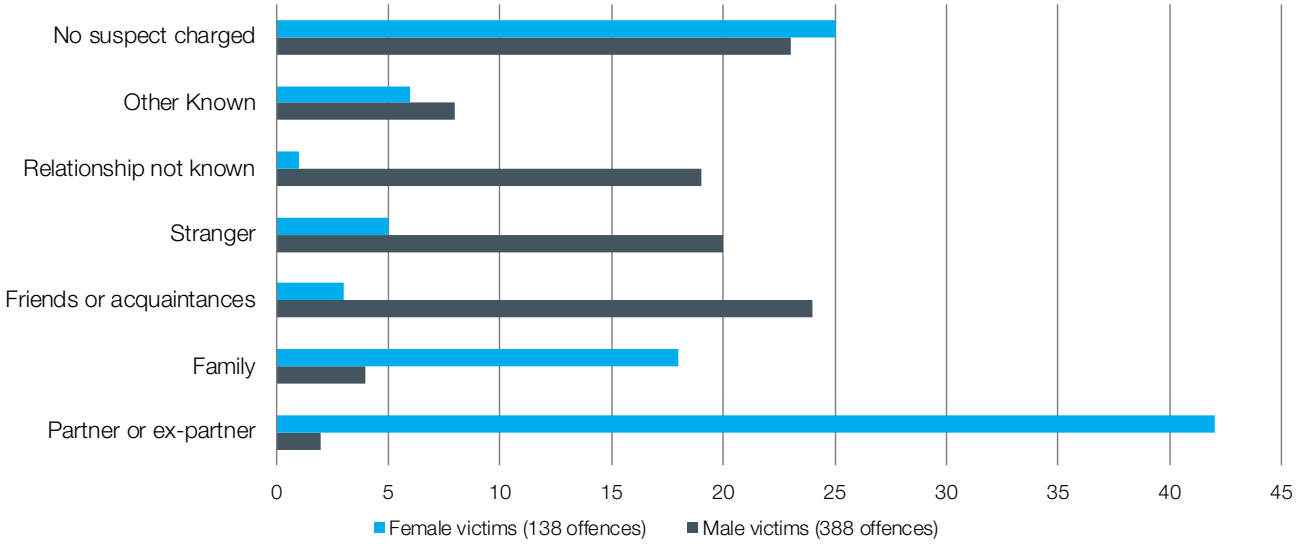
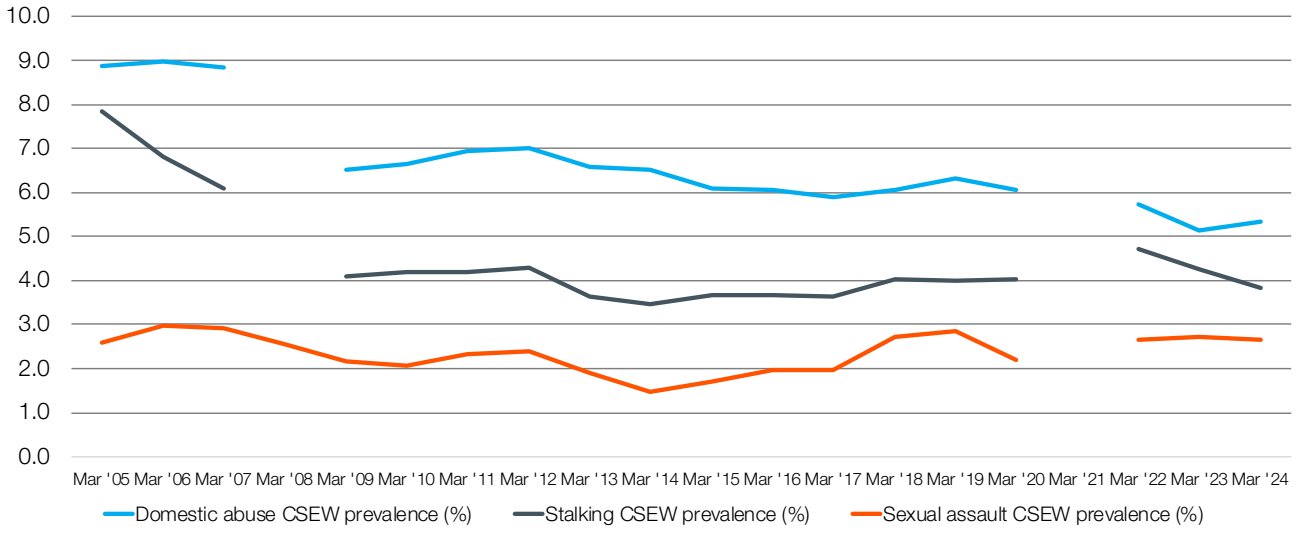


Figure 2 Trends in the prevalence of experiences of domestic abuse, sexual assault and stalking for people aged 16 to 59 years, to year ending March 2024 (ONS, 2024)



As Figure 2 shows, domestic abuse rates have declined slightly over a decade (from 6.5 per cent in 2014 to 5.4 per cent in 2024), but sexual assaults have increased from 1.5 per cent to 2.6 per cent (ONS, 2024a). The crime survey data excludes children and technology-enabled VAWG, meaning the true prevalence is likely to be much higher (NAO, 2025; Herdale et al, 2025).

Police data

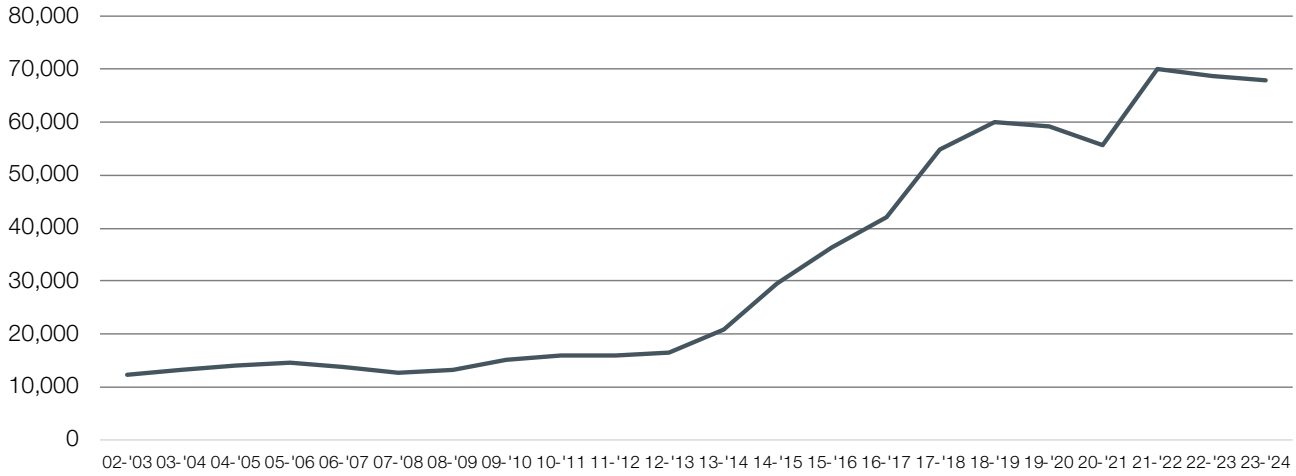
The Home Office does not consider police-recorded crime an accurate indicator of the prevalence of VAWG since, as the crime survey shows, fewer than one in six victims of rape or assault by penetration reported the crime to the police (ONS, 2024a). Online VAWG is even less frequently reported; Open University research showed that of the 15 per cent of all women who had experienced online VAWG, only four per cent reported it to the police, due to uncertainty around the law and general under-reporting of online harm (Jurasz, 2024; Herdale et al, 2025).

Yet police data is a useful indication of the demand the police currently face, and of improvements in recording practice over time (albeit from a very low base). According to NPCC data, VAWG accounted for 20 per cent of police recorded crime in 2022–23 (NAO, 2025) and there was an eight per cent increase in police recorded sexual offences in the year ending December 2024 (to 205,465 offences), compared with the previous year (ONS, 2025a). Around 35 per cent of all sexual offences recorded by the police in the year ending December 2024 were rape offences, a five per cent increase compared with the previous year (ONS, 2025a).

Online VAWG

The UN defines online violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of ICT, such as mobile phones and smartphones, the internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately” (Šimonovic´, 2018). In recent years, rapid advancements in information and communication technology have enabled the perpetration of VAWG on a scale previously unknown (Jurasz, 2024). Online spaces have been co-opted by perpetrators to create new ways of intimidating victims and exerting control through facilitating domestic abuse, silencing women who wish

Figure 3 Police recorded rape, year ending March 2003 to year ending March 2024 (ONS, 2025a)



to express themselves, and creating communities where misogynistic views thrive (Manning, 2024; Ofcom, 2025). Perpetrators use technology to manipulate, track, and harass victims, leading to significant emotional and psychological harm (Pickering, 2023).

This includes behaviours such as image and text-based sexual abuse, cyberbullying, cyberstalking and cyberflashing; not all of which are deemed to be crimes (Jurasz, 2024).

Online VAWG can be divided into:

- **Cyber-enabled** crimes, which are existing crime types such as rape and sexual offences, domestic abuse, coercive control, stalking and harassment, which are facilitated by technology.
- **Cyber-dependent** crimes such as cyberflashing (the taking and sharing of intimate images using mobile phones), deepfake image-based abuse (involving the use of generative AI to create and manipulate images for sexual and other purposes) and offences involving immersive technology (the metaverse).

Key factors that differentiate online violence from other forms of violence against women include:

- Anonymity – the abusive person may remain unknown to victims
- Action at a distance – abuse can be perpetrated from anywhere
- Automation – requires less time and effort
- Accessibility – enabled by the variety and relative affordability of many technologies
- Impunity – abusers and perpetrators often escape detection
- Propagation and perpetuity – texts and images multiply and can exist indefinitely (Šimonovic´, 2018).

Anonymity, ease of access and relative impunity have contributed to the rapid spread of hateful rhetoric and jargon relating to women from alternative platforms (such as 4Chan) to the mainstream (e.g. X), with the worst abuse directed at Black women, particularly Black women in public life (Oliviera and Slupska, 2023). Recent reports have shown how this is being enabled by big tech companies such as Meta (formerly Facebook), X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and YouTube, which have deprioritised content moderation and other trust and safety protection for users (Phillips et al, 2024).

Survey data demonstrates just how common online VAWG is. Research by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2021) found 85 per cent of women globally have witnessed online violence, with 38 per cent having personal experience – and this is set to worsen as the online environment evolves. In the UK 15 per cent of women have had direct experience of online violence, with young women and non-heterosexual women bearing the brunt (Jurasz, 2024).

In 2023 alone, the Revenge Porn Helpline reported nearly 19,000 cases of abuse, an increase from just 1,600 cases in 2019. Deepfake-related abuse has surged by 400 per cent since 2017, with the vast majority targeted at women and girls (HC Deb, 2024). While the Online Safety Act 2023 introduced offences prohibiting non-consensual sharing of intimate images, including deepfakes, currently no crime is committed until the images reach a wider audience (Hansard HL Deb, 2025). However, the law is set to change to ban the creation of such images after campaigners, including Professor McGlynn, made the case that since victims do not consent to the creation of such images, their very existence is harmful – victims experience it as an ever-present threat, with young women in particular expressing a "palpable sense of despair at the lack of control over their identities and sexual autonomy" (Hansard HL Deb, 2025). McGlynn et al. (2020) describe the profound 'social rupture' online abuse causes, drastically altering all aspects of victims' lives, for example isolating them from friends, family, the online world and society.

This online abuse can lead to real life violence (Oliviera and Slupska, 2023). Survey data shows that half of women abused online know the perpetrator offline and one in ten have experienced physical harm after online threats (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021).

Any analysis of VAWG must also recognise that experiences are informed and shaped by intersecting identities. The Combahee River Collective (1977) and Crenshaw (1991) both describe the specific experience of Black women, moulded by racism, sexism and classism, alongside other systems of oppression. Indeed, Black women's experiences of rape and sexual violence is notably different to that of white women. A recent report by the online abuse charity Glitch finds that digital misogynoir, the particular venom directed at Black

women on social media, had spread unchecked and there were 9,000 more highly toxic posts about Black women than white women – demonstrating that Black women are more likely to experience both racist and gendered abuse (Oliviera and Slupska, 2023).

How the threat is likely to change and what the key drivers will be

The digital environment is constantly evolving and innovative technologies, including new developments in artificial intelligence, "will inevitably give rise to different and new manifestations of online violence against women" (Šimonovic´, 2018). The National Crime Agency's Strategic Threat Assessment (2025) found that young men are increasingly at risk of being drawn into online groups which recruit them by manipulating their need to belong, or their desire for "status, power, control, misogyny, sexual gratification". These so-called 'com-networks' then collaborate to inflict serious harm against women and girls. Offenders use social media across all crime stages, from the identification and recruitment of victims by sharing images of glamourised lifestyles, to their exploitation and control (Pajon and Walsh., 2024). Similarly, the 2023 Strategic Threat and Risk Assessment (STRA) for VAWG, produced on behalf of the national VAWG taskforce, acknowledges that while "the true scale of online and tech-enabled VAWG is unknown" it is likely to be prevalent across all VAWG offences. The assessment concludes that it is almost certain the threat posed to women and girls in the online space will continue to grow in the years ahead (VKPP and NSPCC, 2024).

Public attitudes towards VAWG

A recent public attitude survey by Ipsos (2025) shows the public believe we are living in an increasingly misogynistic world. While over three in five (63 per cent) of people believe awareness of VAWG is growing, half (51 per cent) think levels of violence and abuse are also increasing – although this reflects increased awareness rather than increases in prevalence. Just under half think that levels of 'toxic masculinity' and misogyny are increasing, while four in ten believe VAWG is being 'normalised.' A quarter of those surveyed said that they personally know a woman or girl who has experienced domestic abuse in the UK within the last year (Ipsos, 2025).

Although this growing awareness is positive, a YouGov survey shows that UK adults are likely to exhibit victim blaming attitudes (such as suggesting the way victims dressed or acted made them responsible for the abuse they experienced) and prioritise the abusers' wellbeing over the victim. 34 per cent of those surveyed believe domestic abuse is the result of 'bad people' rather than a reflection of sexism in wider society that enables it (Davidge, 2022). These attitudes fuel VAWG since those who blame abuse on the individual are less likely to perceive patterns of behaviour or the harms they cause (ibid). There is a distinct gender divide in experience of, and attitudes to, online VAWG, especially among young people. Younger women are more likely to bear the brunt of online abuse and to experience violence that moves offline, however their male peers are least likely to recognise such online violence or see it as their responsibility to report it (Jurasz, 2024).

2. Current performance and future directions in the police response to VAWG

The impact of budget cuts, officer shortages and outdated practices, as well as the persistence of 'rape myths', mean that few victims receive the criminal justice outcome they desire – leading campaigners to assert that rape, especially, has been essentially decriminalised (Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office, 2025; Centre for Women's Justice et al, 2020). The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office (2025) found that 86 per cent of domestic abuse victims reported the abuse they experienced to the police – but only 12 per cent got the response they wanted. Similarly, the Victims' Commissioner (2023), reported that 87 per cent of female victims of crime lacked confidence in the effectiveness of the criminal justice system and 79 per cent in its fairness. In 2021 police in England and Wales recorded the highest ever number of rape offences within a 12-month period – a 13 per cent increase on the previous year. Yet only 1.3 per cent of recorded rape in that year resulted in a charge or summons, due in part to long delays caused by the complexity of investigations (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2022).

Although there has been some improvement – in the year ending March 2024 the proportion of rape offences assigned a charge/summons outcome was 2.6 per cent – disposal rates are still "shockingly low", which sends a "terrible message" to victims and survivors of rape that "justice is clearly not being done" (Home Office, 2024; Home Affairs Committee, 2022). Research shows victims are dissatisfied with the service they receive even before lengthy delays become a factor – with one study finding that nearly half of victims withdrew support for a prosecution within five days of reporting (Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office, 2025). Herdale et al. (2025) argue that, given the fact that most VAWG crimes have an online element, it makes little sense to differentiate between online and offline crimes in the police response, and yet these distinctions are still being made, with offline harms being prioritised. They also identify a lack of a consistent national standards on what is expected of the police in relation to online VAWG and what training should be provided (Herdale et al, 2025).

Strategies for change

In 2021, the then government published its *End-to End Rape Review* report, which accepted that rape victims were being failed (HM Government, 2021). It outlined a series of commitments focused on prevention, supporting victims, pursuing perpetrators and building a stronger system. However, a National Audit Office report (2025) said this strategy had not used the available evidence or expertise and that differing definitions of who can be a VAWG victim used by the police (just women and girls) and the Home Office (which includes men and boys) means there was no common agreement on the scale of the problem. The strategy was also labelled as insubstantial, with critics saying that there would have to be culture change if VAWG were to be prevented (Newman, 2021).

Operation Soteria was also launched in 2021, aiming to develop sustainable and systemic improvements to ensure better handling and outcomes in rape and serious sexual assault (RASSO) cases. An accompanying victim survey showed that many survivors face inadequate police responses, with cases often closed due to insufficient investigation or

evidence. Many survivors were unaware of their Victims' Right to Review (VRR) or found it difficult to engage with (Hohl et al, 2024). Soteria has led to activity designed to improve practice across the board, and early results suggest forces have become better at prioritising rape and sexual assault and communicating with victims; though a majority of forces still face a shortage of detectives and difficulty in meeting demand (King et al, 2023).

Since then, the Home Office has included VAWG as a Strategic Policing Requirement "one which requires a national response that is on par with serious and organised crime and counter terrorism" and has outlined a strategic response based on the 4Ps model – Prepare, Protect, Pursue, and Prevent – to reduce violence and support victims (NPCC, 2023). The NPCC has also set out a national framework for policing VAWG, which recognises that policing has a specific role to play in a whole system response and that prevention can only be delivered in partnership with other agencies (NPCC, 2023). The government has announced a new intelligence-led national policing centre which aims to put VAWG victims at the heart of police investigations and ensure they receive the same high- quality response wherever they are in the country and whether the abuse took place online and offline (Home Office, 2025).

It is too soon to say whether these initiatives will be successful in reducing VAWG or improving services for victims. However existing examples of good practice (see box below) have shown promise.

- Project Vigilant trains plain-clothed officers in behavioural observation and uses them to identify potentially predatory behaviour, including in the night-time economy, so uniformed colleagues can intervene. Some reductions in offending have been observed (Magill et al, 2023).
- Rapid Video Response, which uses trained police officers to respond to non-emergency calls for service from domestic abuse victims using live video calls, has also been shown to lead to increased arrests and better outcomes for victims (Rothwell et al, 2022).
- The Metropolitan Police's V100 programme, drawing on the police to disrupt drugs gangs and dismantle terrorist operations – are being used to identify and take the most dangerous men off the streets (Metropolitan Police, 2024).
- Project Bright Light in Avon and Somerset is applying Operation Soteria findings to domestic abuse, looking in particular at integrating online and offline violence (Herdale et al, 2025).
- Project Minerva is a collaborative research initiative between Essex Police and the Quantitative and Spatial Criminology Research Group at Nottingham Trent University, which has developed a statistical mapping tool to identify high-risk public locations for VAWG in Essex (Police UK, 2023).

Future directions

As outlined above, VAWG is increasingly moving into the digital space, yet there is a lack of specialised skills and resources to effectively address the growing issue of technology-facilitated abuse and there are few evaluations of interventions designed to prevent it (Pickering, 2023).

Currently, with a few notable exceptions, very little police activity addresses the underlying causes of male violence against women by identifying escalating dangerousness and offering men help to recognise and address their violent tendencies (Cordis Bright 2022). More research is needed on how the police, and their partners can take an active role in identifying those at risk of becoming perpetrators and intervening early (Radford et al, 2019 and Burrell, 2018).

Herdale et al (2025) argue that a prerequisite for any future response is the creation of cross-sector networks to drive collaboration, innovation and shared learning. One such model is the Coalition Against Stalkerware (2025), which brings together law enforcement, NGOs, researchers and industry partners to tackle a specific form of tech-facilitated abuse. The authors also recommend a national operating model to ensure consistent practice across the country (Herdale et al, 2025).

3. How is the global and online threat likely to develop?

A recent report from the UN has suggested that the declining strength of democracies globally, coupled with rising inequalities, has led to an increase in misogyny (Lennon, 2025). In a more uncertain world, a popular yearning for a mythical past in which a single wage could feed a family and men and women had much more traditional gender roles, may become more pervasive (ibid). It also seems probable that autocratic leaders will increasingly seek to deploy misogyny to connect with voters who feel threatened by women's and minority rights (Chenoweth and Marks, 2022).

The 'continuum' of VAWG is inclusive of extreme actions such as mass shootings and stabbings, similar to the events in Southport 2024. Some of these, such as the van attack in Toronto (2018) and the school shooting in Isla Vista (2014), are explicitly linked to 'incel' culture. Gohel (2025) argues the motivations of those drawn into extremist ideologies, whether Islamist or far-right, is interwoven with misogyny. Smith (2019) describes domestic abuse as a *"useful apprenticeship for men who are planning to crush passers-by under the wheels of an SUV or stab strangers with kitchen knives"*.

The internet and social media allow such radicalisation, instead of being done slowly and individually, to be done "many-to-many" (Whittaker, 2022). Social media influencers, such as the self-proclaimed misogynist Andrew Tate, profit from algorithms that reward attention and thus incentivise them to generate increasingly extreme and provocative content (Gohel, 2024). While far from new, misogynistic discourses have become increasingly visible and networked as the so-called 'manosphere'[4] becomes ever more mainstream (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). Moreover, content creators from different extremist sects of the online community (such as the incel community and Islamic extremism) are collaborating since the merging of their support bases "sky-rockets engagement"

4 Online communities that claim to address men's struggles but often promote harmful advice and attitudes (UN Women, 2025)

and generates larger profits, thus further reinforcing the algorithm rewarding this extremism (Gohel, 2024).

Such an 'unholy alliance' is already serving to fuel sexism, misogyny and sexual harassment in classrooms as "young impressionable men" are exposed to these "warped ideas" (Gohel, 2024). A recent BBC News survey found more than a third of secondary school teachers said they knew of at least one incident of misogynistic behaviour from a pupil in the last week, and many teachers (61 per cent) said they had seen increases in misogynistic behaviour among pupils over the past five years (McGough and Dunkley, 2025).

4. What should be done to tackle sexism and misogyny within policing?

In June 2020 sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman were murdered in a London park. The police officers ordered to guard the scene took and shared photographs of their bodies. In March 2021, a serving Metropolitan Police officer murdered Sarah Everard. His actions involved abuse of authority, kidnap, and rape. In October 2021 another serving police officer was arrested for rape and it emerged he had committed a string of rapes and sexual assaults over 20 years, and multiple opportunities to stop him had been missed. These cases raised fundamental questions about police recruitment, vetting and standards in the workplace and shed light on behaviours that had been overlooked for decades – that is until the victim was a white woman.

In recent years there have been several reviews into the cultures and practices of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and policing more widely. They include:

- A Home Office-sponsored independent inquiry, by Dame Elish Angiolini.
- An MPS-sponsored review of the force's culture and standards of behaviour, led by Baroness Casey.
- Several misconduct investigations by the IOPC, which uncovered a culture of bullying and harassment by serving Metropolitan Police officers against other serving officers, predominantly women.
- A thematic inspection of police vetting and counter-corruption arrangements by HMICFRS.
- The Dame Vera Baird Review into Greater Manchester Police, which identified issues around care for domestic and sexual abuse survivors.

The HMICFRS (2022) report uncovered: "…a culture where misogyny, sexism and predatory behaviour towards female police officers and staff and members of the public still exists."

Operation Soteria, discussed above, sought to address concerns raised in the Casey Review, focusing on improving the professionalism, training and investigative practices of police officers when dealing with rape and serious sexual offences. The Soteria findings could prove to have an impact on culture within police forces, including enabling a shift towards a more victim-centred approach (HMICFRS, 2024).

However, changing culture is hard and requires a recognition both of what needs to change and the creation of an environment where change is possible (Martin, 2024). The first step is recognising that misconduct is not limited to few 'bad apples' but that those who commit it are shaped by work and home environments, job demands, interactions with colleagues and managers and workplace cultures and practices such 'insiders' find around them. Indeed, an organisation that actively provides support and fosters a caring culture can address potential issues early on before they escalate (ibid).

The College of Policing (2024) is attempting to address these wider factors by applying a behavioural science approach to help understand and address the enablers of sexist and misogynistic behaviours within the police. The College's research shows that if officers and staff felt that everyday sexism was taken more seriously, it would help to reduce the organisation's tolerance of poor behaviour and prevent escalation (College of Policing, 2024).

5. What can be done to stop the rising tide of misogynistic attacks on women in public life?

In recent years, gendered disinformation, defined as the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information or images used against women in public life, has not only led to the backsliding of women's rights and democracy, but become a national security threat, as transnational actors seek to exploit divisions in society (Meco, 2023).

A Demos study noted that gendered disinformation uses "highly emotive and value-laden content to try to undermine its targets," seeking to compel feminist and women politicians to retreat from the political arena, thereby undermining the democratic principles of free expression and fair representation (Judson et al, 2020).

The most prolific and virulent attacks are directed towards Black and global majority female politicians in particular – a 2019 survey of British politicians showed 63 per cent of Black and minoritised women reported experiencing abuse, compared with 38 per cent of Black and global majority men, 34 per cent of white men and 45 per cent of white women (Collignon and Rudig, 2021).

O'Connell and Ramshaw (2017) argue that dismissing such public misogyny as simply "the cost of doing politics" has devastating consequences for the quality of democracy. Instead, they urge political parties to report such abuse and the police to take reports seriously. Similarly, Phillips *et al* (2024) encourage governments to consider adopting specific laws to address violence against women in politics, provide resources and train the police to enforce them. More broadly, calls have been made for leaders around the world to commit to supporting women's global leadership and breaking down barriers to women's political empowerment around the world (Meco, 2023).

Conclusion

The past few years have represented a 'mea culpa' moment for the government and the police as they begin to acknowledge their "abysmal record" of safeguarding women and girls, express shame at the lives lost and destroyed by failures in identifying and prosecuting VAWG and state a "clear direction of intent" to change (Baird, 2021). New strategies and initiatives such as Operation Soteria mean that rape investigation departments, for example, have shifted from "complainant credibility units" to actually investigating suspects (ibid). Moreover, police forces, despite high demand and limited resources, are now beginning to recognise the

trauma of victims and place their needs at the front and centre of what they do (HMICFRS, 2024).

But it is one thing to pledge to change and another thing to enact it, especially since the increase in state-sanctioned misogyny and the growth of the 'manosphere' mean that what were once extreme and minority views are now being repeated in our nation's classrooms, creating a world in which women and girls feel increasingly unsafe.

Although there is now a clearer strategy to combat offline VAWG, the police response to online VAWG remains "fragmented, inconsistent and underdeveloped" and collaboration between policing, online platforms and third sector organisations is erratic (Herdale et al, 2025). These gaps are getting wider and failure to address them could severely impact police effectiveness and public confidence.

Much of the effort to combat VAWG has placed the onus for change on victims, and more research needs to be focused on why men offend, how to prevent and reduce repeat offending, and what can be done to break cycles of violence and abuse (Cordis Bright and West Midlands PCC, 2022). Some victims want a criminal justice response, while others want more restorative approaches that help perpetrators to understand the impact of their actions – and yet the current system denies many victims any sort of resolution (McGlynn et al, 2019).

Violence against women and girls is not inevitable. With political will, police reform and collaboration we can create a society in which no one faces the threat of violence because of their gender. But this will only happen if we acknowledge that all of us contribute to a social, cultural and political context in which men's oppression, murder and abuse of women occur (Katz, 2006). By talking about it, and by acknowledging how different forms of oppression interact to create unique and overlapping experiences of discrimination, we can all be part of the solution (ibid).

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Email: info@police-foundation.org.uk

www.police-foundation.org.uk

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