# A Primary Prevention Response to Scotland's Programme for Government 2026 – 2031



ZERO TOLERANCE

November 2026

We welcome the Scottish Government's new Programme for Government and its emphasis on the primary prevention of men's violence against women and girls. It is encouraging to see a strong alignment between aspects of the Programme for Government and our manifesto ahead of the Scottish Parliamentary Election 2026: Safe, Equal Free: A manifesto for an equal Scotland free from men's violence against women and girls.

As the First Minister recognises in his foreword to the Programme, "We cannot eradicate violence against women and girls without addressing women's inequality" (Scottish Government, 2026c). This is the foundation of primary prevention, and the commitments must be delivered with this root cause in mind.

However, not all of our recommendations were actioned in the Programme, and these glaring gaps risk allowing the epidemic of violence against women and girls in Scotland to continue to escalate.

This report responds to the Scottish Government's commitments to preventing men's violence against women and girls and sets out how we can effectively build a Scotland where women and girls thrive.

"We cannot eradicate violence against women and girls without addressing women's inequality"

**(Scottish Government, 2026c).**



# What is men's violence against women and girls?



Men's violence against women and girls is violent and abusive behaviour enacted by men, directed at women and girls because they are women and girls. This violence is physical and psychological and takes many forms, including stalking, sexual crimes, and domestic abuse, and it takes place in-person and online. These behaviours are an abuse of power and stem from systemic, deep-rooted gender inequality. It causes human suffering, limits the lives of women and girls, and is a fundamental violation of human rights.

## Men's violence against women and girls in Scotland

This violence occurs in every community across Scotland. In the last 10 years, Police Scotland have recorded a 45% increase in sexual crimes and over a 10% increase in domestic abuse incidents (Scottish Government, 2016; Scottish Government, 2025; Scottish Government, 2026a).

The majority of incidents of domestic abuse in Scotland (over 80%) involve a female victim and a male suspected perpetrator — the suspected perpetrator being a partner or ex-partner (Scottish Government, 2026a).

Most victim-survivors of men's violence against women and girls know their perpetrators; in 2025-26, more than two thirds of female homicide victims in Scotland were killed by a partner or ex-partner (Scottish Government, 2026b).

Men are most likely to harm women at home. In Scotland, nearly 90% of domestic abuse incidents, almost 75% of homicides, and more than a third of sexual abuse incidents occur in the home (Rape Crisis Scotland, 2022; Scottish Government 2026a; Scottish Government, 2026b).

**It doesn't need to be this way. Men's violence against women and girls is preventable.**

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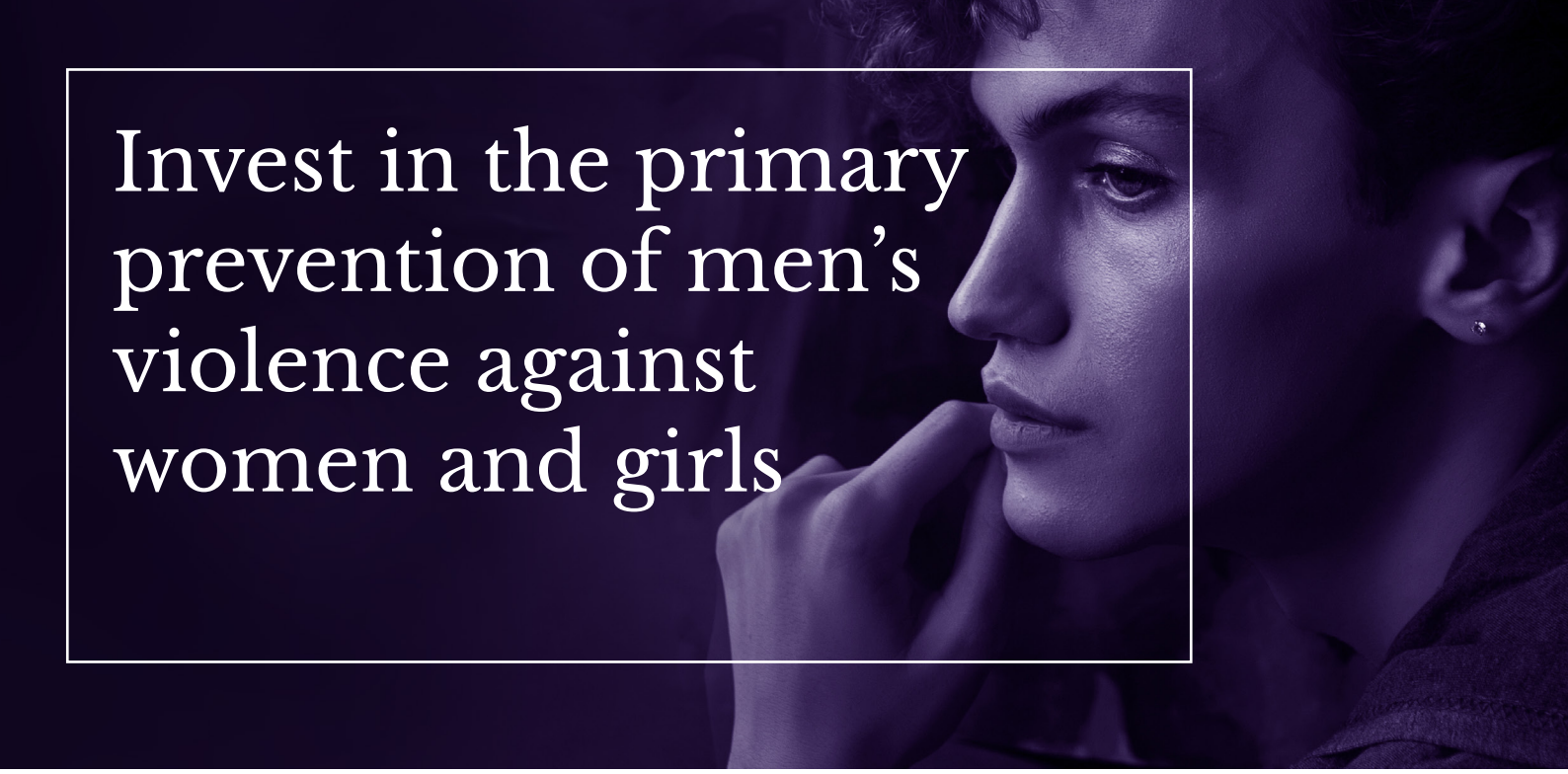

# Invest in the primary prevention of men's violence against women and girls

## Response

We are very encouraged by the Programme for Government commitment to the 'Equally Safe primary prevention framework'. Alongside the Improvement Service, COSLA, Scottish Women's Budget Group, Public Health Scotland, and the Scottish Government, Zero Tolerance co-produced this guidance on adopting a public health approach to preventing men's violence against women and girls. We also welcome the Programme commitment to funding for specialist third sector support services. However, we are deeply concerned about the lack of commitment to ringfenced funding for primary prevention, and the lack of mention of funding for expert women's sector organisations that are not service providers, such as Zero Tolerance.

Zero Tolerance is Scotland's expert organisation for the primary prevention of men's violence against women and girls, and we address the root cause at a national level leading on the development and implementation of primary prevention public policy. Research across 70 countries over four decades found that strong, autonomous feminist movements are what drive

governments to adopt comprehensive policies on violence against women (Htun & Weldon, 2012). The Scottish Government has international obligations to involve relevant human rights organisations in the implementation of policies, measures and programmes to prevent violence against women and girls, and to recognise, encourage, support, and allocate financial resources to such organisations (Council of Europe, 2011, Articles 7-9).

For primary prevention to be effective, investment is needed in expert-led, holistic, long-term prevention activity that tackles the root cause and multiple drivers of men's violence and misogyny at all levels of our society.

## Recommendation

We ask the Scottish Government to sustainably fund primary prevention and the expert women's sector, and to meaningfully consult with us on action that concerns women's rights, to ensure policy and legislation truly create a better Scotland where women and girls are free from men's violence.

**Research across 70 countries over four decades found that strong, autonomous feminist movements are what drive governments to adopt comprehensive policies on violence against women**

(Htun & Weldon, 2012)



# Expert-led public prevention campaigns

## Response

We strongly welcome the Programme for Government commitment to “a sustained multi-year public health campaign to address attitudes towards misogyny and VAWG”.

Evidence shows public campaigns help to prevent men’s violence against women and girls when they are long-term, expert-led, and part of a wider, multi-component prevention approach — rather than standalone (Kerr-Wilson et al., 2020; Nevens et al., 2021). To be effective, these campaigns must be long-term, expert-led, and evidence-based, with robust and transparent evaluation processes.

The UK and Scotland have obligations under the Istanbul Convention to run regular awareness-raising campaigns on all forms of violence covered by the Convention with the cooperation of women's organisations (Council of Europe, 2011, Article 13). The Programme itself commits to taking action "in line with our Equally Safe approach and the Istanbul Convention" (Scottish Government, 2026c).

We commend the Scottish Government on its recent campaign on online misogyny, which targeted young men and boys and was informed by our expert consultation. To fulfil our international obligations, the Scottish Government must ensure that future campaigns cover all forms of men's violence against women and girls and are widely disseminated among the general public (Council of Europe, 2011, Article 13).

## Recommendation

We recommend that the Scottish Government's forthcoming public prevention campaigns target adult men of all ages and extends beyond online misogyny to centre multiple forms of men's violence against women and girls.

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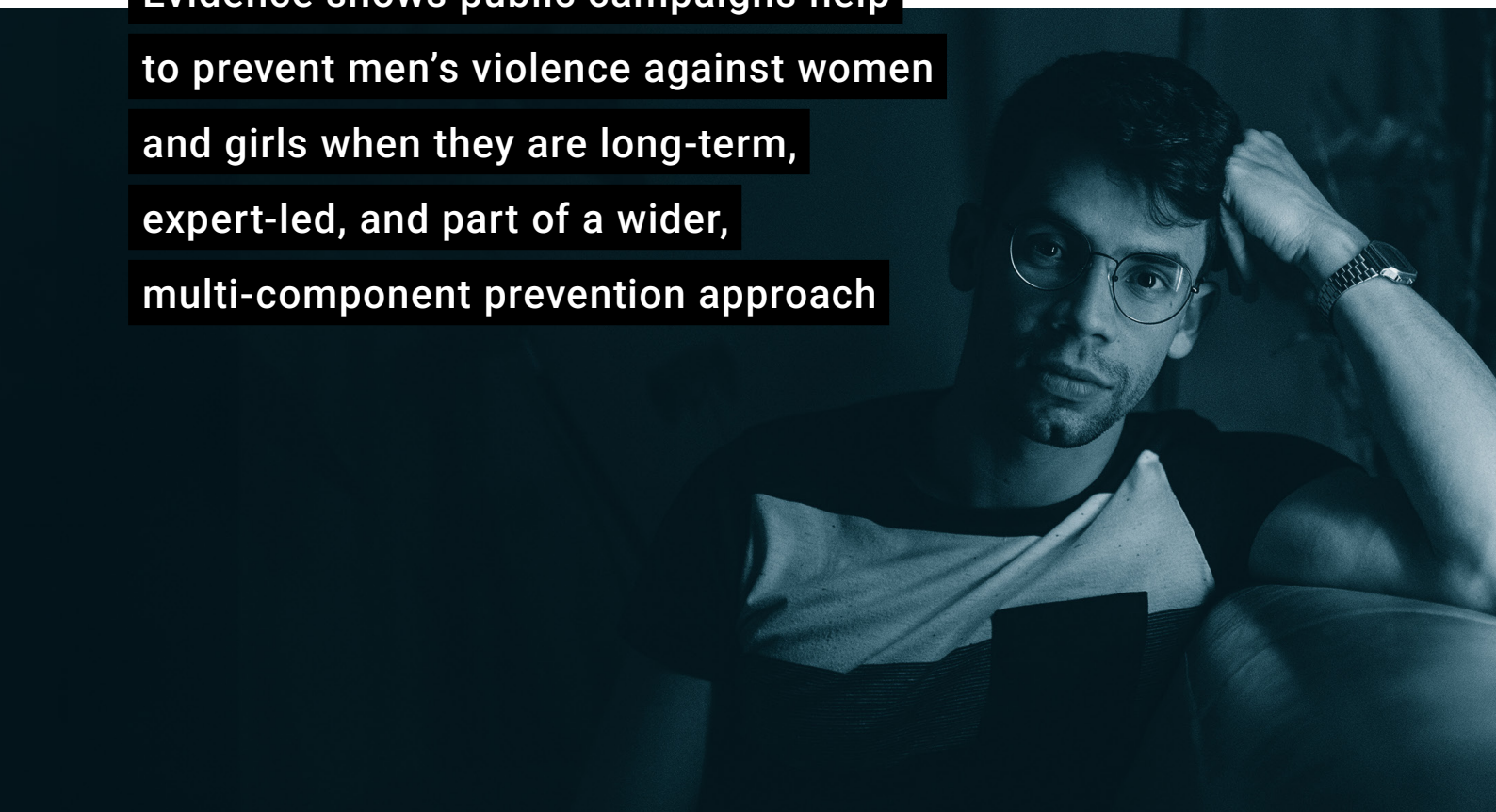



# Community prevention programmes for men and boys

## Response

We value the commitment made in this programme to “invest in targeted interventions to challenge and change problematic misogynistic attitudes and behaviour in boys and young men”.

Research shows that specialist local community interventions for men and boys on gender stereotyping can help to prevent violence against women and girls when they are gender-transformative, long-term, and well designed (Jewkes, Flood & Lang, 2015; Kerr-Wilson et al., 2020). Gender-transformative interventions critically examine and challenge harmful masculine norms while promoting positive, ethical alternatives, and encourage men and boys to question learned assumptions about gender (Casey et al., 2018; Jewkes, Flood & Lang, 2015).

The UK and Scotland have obligations under the Istanbul Convention to promote gender equality and non-stereotyped gender roles beyond formal education, including in informal education, sports, cultural and leisure settings, and the media (Council of Europe, 2011, Article 14).

## Recommendation

We recommend that expert-led primary prevention interventions for men and boys be locally available to all ages and specifically designed to support men and boys to live outside of the life-limiting confines of gender-stereotypes.

**local community interventions for men and boys on gender stereotyping can help to prevent violence against women and girls**





# Statutory education on relationships and sex within a whole school approach

## Response

It is encouraging that the new programme features continued commitment to school-based initiatives that Zero Tolerance contributed to; such as the Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning, the Gender Based Violence in Schools framework, the Mentors in Violence Prevention programme, and Equally Safe at School. However, we are deeply concerned about the glaring gap in consideration for statutory relationships, sexual health and parenthood education (RSHPE).

Schools are a critical site for the protection of children and young people and present the best opportunity to challenge attitudes which condone abuse and transform the long-term likelihood of abuse in adult relationships (EVAW, 2023). A whole school approach addresses the needs of pupils, staff, and the wider community across the entire school environment — from the curriculum or learning environment to addressing the school's

physical environment. A whole school approach considers what actions are taken to prevent men's violence against women and girls and ensure safety for both students and staff (EVAW, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024).

It is well-established that accurate, inclusive, and consistent RSHPE, embedded within a whole-school approach, works to prevent men's violence against women and girls. Because RSHP education is not compulsory, local areas have discretion over what is taught and when, and provision is patchy, so not all pupils in Scotland receive this crucial education (NSPCC, 2025). This results in us failing to teach some of the most marginalised and at-risk pupils about healthy relationships and sexual health, including LGBTQIA+ and disabled pupils, pupils who live rurally, and pupils of all faith backgrounds.

## Recommendation

We recommend statutory education on sex and relationships that is evidence-based, inclusive, consistent, and applied within a whole school approach to ensure that all children and young people in Scotland are empowered to make safe choices, form meaningful connections, and are equally safe.

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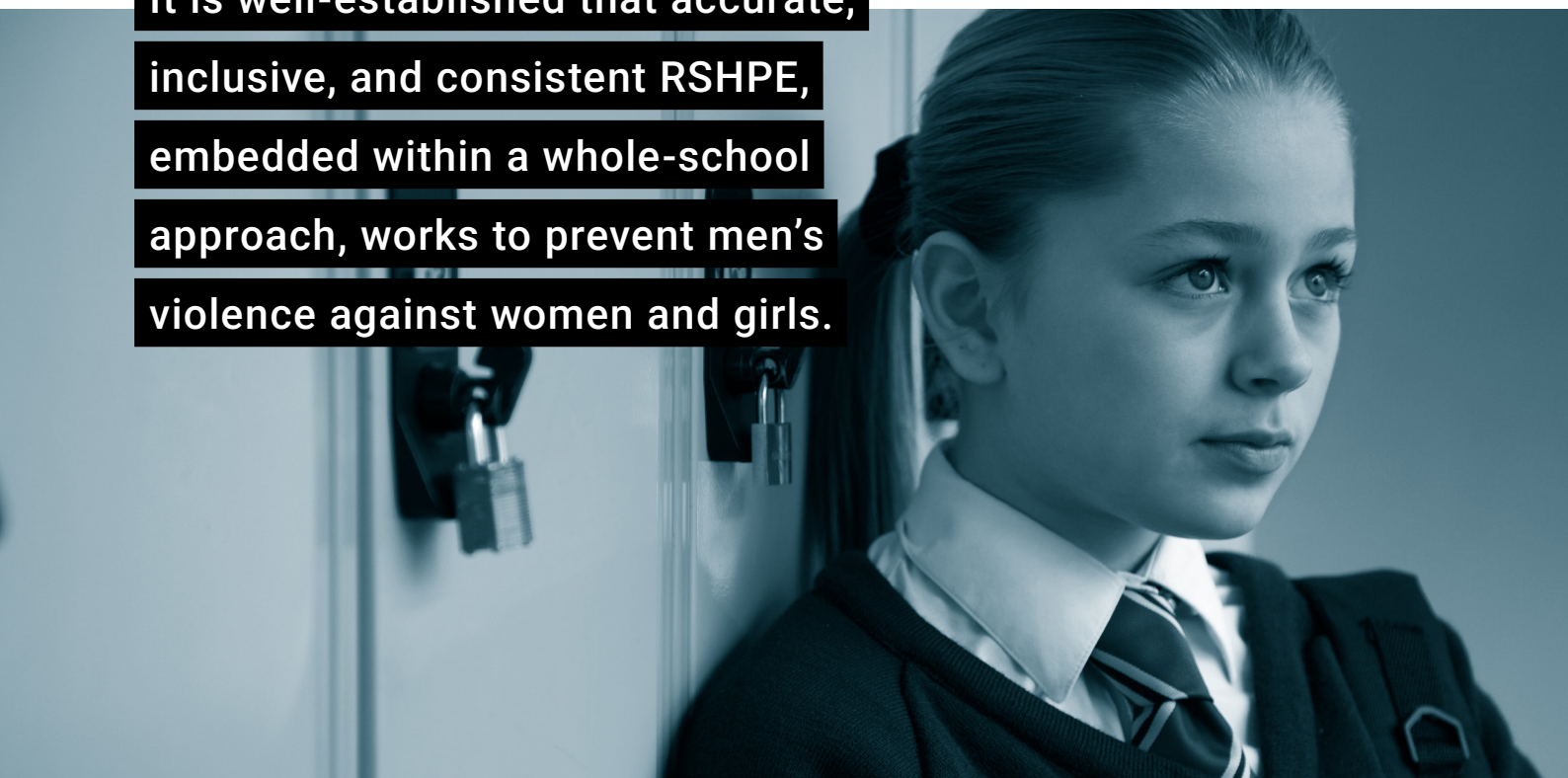




# Follow through on delayed primary prevention legislation

## Response

Zero Tolerance has successfully worked with the Scottish Government on several legislative primary prevention initiatives, such as the Misogyny Bill and the Human Rights Bill, which are celebrated internationally as best practice. While we welcome the Programme's commitment to the long-standing Misogyny Bill and Human Rights Bill, promises mean little without follow-through.

Despite the campaigning of over 100 civil society organisations in Scotland, including Zero Tolerance, Scottish Government delays to bringing the Human Rights Bill to Parliament persist. Scotland has international obligations under the Istanbul Convention and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to take the necessary legislative measures to eradicate all forms of men's violence against women and girls (Council of Europe, 2011, Article 14; CEDAW, 2019, paragraph 30). CEDAW is fundamental to the rights of women and girls and the Human Rights Bill acts as the legal pipeline to fully and directly

incorporate CEDAW into Scots Law. Without the Human Rights Bill, some pervasive forms of discrimination against women, such as men's violence against women and girls, are allowed to be normalised and perpetrated without consequences in Scotland.

Over several years of consultation between the Scottish Government and the expert women's sector in Scotland, we have made clear that there are gaps in the law where egregious misogynistic harassment is not criminalised (Engender, 2019). As a result of our sector's consultation, the Scottish Government commissioned significant independent research into the potential of a standalone offence, which recommended that the Scottish Government creates a specific piece of legislation — the new Misogyny and Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act (Scottish Government, 2022a). The Scottish Government agreed "that these recommendations represent a new and necessary departure, in that they specify women and girls as requiring specific protection of the criminal law and are pivotal in challenging society's tolerance of misogyny." (Scottish Government, 2022b).

Far-right social and political groups campaigning to reverse the Scottish Government's commitments to the Misogyny Bill and Human Rights Bill are threatening preventative legislation that would otherwise help eradicate violence against women and girls. In delaying the Misogyny Bill and Human Rights Bill, the Scottish Government have undermined the safety of women and girls in Scotland — we have waited long enough.

## Recommendation

We recommend bringing the Misogyny Bill and Human Rights Bill to Parliament swiftly and robustly, implementing the recommendations of Baroness Kennedy and incorporating CEDAW into Scots Law, so that violence against women and girls in Scotland is prevented through evidence-based legislative approaches.



# Regulate digital technology and online platforms

We welcome commitment in the new programme to "work with UK and international partners to seek the regulation of online platforms to prevent violence against women and girls that happens online". We also welcome the commitments to "Develop an approach to technology-facilitated VAWG" and to ensure the public health approach to online safety "contains a clear focus on the different harms experienced by boys and girls" (Scottish Government, 2026c).

Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls is any violence against women and girls that is committed, assisted, aggravated, or amplified using a digital tool (UNDIR, n.d.). This violence can take many forms – from inequitable access to technology and nonconsensual surveillance to the creation and sharing of sexualized deepfakes and coordinated campaigns of gendered disinformation (UNFPA, 2025).

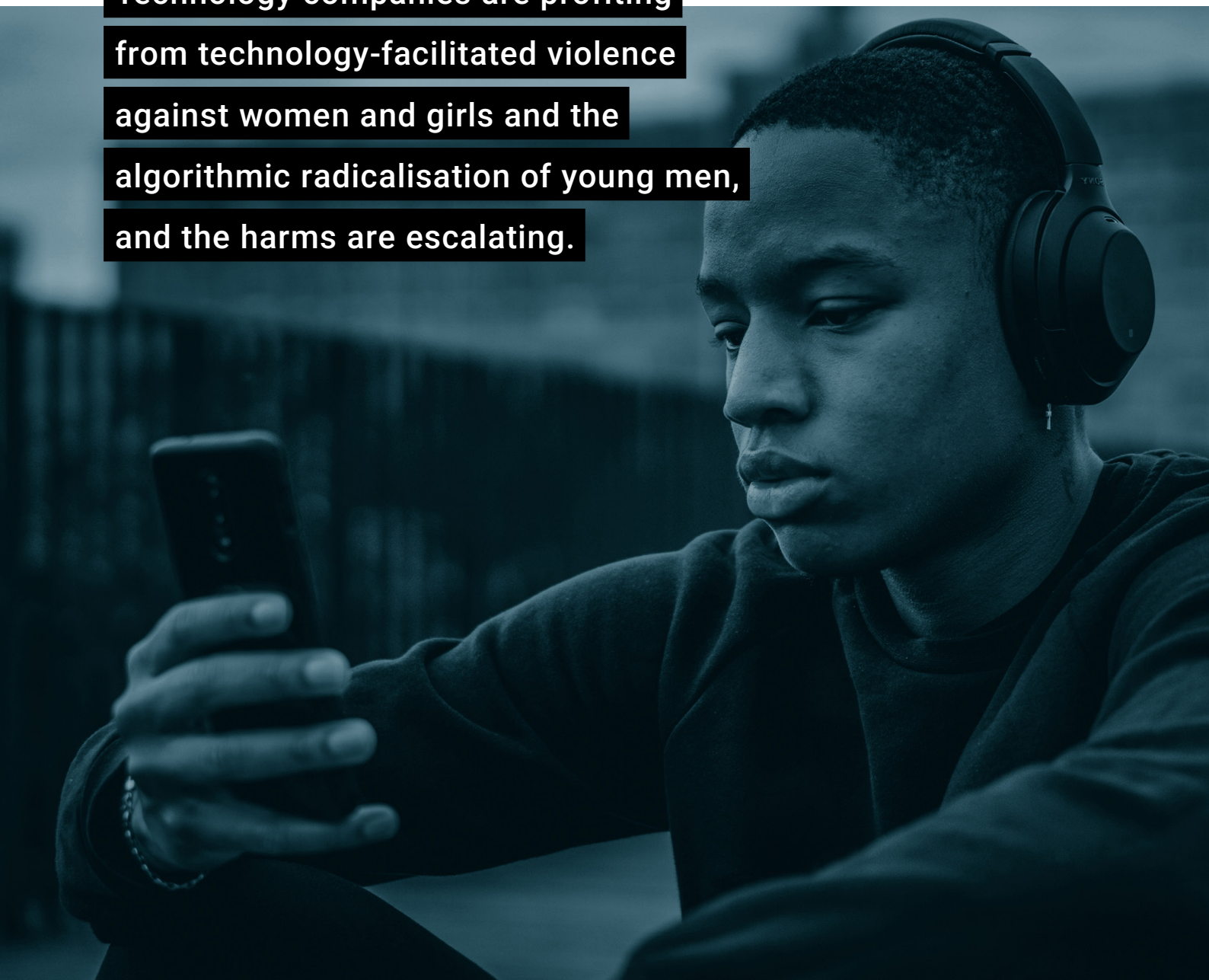
Technology companies are profiting from technology-facilitated violence against women and girls and the algorithmic radicalisation of young men, and the harms are escalating. Research demonstrates that to prevent tech-facilitated violence

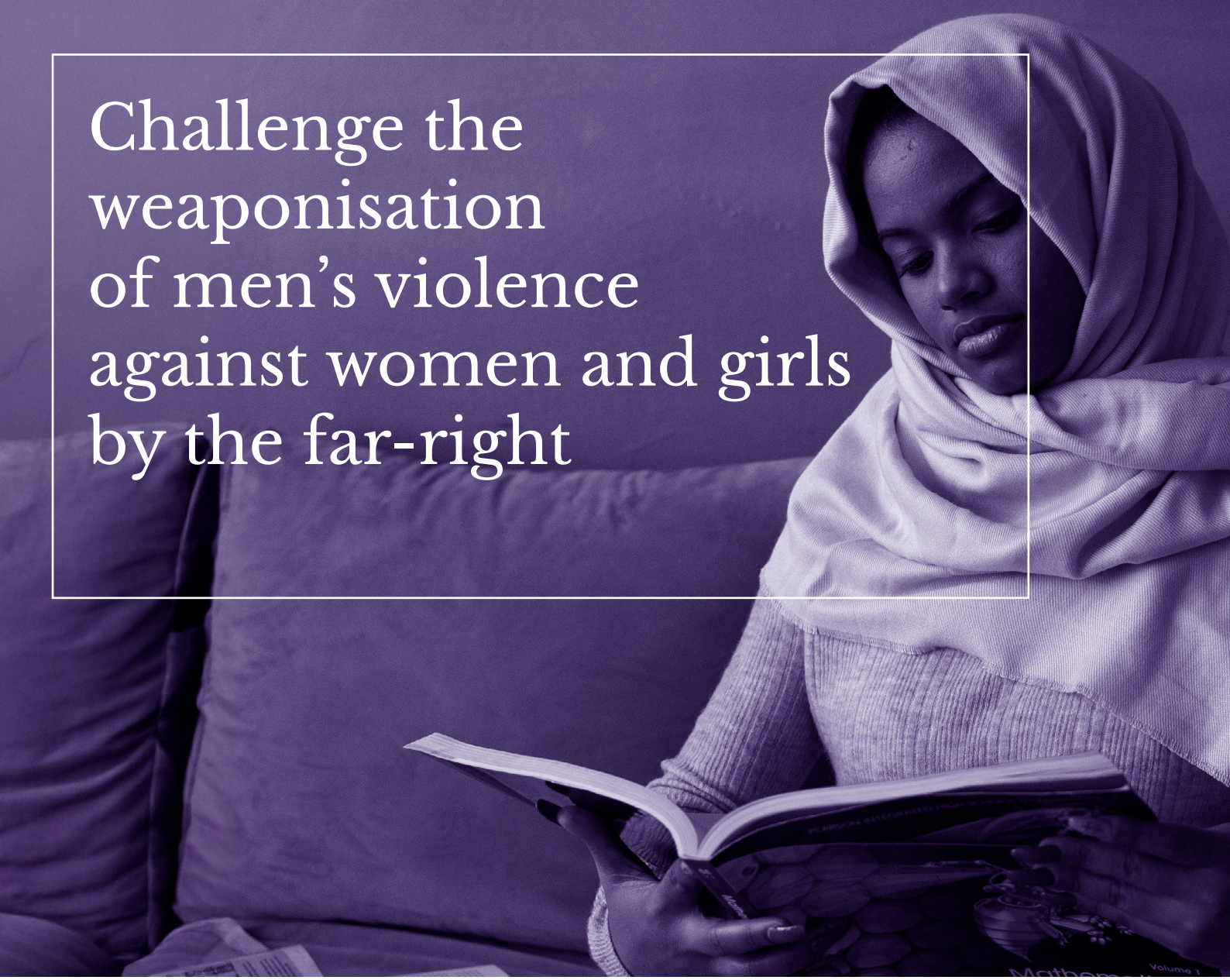
against women and girls, increased government regulation is needed, and regulators should be bolder in the action they require tech platforms to take to prevent harm (Livingstone, 2025).

## Recommendation

We recommend working with UK and international partners to increase the regulation of digital technology and online platforms and be bolder with the action that tech companies are required to take to build safety into design and prevent technology-facilitated violence against women and girls.

**Technology companies are profiting from technology-facilitated violence against women and girls and the algorithmic radicalisation of young men, and the harms are escalating.**





# Challenge the weaponisation of men's violence against women and girls by the far-right

## Response

We are encouraged by the programme commitment to "stand up" to those "who aim to stoke division, hatred, and harm — often directed squarely at the most marginalised groups and falsely claiming to protect women and girls".

Violence against women and girls is caused by gender inequality. The weaponisation of men's violence against women and girls is a tactic used by those who oppose women's rights to distort the public's understanding of what the cause of this violence is. It is done by co-opting concern about women's safety to wrongly

position minorities – specifically Muslim, refugee, ethnic minority, and transgender people – as the 'real threat' to women and girls (Zero Tolerance, 2026a). The use of this tactic opposes Equally Safe's strides towards impactful prevention; risks neglecting our commitment to the Istanbul Convention; and may ultimately lead to us failing to realise women and girls' human rights.

By rejecting this false and divisive messaging, we can continue effective progress to ending men's violence against women and girls and building cohesive communities.

## Recommendation

We recommend challenging the weaponisation of violence against women and girls in spaces of influence by reasserting the evidence base that underpins primary prevention and showing solidarity to those most affected.





# Increase the age of marriage and civil partnership

## Response

We are disappointed that the programme makes no mention of increasing the age of marriage and civil partnership in Scotland, despite the expert consultation responses of ourselves, the expert women's sector, and children's rights charities. In this Scottish Government consultation, response analysis demonstrates that 68% of those who answered agreed that the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership should be raised to 18 (Scottish Government, 2026d).

Child marriage is currently legal in Scotland. The United Nations considers child marriage as a form of forced marriage and defines it as any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age (UN ESCWA, n.d.). UNICEF describes marriage before the age of 18 as "a fundamental violation of human rights" (UNICEF, n.d.). Increasing the age of marriage to 18 is an evidenced primary prevention approach as it removes the legal and normative framework that allows child marriage to occur. England and Wales (since 2023)

and the Republic of Ireland (since 2019) have set the minimum age of marriage at 18 without exception, Northern Ireland is currently legislating to do the same, and we are lagging sorely behind.

By raising the legal age of marriage, we can support girls to live free from violence, grow up with dignity, and access opportunities to develop their full potential.

## Recommendation

We recommend raising the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership to 18 without exception as this strengthens women and children's rights and removes the legal framework that allows child marriage and forced marriage to happen in Scotland.

**68%**

**of those who answered agreed that the minimum age of marriage and civil partnership should be raised to**

**18**

# Decriminalise abortion in Scotland



## Response

Zero Tolerance is a steering group member for the Let's change the Act campaign, which calls for the full decriminalisation of abortion in Scotland and modernisation of the law. We are deeply concerned that the Programme for Government does not address reproductive rights.

Under current Scottish law, women have no legal right to end a pregnancy, and abortion-related offences continue to be investigated and prosecuted in Scotland: there have been at least 11 charges for crimes related to abortion this century, most recently in 2023-24 (Engender, 2024). The full decriminalisation of abortion is a crucial component of any serious primary prevention strategy, because both issues are rooted in the same gendered power imbalance. A society that does not trust women to make decisions about their own bodies and health is a society that produces the conditions in which men's violence against women thrives.

## Recommendation

We recommend the full decriminalisation of abortion and for the Abortion Act 1967 to be replaced with a modernised, health-based framework as a crucial component of Scotland's primary prevention strategy so that women can make their own decisions about their lives.



# Uphold existing laws that protect pregnant women from violence

## Response

We are alarmed that the programme includes a commitment to recognise pregnancy as an aggravating factor in domestic abuse cases, as this is a position that Scotland's expert women's sector has opposed in recent government consultation (Zero Tolerance, 2026b).

Legal analysis has found that existing criminal law in Scotland sufficiently covers offences committed against pregnant women by a partner or ex-partner (Engender, 2024). Under Scots law, the fetus is not a separate person with legal rights, and the introduction of such an aggravation could become a 'foot in the door' for fetal personhood in the law. Such legal status would undermine women's rights to health, reproductive autonomy, and a wide range of other human rights.

## Recommendation

We recommend that the Scottish Government commits to upholding existing laws that protect pregnant women from violence, instead of introducing a statutory aggravation in relation to domestic abuse offences committed against pregnant women.



# Conclusion

Zero Tolerance is Scotland's expert organisation on the primary prevention of men's violence against women and girls. Primary prevention is a long-term strategy to prevent violence before it starts by addressing the root cause: gender inequality.

By transforming the attitudes, behaviours, and structures that create an environment for this violence to flourish, we can instead cultivate respect, equality, and freedom from violence to create a Scotland where everyone can thrive.

We have built our expertise in primary prevention through over 30 years of experience grounded in feminist theory and practice, a robust evidence-base and well-established international approaches.

We welcome opportunities to support the Scottish Government to translate the Programme for Government's ambitions into practical actions that will eradicate men's violence against women and girls in Scotland.

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