

Disability Commissioner (Scotland) Bill

Response by Zero Tolerance for the Scottish Government, 17 May 2024

Introduction

Zero Tolerance is Scotland's expert organisation focusing on the primary prevention of men's violence against women and girls (VAWG) by tackling the root cause: gender inequality. Eradicating VAWG is essential to building a successful, inclusive, safe, well, kind and equal Scotland. Weaving gender equality into the everyday fabric of Scottish life is a central component of primary prevention of VAWG, and realising the human rights of women and girls is a key way to make gender equality a reality. We are particularly concerned with ensuring prevention efforts are inclusive of and tailored to the needs of disabled women, who face disproportionate rates of violence and abuse (Balderston, 2013; SafeLives, 2017).

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Questions

8. What are your views on the main proposal of the Bill, to establish a Disability Commissioner for Scotland?

Zero Tolerance strongly supports the establishment of a Disability Commissioner for Scotland. Research consistently shows that disabled women experience higher rates of gender-based violence than non-disabled women, in ways that are often specific to their impairments and society's ableist response (Balderston, 2013; SafeLives, 2017; Zero Tolerance, forthcoming). A dedicated Commissioner is vital to drive the systemic changes needed to tackle the root causes of this abuse: systemic ableism and gender inequality which exclude disabled women from power. Disabled women are doubly marginalised by these systems, leaving them further vulnerable to abuse.

We support and agree with the general functions laid out for the Commissioner. It is essential for the prevention of VAWG that the inherent rights of disabled women are understood and promoted across Scottish society. The establishment of a Commissioner is an important opportunity to highlight the disproportional rates of violence disabled women face, and how sexism, misogyny, and ableism intersect to reinforce the multiple forms of discrimination faced by disabled women.

A new Commissioner must champion a prevention of VAWG agenda by challenging ableist and gender stereotypes which have significant impact on the lives of disabled women. The abuse and violence that disabled women experience is not inevitable. However, ableist and misogynistic stereotypes common across individual, practitioner, and structural levels both enable and reinforce violence. For example, participants in Zero Tolerance's research stated that perpetrators use gender stereotypes about disabled women to justify their abuse (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 16). Several participants who required partner support for providing childcare or doing household tasks were made to feel 'less than' and 'useless' by perpetrators. Broader cultural change focused on the prevention of VAWG is sorely needed and the Commissioner can play a part in this by challenging dangerous attitudes and stereotypes.

Moreover, as well as enabling violence, gender and ableist stereotypes prevent women from seeking support when violence has happened (Shah et al., 2016; Zero Tolerance, forthcoming). To promote and safeguard the rights of disabled women,

attention must be given to ensuring disabled women have fair and equal access to support services which treat them with respect and dignity.

Whilst Zero Tolerance strongly supports the establishment of a Disability Commissioner for Scotland, it is vital gender competence is a core requirement of the role. As the Policy Memorandum for the Bill states, women are more likely than men to be disabled in Scotland (NACWG, 2017). Disabled women are also twice as likely to experience violence during their lifetimes as non-disabled women (Engender, 2018). Gender competence is therefore a necessary requirement for the Commissioner to challenge the intersection of sexism and ableism that impact the lives of disabled women across Scotland. If the Commissioner is to promote and safeguard the rights of disabled people, they must understand the impact of multiple forms of discrimination on disabled people, including sexism and misogyny. To prevent violence against disabled women and girls, its root causes - sexism and ableism - must be addressed.

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9. What is your awareness of other commissions or bodies that exist to promote and protect your rights?

This question is beyond the scope of Zero Tolerance to answer.

10. What are your views on the proposal to use the definition of disability to set out in the Equality Act 2010 – a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on that person's ability to carry out normal day to day activities.

Zero Tolerance supports using the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability, as it encompasses a wide range of physical, mental, neurodevelopmental and sensory impairments. This inclusive definition is important to ensure the Commissioner's work addresses the diverse forms of violence experienced by disabled women.

Zero Tolerance's forthcoming report on disabled women's experiences of violence emphasises the need for the Commissioner to apply an intersectional gender lens to all disabilities. Disabled women's experiences of violence in our research were inherently caused by the intersection of sexism and ableism (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming). This finding is supportive of research done in other areas showing how society's sexist and ableist attitudes discriminate against disabled women and limit their ability to participate in society (Breckenridge, 2018; Chenoweth, 1997; Engender, 2018; Thiara et al. 2011). An inclusive definition enables the Commissioner to

examine how different impairments intersect with gender and other intersecting inequalities to help shape prevention opportunities.

However, we believe this role should also be embedded in ‘an understanding of the social model of disability, seeking to deliver change in how disabled people are included in and by society, rather than a medical model treating disabilities as something to be personally overcome’ (The Alliance, 2022, p. 2). Disabled people are disabled by the barriers that society has put in place which prevent their full and equal inclusion (Inclusion Scotland, n.d.). The Commissioner’s role must address these barriers.

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11. What are your views on the proposal for the commissioner to have regard to the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and to encourage and observe equal opportunities requirements.

Zero Tolerance strongly agrees that the Commissioner should have regard to the UNCRPD and equal opportunities requirements. VAWG is a fundamental human rights violation rooted in gender inequality and misogyny. To prevent this, the Commissioner must uphold disabled women's rights to non-discrimination, safety, equal participation and access to justice under international law. Disabled women's particular needs must remain at the forefront. The Commissioner must recognise the diversity of disabled people and ensure that the needs of disabled women are not lost to homogenising approaches.

Participants in Zero Tolerance's forthcoming research stated how structural inequalities, such as inaccessible housing, social care, and healthcare, amplified their vulnerability to abuse by limiting their autonomy and entrenching disadvantage (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, pp. 29-32). Centring the UNCRPD would empower the Commissioner to drive accountability for upholding disabled women's full spectrum of rights as key to prevention.

We also support the Commissioner's capacity to encourage others to have regard for relevant provisions within the UNCRPD. It is a key goal of this role to promote understanding around the rights of disabled people, especially by service providers. In forthcoming research by Zero Tolerance, participants highlighted how they often felt failed by the state, and its services and institutions (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 29). Our research participants felt that key services such as housing, criminal justice, social work, and the NHS, ignore their rights and discriminate against them. This leaves them vulnerable to violence and abuse, which they experience at higher

rates than disabled men because of gender inequality (Hager, 2023). The establishment of a Commissioner presents an opportunity to highlight the rights of disabled women and encourage key services to improve their service provision by tackling prevalent ableist and sexist attitudes.

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12. What do you think about the Commissioner's powers as set out in the Bill?

Zero Tolerance wholeheartedly agrees with the Commissioner's mandate to promote awareness and understanding of the rights of disabled people. However, this power must be used to address the unacceptably high rates of violence against disabled women as a top priority. 1 in 2 disabled women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, and they face additional forms of abuse related to their disability (SafeLives, 2017). To tackle the root causes of violence against women and girls, the Commissioner must have a role in challenging ableist and sexist attitudes which condone and enable violence. Specific functions to drive primary prevention of VAWG through attitude and behaviour change, research, policy advocacy, and service improvement are essential.

In addition, to successfully promote and safeguard the rights of disabled people, the Commissioner must advocate for the rights and empowerment of **all** disabled women. This means having an intersectional approach to advocacy work, understanding how multiple forms of discrimination work to impact the lives of disabled women. For example, trans and non-binary people experience gender-based abuse in ways that are specific to their trans identities (SafeLives, 2021; STA, 2010). Disabled trans and non-binary participants in our research experienced gender-based

violence at the intersection of ableism, misogyny, and transphobia (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 17). These forms of discrimination cannot be separated, and amplified their experiences of abuse. It is therefore critical that the new Commissioner can navigate this landscape, understanding how ableism intersects with other gender-based forms of discrimination.

Disabled women face multiple barriers to their sexual and reproductive rights (Hague et al., 2011; Shakespeare, 2014; Thiara et al., 2011; Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 18). As Engender (2018) note, it is often assumed that disabled women and girls do not need access to sexual or reproductive health education or services. This makes it difficult for disabled women to make informed decisions about their bodies and rights (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 18). This is in violation of multiple UN human rights treaties but particularly Article 25 of the CRPD and Article 16 of CEDAW (Engender, 2018). It is vital the Commissioner lead on rectifying these issues which violate disabled women's human rights and put them at further risk of abuse (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 18).

The Commissioner should also have a defined role in promoting accessible housing, inclusive education, fair employment and social security to build disabled women's resources and address their socioeconomic disadvantage. Participants in Zero Tolerance's forthcoming research reported how structural inequalities rooted in ableism, such as inadequate benefits and insecure work, trapped them in poverty and abusive relationships (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, pp. 25-26). Duties to champion disabled women's socio-economic rights are fundamental to a comprehensive prevention agenda.

Zero Tolerance welcomes the proposed powers for the Commissioner, particularly to conduct investigations into how service providers and public bodies are upholding disabled people's rights. This investigative function is crucial to identifying and reforming institutional failures that enable abuse.

Participants in Zero Tolerance's forthcoming report highlighted their experience of pervasive barriers in accessing services and support, including ableist and sexist attitudes which discredit victim-survivors and result in poor police responses (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 34). Ableism and gender inequality are prevalent across

all levels of society: individual, practitioner, and structural, which allow and enable violence against disabled women and girls (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 5). Powers to investigate and issue recommendations would enable the Commissioner to address discrimination across services and wider society - securing disabled women's equal right to safety and redress.

The Commissioner would have the power to review policy related to the rights of disabled people. There is currently no consideration to the needs of learning-disabled women and girls in the Scottish Government's Equally Safe strategy (SHRC, 2023, p. 29). Women with learning disabilities are more likely to experience violence than their disabled peers (Wiseman and Watson, 2021). Globally, 90% of women with learning disabilities have been subject to sexual abuse, with 68% experiencing sexual abuse before they are 18 (OHCHR, 2017). There is opportunity here for the Commissioner to improve the intersectionality of key VAWG prevention work, by pushing for the explicit inclusion of all disabled women in Scotland's primary VAWG prevention strategy.

There is currently limited research into disabled women's experiences of VAWG in Scotland, therefore delaying prevention and intervention initiatives (Meyer et al., 2020). The Commissioner's powers to undertake research on matters related to disabled people must be used to address this gap in understanding and create effective solutions.

There is also urgent need to investigate and highlight the severe lack of accessible services and refuges for disabled women fleeing violence. Zero Tolerance's research participants stated that they often saw services such as social work as risky to approach due to ableist narratives around disabled women's capacity to provide care for their children (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 16). Due to the fear or experience of children being removed, disabled mothers in our research were reluctant to go to these services for help when they were experiencing domestic abuse. One participant stated:

"I'd had a friend who did exactly the same thing [phoned social services], who had similar conditions to me, and she did, her kids

were taken off of her because she was deemed an unfit mother because she had a dirty house” (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 17).

The Commissioner should drive change in this area by promoting specialised and inclusive prevention training for service providers to challenge ableist and sexist attitudes which can alienate women from services they need. This education should be co-designed with disabled women and focus on disabled women’s rights and how services can ensure they are adhered to.

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13. What do you think of the proposed power to undertake investigations of service providers to ask how they have given effect to the rights, views, interests of disabled people in general or an individual disabled person. This power to investigate will be limited to devolved matters.

The investigative powers are a strength of the proposed Commissioner, as they create crucial levers for reform. Zero Tolerance's forthcoming report supports existing evidence that ableist attitudes and discrimination in service settings, from education to healthcare to justice, create environments where abuse of disabled women is condoned and perpetuated (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2015; Chakraborti and Hardy, 2017; Scope, 2018; Wiseman and Watson, 2021; Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, pp.15-16). Powers to examine organisational practice through a disability-inclusion lens are vital to cultural change.

We welcome the scope for individual investigations where systemic issues are identified. Zero Tolerance's forthcoming report emphasises the importance of centring disabled women's lived experiences to inform prevention solutions (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 39). Enabling the Commissioner to investigate individual cases would ensure proposed reforms are grounded in survivors' voices and the realities of service delivery.

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14. What do you think of the proposals to:

- **encourage the involvement of disabled people in the Commissioner's work**
- **use inclusive communication to enable the fullest involvement**

Involving disabled people, particularly disabled women, should be embedded throughout the Commissioner's work and not limited to consultation. Zero Tolerance's forthcoming report stresses that policies and practices designed without disabled women often fail to meet their needs and can perpetuate marginalisation (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming). To be effective, prevention efforts must be co-designed with disabled women as equal partners, centring lived experience.

We recommend establishing permanent structures for collaboration, such as a disabled women's advisory group to inform the Commissioner's priorities and programs. Meaningful involvement requires dedicated resources.

Inclusive, accessible communication is essential for participation. Participants in Zero Tolerance's forthcoming report stated how it is difficult to get important information (letters, bills, complaints procedures) in accessible formats (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 30). The Commissioner must champion best practices like Easy Read formats, British Sign Language interpretation, and trauma-informed facilitation to enable full inclusion. Disabled people's organisations, particularly those with specialist gender expertise, are key partners in this endeavour.

References

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15. Do you think there might be any unintended consequences as a result of the Bill's proposals?

One potential unintended consequence could be the perception that a Disability Commissioner absolves other bodies of their responsibilities to uphold disabled

people's rights and prevent abuse. It will be important to position the Commissioner as part of a wider infrastructure working collaboratively to drive change. Clear partnership agreements and public communications can manage expectations and reinforce collective responsibility.

Another risk is that the Commissioner's work is siloed from broader VAWG prevention and gender equality efforts. Zero Tolerance's forthcoming report underscores the intersectional nature of violence against disabled women therefore necessitating an integrated approach (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming). The Commissioner must actively collaborate with VAWG and equalities related teams within the Scottish Government, third sector women and disability organisations, and other equality bodies to ensure alignment and coordination. Joint initiatives and cross-cutting strategies can model intersectional practice.

References

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16. Do you have any other comments on the Bill?

The Disability Commissioner has transformative potential to prevent and eradicate violence against disabled women, girls, and non-binary people in Scotland. To realise this potential, we recommend:

- Enshrining a gendered, intersectional approach in the Commissioner's statutory function and strategic plan. This should include explicit duties to address the disproportionate violence experienced by disabled women, challenge ableism and sexism, and collaborate with feminist and anti-racism movements.
- Protecting the Commissioner's independence through direct accountability to Parliament. In recruiting the Commissioner, transparent recruitment procedures that prioritise representation of disabled women with lived experience of abuse are needed. It is crucial for the Disability Commissioner to maintain their independence, integrity, and ability to create meaningful

change for disabled people. The role is to promote and protect the rights of disabled people, which requires an impartial approach.

- Allocating sufficient resources for the Commissioner to fulfil an expansive prevention mandate. This should cover research, education, training, advocacy, service coordination, and strategic litigation. Investing early in primary prevention will yield long-term social and fiscal benefits (García-Moreno et al., 2015; Michau et al., 2015). However, to ensure coordination, this work must be in close collaboration with VAWG and gender experts both within the Scottish Government and externally.
- Authorising the Commissioner to conduct own-initiative inquiries and intervene to participate in legal cases as a "friend of the court." This involves providing information or arguments to assist the court in making a decision, without being a party to the case itself. So, if there was a court case involving the rights of a disabled woman who had experienced violence, the Commissioner could submit evidence or legal opinions to help the court understand the broader issues at stake and make a ruling that upholds disabled women's rights. This is a way for the Commissioner to influence the development of the law and ensure disabled people's perspectives are considered in important cases.

Zero Tolerance's forthcoming report provides recommendations that could form the Commissioner's priorities in relation to tackling violence against disabled women. It emphasises the urgent need to promote comprehensive primary prevention, including inclusive prevention education, advocacy, and structural reforms that empower disabled women (Zero Tolerance, forthcoming, p. 25). By actioning these recommendations from the outset, the Commissioner can make swift progress towards a Scotland where disabled women live free from violence and enjoy full equality.

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About Us

Zero Tolerance is a Scottish charity working for a Scotland free from all men's violence against women by tackling its root cause: gender inequality.

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