

Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Rural Scotland: Bridging the Gap Between National Policy and Rural Realities

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Executive Summary

This report presents findings from the first in-depth research on gender-based violence (GBV) in rural Scotland. Although Scotland has established a robust policy framework for tackling GBV, particularly through *Equally Safe*¹, this study shows that current policy and service models do not adequately address the specific challenges experienced by victim-survivors in rural and island communities. Without urgent attention to rural realities, “one-size-fits-all” GBV responses risk reproducing unequal access to safety, support, and justice.

Drawing on interviews with both victim-survivors and support service providers in rural and island communities, the study offers a fuller understanding of how rurality shapes experiences of abuse, help-seeking, service access, and support provision. It shows that rurality is not only about geography or distance, but about how spatial, economic, social, and cultural conditions intersect to shape access to safety, support, and justice. The study identifies four interconnected dimensions of rurality:

- **Spatial:** distance, isolation, limited transport, and restricted access to specialist services
- **Economic:** financial insecurity, higher living costs, housing constraints, limited employment opportunities, and increased dependency
- **Social:** reduced anonymity, high visibility, interconnected relationships, and concerns about confidentiality
- **Cultural:** norms around privacy, resilience, self-reliance, and stigma

Together, these dimensions shape experiences of abuse, help-seeking, service access, and support provision. They can also be exploited by perpetrators as part of coercive control, restricting access to support through isolation, limited mobility, and dependence on shared resources.

The research identifies a continuing gap between Scotland’s national GBV ambitions and their implementation across rural and island communities. Addressing this requires moving beyond standardised, urban-centred approaches towards more place-sensitive, intersectional, and rural-proofed responses.

Key priorities include:

- Developing ‘rural proof’ mechanisms within GBV policy, practice, and evaluation
- Improving access to specialist support through mobile, outreach, confidential, and locally accessible services
- Investing in secure, ring-fenced funding for specialist rural GBV provision
- Strengthening coordinated, place-based responses to rural inequalities, including transport, housing, poverty, and digital exclusion

Without stronger recognition of rural realities, victim-survivors in rural Scotland will continue to face unequal access to safety, support, and justice. Specialist, locally accessible, and sustainably funded services are essential to achieving equitable outcomes across Scotland.

¹ Scottish Government (2023). *Equally Safe: Scotland’s Strategy to Eradicate Violence Against Women*.

Background

Scotland has been internationally recognised for adopting a gendered and preventative approach to GBV. Through **Equally Safe** and associated delivery plans, the Scottish Government has committed to preventing violence, improving support and protection, and strengthening justice responses. However, the effectiveness of these commitments also depends on how they are implemented across different geographic contexts.

Rural communities face distinct challenges that are not always adequately reflected within current policy and service provision. These areas are often characterised by dispersed populations, limited infrastructure, reduced public transport, uneven digital connectivity, and restricted access to specialist services.

Despite growing international attention to rurality and GBV, limited research has examined these issues in Scotland. This study is the first in-depth academic research on GBV in rural Scotland, highlighting how rural conditions shape experiences of abuse, access to support, and service delivery, as well as the implications for policy and practice.

At the centre of the study is a multidimensional understanding of rurality that moves beyond geography alone. It considers how spatial, social, cultural, economic, and structural conditions interact to shape experiences of GBV and access to safety, support, and justice. The findings demonstrate that rurality is not simply a backdrop to abuse, but an active factor shaping victim-survivors' options, service responses, and policy implementation.

Methods

This report draws on empirical research conducted between February 2022 and October 2023. The study examined how rurality shapes experiences of GBV, help-seeking, access to services, and support provision. The findings are based on:

- In-depth interviews with women who had experienced GBV in rural Scotland
- In-depth interviews with support service providers working in Scottish Women's Aid and Rape Crisis Scotland groups and centres serving rural and island communities

The fieldwork generated more than 37 hours of recorded interviews across both participant groups. Participants were recruited from rural communities across Scotland, spanning the Lowlands, Highlands, and Islands.

Research Findings and Key Issues

Structural and Spatial Barriers

Women experiencing GBV in rural Scotland face significant structural and spatial barriers to accessing safety and support. Key challenges include:

- Long distances, limited public transport and high travel costs restrict access to support and reduce opportunities to leave abusive situations
- Limited local service provision means that many rural communities rely on under-resourced generalist services rather than specialist GBV support
- Housing shortages, financial insecurity, and limited employment opportunities increase dependency on abusive partners and constrain exit options
- As support services increasingly rely on remote and online support, digital exclusion and poor connectivity can further limit access to support

Perpetrators actively exploit rural conditions as part of coercive control. Isolation, limited mobility, and dependence on shared resources used to restrict women's access to support. These barriers are often intensified by wider inequalities, including disability, poverty and caring responsibilities.

Rurality, Visibility and Help-Seeking

The social dynamics of rural and island communities create additional barriers to disclosure and help-

seeking. Reduced anonymity, high visibility, and interconnected social ties increase concerns regarding confidentiality and reputational harm.

Victim-survivors often are reluctant to engage with local services due to fears of not being believed or concerns about familiarity between service providers, perpetrators, and wider community networks. Cultural norms associated with privacy, resilience, self-reliance and stigma further discourage disclosure.

Gaps in Policy and Implementation

Current policy and service models do not adequately reflect the realities of rural communities. Existing approaches often remain urban-centred and fail to account for the additional coordination, infrastructure, and resources required to ensure equitable access to support across geographically dispersed communities.

Many rural services operate within contexts of insecure funding, workforce pressures, and increasing demand. Specialist third-sector organisations play a critical role in rural support provision but often remain reliant on short-term funding arrangements that undermine long-term sustainability.

There remains a significant gap between Scotland's national policy ambitions and the realities of implementation across rural Scotland.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings show that Scotland's GBV commitments cannot be implemented equitably without stronger attention to rural realities. Current approaches often remain urban-centred and do not adequately reflect how rurality shapes access to safety, support and justice. The following recommendations set out key priorities for action.

Develop 'Rural Proof' GBV Policy, Practice and Evaluation

GBV policy, practice, and evaluation should systematically assess how national commitments operate across rural and island communities.

This means:

- Embedding rural considerations within policy design, implementation, and evaluation
- Incorporating rural-specific indicators into monitoring and evaluation frameworks
- Engaging rural communities, specialist organisations, and frontline service providers in policy development and evaluation

'Rural proof' approaches are essential to ensure that national GBV commitments respond to local realities and translate into equitable access to safety, support, and justice across Scotland.

Improve Access to Specialist GBV Support

Victim-survivors in rural and island communities need support that is specialist, confidential, and accessible.

This requires:

- Expanding mobile, outreach and locally accessible GBV services
- Improving transport and financial support to access services, healthcare, legal processes, and accommodation
- Creating safe and discreet access routes, including support outside immediate local areas where needed
- Expanding remote and digital support while addressing digital exclusion

Policy and service design should recognise that rural accessibility is shaped not only by distance, but also by affordability, infrastructure, privacy, and continuity of support.

Invest in Sustainable Rural GBV Provision

Specialist rural GBV provision requires secure and long-term investment. Priority action includes:

- Providing ring-fenced funding for specialist rural GBV services
- Reducing reliance on short-term funding that undermines service continuity
- Strengthening GBV training for generalist providers, including health, social care and community-based practitioners
- Supporting staff retention and organisational capacity within rural services

Funding models should support both specialist services and the wider local systems that victim-survivors rely on.

Strengthen Coordinated, Place-Based Responses to Rural Inequalities

Effective rural GBV responses require coordinated services and action on the wider inequalities that shape access to safety, support, and justice.

This includes:

- Strengthening collaboration between police, health, housing, social care, education and the third sector
- Resourcing the additional coordination required across geographically dispersed areas
- Ensuring rural perspectives are represented in strategic planning and partnership structures
- Addressing transport, housing, poverty, and digital exclusion as part of GBV responses

Policy and partnership responses should therefore recognise that specialist GBV provision, transport, housing, poverty, and digital inclusion are interconnected conditions for long-term safety.

Conclusion

Scotland has established an ambitious and progressive framework for addressing GBV. However, these commitments cannot be delivered equitably if rural realities remain marginal within policy design, funding, and service provision.

This brief has shown that rurality is not simply a backdrop to GBV. It shapes access to safety, support, and justice through distance, limited services, economic constraints, social visibility, and wider rural inequalities. When these conditions are not recognised, “one-size-fits-all” responses risk reproducing unequal outcomes for victim-survivors in rural and island communities.

Delivering the ambitions of ***Equally Safe*** requires more than national commitment. It requires rural-proofed policy, sustainable specialist provision, and coordinated place-based responses that reflect how rural life shapes both experiences of abuse and access to support. Ensuring equitable access to safety, support, and justice for victim-survivors across Scotland means treating rurality as central to GBV policy and practice, not as a peripheral concern.