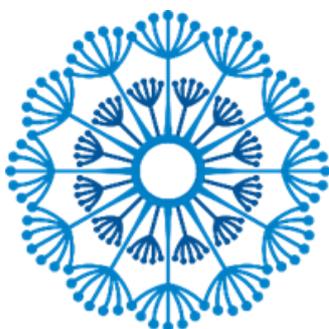
The background of the entire page is a light blue illustration of dandelion seed heads. Some are fully formed and attached to their stems, while others are shown as individual seeds floating in the air. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

THE VOICES OF WOMEN IN SHETLAND

SWA SURVEY REPORT FOR 2025/2026



**Shetland
Women's Aid**

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MESSAGE FROM SHETLAND WOMEN'S AID

We want to thank every woman who took the time to share her experiences through our *Women in Shetland* survey. Speaking about harm, fear, or discrimination is never easy – particularly in a small, interconnected community. We recognise the courage this takes, and we do not take your trust in us lightly.

This report reflects what women in Shetland have told us they are living with right now. Some describe strong community ties and positive experiences. Others describe violence, control, and the long-term impacts of trauma. Many describe both. Together, these responses show that while progress has been made, responsibility for women's safety and wellbeing remains unevenly shared across the community.

We publish these findings so that women's voices can be heard. It is important to our organisation that women's voices are not dismissed and are not minimised. Meaningful change requires collective responsibility and measurable action – and it begins with listening.

CONTENT NOTE

This report includes discussions of gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, coercive control, sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination. Some readers may find this content distressing.

If you are affected by any of the issues raised in this report, support information is provided at the end of this document. You are not alone, and specialist support is available.

All quotes included in this report have been anonymised to protect the privacy and safety of participants. Identifying details have been removed, and care has been taken to ensure individuals cannot be identified from their responses.

INTRODUCTION

Each year during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (25 November – 10 December), Shetland Women's Aid invites women living in Shetland to share their experiences, views, and priorities through the *Women in Shetland* survey. This survey does not seek to measure crime rates or track trends over time. Instead, it creates space for women to speak openly about what life feels like right now – what works, what doesn't, and what needs to change.

The 2025 survey continues to centre women's lived experiences, while asking more detailed questions about gender-based violence (GBV), access to support, and interactions with local services. Responses reflect a wide range of realities. Some women describe feeling safe, supported, and able to thrive in Shetland. Others describe fear, harm, and the long-term impacts of violence, often experienced quietly and without support. Many describe holding both of these truths at once.

These experiences are shaped by Shetland's unique context as a small, interconnected island community. Close social networks, strong reputational ties, and limited anonymity can be sources of belonging and support, but they can also make it more difficult to speak out, seek help, or challenge harmful behaviour. Geography does not create misogyny or violence, but it can intensify the impact of both.

Across the survey findings, a clear pattern emerges. Women describe Shetland as both safe and unsafe; progressive and resistant to change; supportive and silencing. These cultural tensions sit at the heart of our findings.

This report reflects what women are choosing to share at this point in time – not simply to prove a problem exists, but to make it clear that sustainable change is required if Shetland is to be a place where all women are truly safe, supported, and believed.

“I have spoken to some people about this survey, who have questioned the need for it. I just want to say that I really appreciate the opportunity to talk about issues relating to women. It doesn't mean that men don't have issues too. For too long, women have been made to feel that we should appreciate what we have. I like that there's room for ambition to always do better, and this survey gives me hope. Thank you.”

Copy of poster distributed around Shetland, advertising the survey.

 Shetland Violence Against Women Children & Young People Partnership

 Shetland Women's Aid

WOMEN IN SHETLAND

SHARE YOUR VIEWS

Shetland Women's Aid are conducting our annual Women's Survey to gather insights into the key issues, challenges, and strengths experienced by women in Shetland. The survey will be live during this year's 16 Days of Activism (25th Nov - 10th Dec 2025).

Findings will be shared with the Shetland Violence Against Women, Children & Young People Partnership (SVAWCYP) to help improve specialist services for those affected by gender-based violence. We will also share relevant insights with local partner organisations to support wider equality and prevention work across Shetland.

The survey is completely anonymous and is a valuable opportunity to share your views, concerns and suggestions with local decision-makers.

Deadline: Midnight on 10th Dec 2025.

 16 Days of Activism



SCAN FOR SURVEY

 **YOUR VOICE MATTERS**

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The *Women in Shetland* survey was created by Shetland Women's Aid to ensure that women's voices and lived experiences directly inform local decision-making. The findings contribute to the work of the Shetland Violence Against Women, Children, and Young People Partnership (SVAWCYP), supporting partners across statutory and third-sector services to better understand women's needs, experiences, and priorities in Shetland.

The survey was open to all women living in Shetland and was distributed online during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (25 November – 10 December 2025). It was shared through Shetland Women's Aid's networks, social media channels, partner organisations, and community groups, in order to reach women with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were not required to answer every question and were able to share as much or as little detail as they were comfortable with. The survey included quantitative questions alongside open-ended responses, recognising that women's experiences cannot be fully captured through statistics alone.

Gender-based violence (GBV) was defined as "*domestic abuse (including coercive control), sexual violence, harassment, stalking, honour-based abuse, or any other form of harm experienced because you are a woman.*" All references to GBV in this report align with this definition.

KEY FIGURES AND FINDINGS

Respondents were not required to answer every question. Percentages are based on the number of women who answered each individual question.

- **116 women responded to the survey** during the 16-day survey period.
- **60 women (53% of respondents) reported experiencing discrimination in Shetland as a result of being a woman.** 49 reported they had not, and 7 chose not to answer.
- **66 women (57% of respondents) reported being affected by gender-based violence in Shetland.** 48 stated they had not, and 2 chose not to answer.
- 38 women said that they received support for gender-based violence in Shetland. This means that **around 58% of those who indicated they were affected by GBV in Shetland did not receive any support.**
- 16 women said that they chose to report their experience to the police. This means that **over 75% of those who indicated they were affected by GBV in Shetland chose not to report to the police.**
- Of the 116 respondents, 108 women answered at least one qualitative, open-ended question, giving detailed feedback on their experiences of life in Shetland.

Behind every statistic is a woman with a lived experience. While these figures provide important context, they cannot capture the full complexity of women's lives in Shetland.

WHERE COMMUNITY FEELS LIKE STRENGTH

Throughout the survey, many women spoke about the love they feel for Shetland. Any honest reflection on the challenges women face here must first recognise the strengths of the place they call home. For many, this is not simply where they live – it is where they were raised, where they are raising families of their own, and where they feel rooted and secure.

“I feel very lucky to be a woman in Shetland.”

Safety was a strong theme throughout the survey, particularly when women were asked about the benefits of living in Shetland. Respondents frequently compared island life to experiences on the mainland, describing a sense of ease in their everyday lives. One woman said, *“We live in a relatively low-crime environment which compared to other parts of the UK makes me feel generally safe day to day.”* Women spoke about walking home alone at night without fear, about allowing children greater independence, and about the comfort that comes from familiar surroundings.

“I love Shetland and, in many ways, we are safer than being south. I think many women feel safer walking home alone here than south. But doesn't mean we are safe in all ways, and we still have a long way to go.”

“It does feel safe to live here, and generally speaking, crime rates are low. There are wide open spaces and instant access to the outdoors, without the fear of having your safety compromised by a stranger.”

For many, this sense of safety is not abstract. It is woven into ordinary routines; walking through town after dark, leaving doors unlocked, moving through public spaces without the heightened vigilance that many women living elsewhere might describe. One respondent wrote, *“streets are safer, rural areas feel very safe and I don't even bother to lock my door during the day”*, and these sentiments were echoed throughout the responses received.

“I feel safe. I can walk on deserted hills and beaches with EarPods in.”

Women were also clear about the value they place on the access to nature that the islands allow. The landscape itself was described as a source of calm and freedom. The ability to walk alone on hills and beaches, to find quiet places without scrutiny, and to experience space without crowding was repeatedly referenced as something deeply positive about living here. When asked about the benefits of living in Shetland, one respondent simply said, *“freedom, open space, fresh air”*, and many reiterated this.

“Getting out into nature and having serenity places to walk peacefully and enjoy the scenery and meditate in complete silence, away from the busy world. So many locations available for a peaceful walk on your own.”

“I also feel much safer walking around or exploring nature on my own than I ever did on the mainland and there’s a sense of freedom in that.”

Alongside the freedom to spend time alone safely, the theme of community was particularly strong in the responses received. Shetland was often described as “close-knit”, with women highlighting the ease of connection and the vast array of social opportunities available across the islands.

“Community is a challenge but also a huge positive too. People look out for one another here. Folk are very generous with their time and money, and tend to want to help others.”

Respondents spoke at length about the power of informal support networks, about neighbours looking out for one another, and about the comfort of knowing the people living around you. One respondent wrote, *“Living in a smaller community means people often help each other, and you can form close relationships and feel part of something meaningful.”* This was reaffirmed by other women throughout the responses.

“Because the community is smaller, it feels easier to connect with people and build supportive relationships when things are good”.

“There is a strong sense of community here, and that can create real potential for women to organise, support one another, and push for meaningful change.”

“Because the population is smaller and connections are tighter, it sometimes feels more realistic to influence local culture, challenge harmful norms, and build networks of solidarity.”

Many women spoke with pride about the strength of the other women in their lives, this sense of solidarity, and a *“brilliant community of women supporting each other”*. One woman said that there are *“very supportive communities and groups for women to be involved with”* and many more referenced the variety of women-only leisure spaces available locally, including at the Shetland Recreational Trust and Haar Sauna.

“Women now have a voice a Shetland”

“I’m beginning to hear empowered whispers.”

There was a clear recognition of strong female role models, of women supporting women in both formal and informal spaces, and of a growing willingness to speak openly about the issues affecting women and girls in Shetland today. On the benefits of living here, some responses were brief but emphatic. One respondent simply wrote, *“strong female women”*, while another stated, *“other women is a positive”*.

“I’d lik tae start by acknowledging dat wir midders, grandmidders and idders cam through a lot tae help wis hae a better life noo. I think da groundin in croftin and fishin industry helped wis be who we are as a community o women today, alangside havin influxes o women wi e.g. Unst RAF or oil-industry helped connect wis wi da world beyond da horizon. Noo, dirs women in leadership roles, great role models in music, sport, arts and entertainment, and a feelin o empowerment and support.”

“As a menopausal grandmother, and a professional woman, I feel a huge responsibility to use my privilege of age, wisdom and experience to encourage others. [I will] set an example for the women and girls

coming behind, give them permission to own their bodies and keep themselves safe."

Taken together, these reflections paint a picture of a place where many women feel safe and connected. Where community feels like strength. Yet even with this strength, respondents spoke about the tensions that come with living in an island community where the reality of women's safety can be layered and, at times, hidden from view.

"The community can be supportive, but there's still a big gap in recognising the quieter, more hidden ways women struggle - especially around safety, confidence, and asking for help to protect ourselves and our children from emotional harm."

"Within certain circles, there is a real sense of community. It feels more and more like "feminist" isn't a dirty word, and you can find likeminded people. Generally, it feels safe here - but that is very subjective and really depends on how you define safe."

EXPERIENCES AND IMPACT OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

EXPLICIT VIOLENCE AND THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

While many women described their community as safe, the survey responses reveal a more difficult reality. Shetland is not exempt from misogyny or from the prevalence of explicit violence against women and girls. As one woman put it, *"I don't think enough people understand that Shetland is no exception when it comes to gender-based violence."* This notion that *"it happens here too"* and *"there's a lot of people who still think GBV doesn't exist"* was emphasised throughout the findings.

"I think there's a misunderstanding that Shetland is safe and we have no issues when that's not the case. In fact, it's often worse here as people don't talk about it and brush it under the carpet."

"There is a common belief that Shetland is already equal because it feels safe in public, and that GBV is more of a "mainland problem."

Throughout the survey findings were dozens of accounts of coercive control, sexual violence, domestic abuse, and sustained harassment. What emerges in this report is not a contradiction of Shetlanders' pride and affection for the isles, but a more complex picture of how violence against women and girls is understood and experienced here.

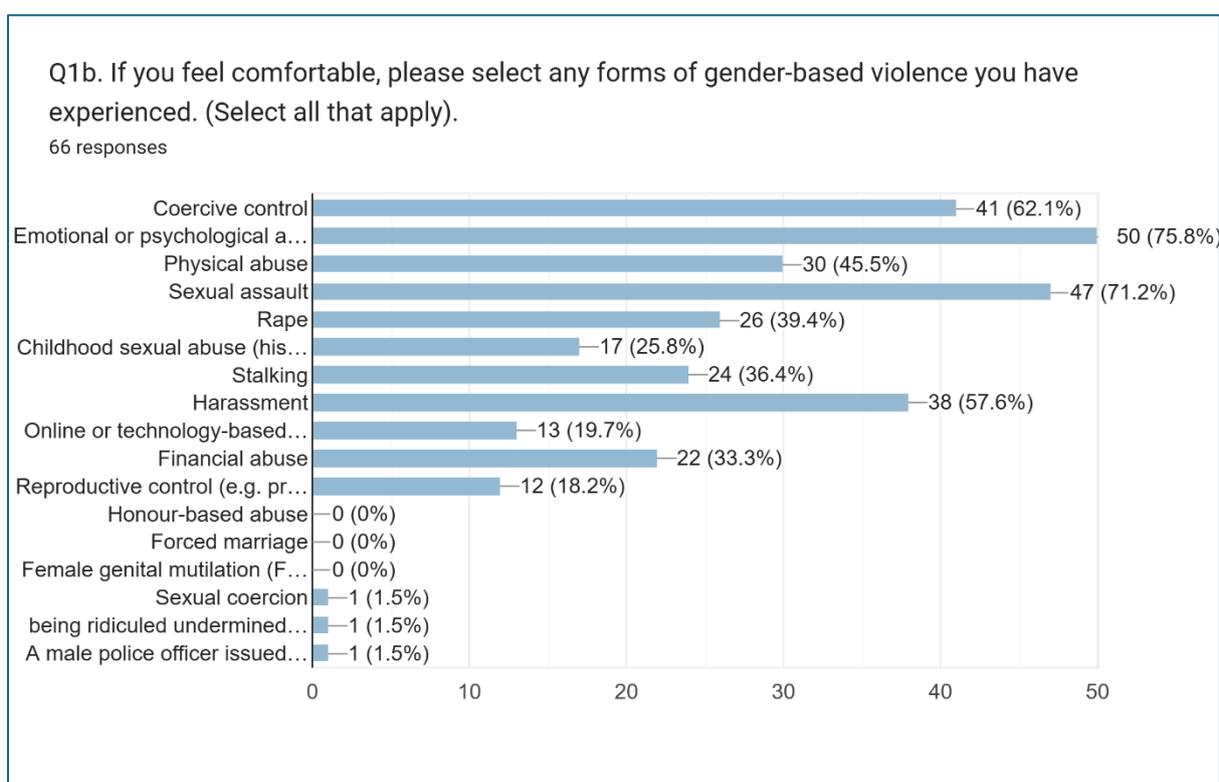
This report centres women's experiences, and it is important to acknowledge that gender-based violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women and girls. This pattern is reflected both nationally and in the responses to this survey. In a small island community, where social networks are close and histories are shared, this reality can feel complicated to acknowledge.

Many women spoke about the harm they have experienced here, with numerous responses stating, *"I can't count the amount of times I've been sexually abused in Shetland"* and emphasising that GBV in all forms is prevalent here, from a young age and well into adulthood.

"I've been assaulted by many men over decades to one degree or another. I didn't even realise I'd been raped until I was in my 30s as I hadn't understood consent"

"I've lived abroad and various other places in the UK, Shetland is by far the worst for sexual violence, in my experience."

Our survey did not ask women to disclose their direct experiences of gender-based violence in detail. Instead, we asked those who have been affected by GBV to indicate, if they felt comfortable to do so, any forms of violence they have experienced from a list available.



Among the women who reported being affected by gender-based violence in Shetland, over half indicated that they had experienced emotional or psychological abuse, sexual assault, coercive control, and harassment. Over a third indicated that they have experienced physical abuse, rape, stalking, and financial abuse.

It is important to understand these figures can only account for those who felt able to name the violence perpetrated against them. In the array of qualitative responses received throughout the survey, women spoke of how

normalised these behaviours can be, making it difficult to label their experiences as gender-based violence explicitly.

"It's hard to pinpoint specific examples - not because it doesn't happen, but because it's so normalised."

"So much of what I have experienced is part of the norm for women. If every woman in Shetland reported everything that happened to them (from inappropriate touching on nights out, to coerced sex) then the police would be overwhelmed - they'd be dealing with half the population."

"Controlling or aggressive behaviour are dismissed as "normal" rather than signs of domestic abuse"

There was also acknowledgement from those who had not been affected by GBV directly, but understood that many of their friends, relatives, and acquaintances have. Respondents repeatedly articulated the idea that most people in Shetland either know a victim, or a perpetrator, of abuse without always realising it.

"As a community, we need to finally admit that GBV is happening all around us: you either know a victim or a perpetrator."

"Besides never experiencing physical, sexual or mental abuse myself, I know far too many women who have. Most have been the victim of a family member."

"Child sexual abuse is kept secret in too many families"

Women spoke about harm that takes place in private spaces, within relationships, in workplaces, in pubs, and in familiar social settings. These experiences were not abstract. Some were described as ongoing, some historic, however, in many cases, life-altering.

Beyond the immediate incidences of violence, many women reflected on the longer-term effects of holding trauma in their bodies and their lives. These impacts were not always visible to others, but were described as

shaping daily functioning, confidence, health, and the ability to form positive relationships. One woman summed this up by saying, *"it's impossible to move on and live a happy nurtured lifestyle while you carry such trauma"*. Others spoke about isolating themselves from their community in order to cope and choosing to keep their experiences to themselves in order to function day-to-day.

"My body was in complete disarray from holding it all in and bottling it all up. My physical ailments due to stress and trauma caused autoimmune diseases."

"My body had held onto trauma."

"I can't trust anyone now, so I just keep myself to myself."

"You end up trying to cope with fear, exhaustion, and no peace, because you feel like nobody will take it seriously unless there's visible violence."

Many women acknowledged that, instead of turning to professional support, they developed stereotypically *"unhealthy"* coping mechanisms. In response to what needs to change, one respondent said that our community needs to be *"brutally honest about da amount of crimes against women and girls and how trauma and neglect can lead to addiction issues"*, and many went on to say that substance use was a key factor in self-managing the effects of abuse.

"Before I had my child I didn't care about my own health and used drink and drugs to numb the pain and put on a smile."

"When I spoke up about sexual abuse, I was blamed for misusing substances to cope"

"Maybe instead o reachin for support, in da past I reached to more harmful behaviours rather than support - e.g. substance abuse, food issues, self-loathing, risk-taking."

THE EVERYDAY CONTINUUM OF MISOGYNY

The survey findings suggest that violence against women and girls does not exist in isolation. It exists on a continuum. While some experiences disclosed are explicit and undeniably criminal, others are woven into the fabric of daily life in Shetland. Inappropriate comments, sexualised “banter”, and the casual dismissal of consent may not always be labelled as violence, yet they reinforce the same power dynamics that allow more overt abuse to take root and persist.

“General banter that is clearly sexism that is allowed and encouraged in spaces which makes women feel unsafe.”

“Women’s experiences in community life would improve massively if harassment and misogyny were taken seriously in the spaces where they most often happen (pubs, clubs, community events, workplaces, and male-dominated social circles). Too much is brushed off as “banter,” even when women are made uncomfortable, unsafe, or excluded.”

When asked about discrimination in Shetland, one woman said, *“I have experienced discrimination too many times to count, that it really doesn’t seem noteworthy”*. She went on to describe in detail her experience of working in male-dominated environments. *“I was ogled over, and had my body and clothes scrutinised on a daily basis. It was so normalised, that it would have felt risky to say anything.”* Dozens more respondents described similar incidents of *“low-level sexism”* that became something they were expected to tolerate.

“[I have] been groped, spoken over, told to smile, interrupted.”

“When I was younger, I experienced a lot of sexism at work, but it was just normal and I only think of it as discrimination in hindsight.”

“Misogyny is so engrained into Shetland culture that it almost doesn’t feel like a challenge faced by women – it’s just how it is. Being touched without consent on a night out, being spoken over in meetings, having to be polite and palatable to avoid confrontation, being called “too

emotional" or "bossy" or "bitchy", being expected to take on caregiving and peace-making roles in social situations. I think it would be hard to find a woman in Shetland who hasn't learned to shrink themselves a little bit, just to get by."

Throughout the survey women spoke about Shetland's drinking culture, and unwanted sexual behaviours and harassment on nights out being a particularly strong issue. Many women value Shetland's social life and sense of celebration. However, for some, these spaces are also where boundaries are most frequently tested. Pubs and social events were framed as spaces where inappropriate touching, persistent advances, and sexualised comments are treated as expected parts of the environment rather than behaviours that warrant concern.

"In town, I've been groped in bars, worried about being spiked, and watched bouncers joke around with men everyone knows are unsafe. Young girls are already learning to accept feeling uncomfortable in places that are supposed to be safe and fun, and that's not right."

"I feel like Shetland has a massive drinking culture and that's where a lot of the assaults happen."

On nights out, many women described feeling that they had to *"brush it off"*, laugh it away, or remove themselves quietly in order to avoid escalation. What is striking in these accounts is not only the behaviour itself, but the extent to which it has been normalised. Serious incidents were described as something that *"just happens"* at the weekend. Alcohol was frequently cited as an excuse, and responsibility subtly shifted back onto women to manage their own safety – to leave early, stay with friends, dress differently, or avoid certain spaces altogether.

"Sexual harassment in pubs is common, and women do not feel bouncers or staff will step in. When I was sexually assaulted, I was told to calm down, compromise, communicate better instead of being protected. I found out the man who had hurt me that night had targeted several other young girls and had even raped women before."

"We were told that being sexually assaulted was an accepted part of going out and probably our own fault. Don't wear that, don't say this, don't drink, don't eat, don't be too loud, don't say a word, have self - respect, keep secrets."

"Shetland's alcohol culture doesn't help- I feel it can reinforce a lack of accountability for harmful behaviours 'they were drunk, they didn't know what they were doing' kind of attitudes..."

Overall, these accounts of everyday sexism point to something cumulative. While any single comment, touch, or dismissive remark might be minimised in isolation, together they create an environment in which women learn to adjust their behaviour, lower their expectations, and tolerate what should never be considered normal. As one woman put it, *"Misogyny is just Shetland's culture."*

Respondents reflected that misogyny is not confined to physical spaces. A number of women raised concerns about the influence of social media and harmful online content, particularly in relation to young people in Shetland. They described classroom environments where sexist language or extreme views about women were repeated from online sources and expressed unease about the growing visibility of incel ideology and other forms of digital misogyny, raising issues of child protection.

"The old-fashioned accepted discrimination is now being reinforced by modern right-wing ideals and misogynistic online influence."

"I feel like the older generation are still living with these sexist views about women even if they just joke about it. They're quite behind. But I do feel that the younger generation are catching up but it's still needing a lot of work. Especially with the rise of sexism movements online like the incel movement etc"

"The rise of misogyny among boys and young men, fuelled by online incel culture, is becoming visible in schools and youth spaces."

While these trends are not unique to Shetland and reflect wider national and global shifts in online culture, women were clear that their impact is felt

locally - shaping attitudes, reinforcing hostility toward women, and influencing how young people understand gender roles and relationships. For some, this digital influence adds another layer to the continuum; misogyny is not only normalised in social settings but increasingly amplified in online spaces that reach into everyday life.

Taken together, these experiences of misogyny reveal not only individual behaviours, but a wider pattern of gender inequality that shapes women's access to health, safety, and opportunity in Shetland.

THE WIDER LANDSCAPE OF GENDER INEQUALITY

While this survey included specific questions about gender-based violence, women did not speak only about violence. Given the opportunity to describe life as a woman more broadly, many spoke about the quieter structural inequalities that shape everyday life in Shetland. Respondents repeatedly raised issues relating to healthcare, childcare, employment, and gendered expectations within local institutions. These reflections are not always recognised as violence; however, they form part of the broader landscape of inequality that affects women's safety, wellbeing, and opportunity. These broader inequalities were often described as normalised within island life.

"Women's suffering and inequality is so engrained in all of us, that people just don't see it as anything other than normal."

"Being in a rural and remote location can make things like healthcare, childcare, and career development more difficult."

WOMEN'S HEALTH

On healthcare in the islands, many women did acknowledge the positive aspects of provision in Shetland. Respondents clearly noted the sexual health clinic as a good example, and described compassionate individual practitioners, relatively accessible GP services, and a strong sense of community care.

"I have received excellent health care from both the sexual health clinic and my local GP, including trauma-informed smear tests and contraception appointments."

However, alongside these positive experiences, a significant number of women described feeling dismissed, patronised, or minimised when seeking support for their health. In particular, women's pain, reproductive health concerns, and wellbeing related to the effects of menopause were repeatedly described as not being taken seriously. Several women specifically noted having to travel to the mainland for childbirth as another difficulty of living in a remote island community, describing the emotional, financial, and logistical strain this can create.

"I feel healthcare for women in Shetland isn't taken too seriously most of the time. I've been at the doctors a few times this past year with pains and other problems. I was told every time it's probably something to do with my period - in the end it wasn't."

"While I haven't experienced this personally, women's healthcare in Shetland can be an issue. I know ALOT of women who have had to fight for their diagnoses (endometriosis and PCOS) as they weren't taken seriously or properly investigated but this is a nationwide problem, not Shetland specific"

"I've been branded a "difficult woman" often especially in medical matters when I've pushed for help with PMDD and adenomyosis and have had no help or acknowledgment by any local health care professionals, it has been quite frankly traumatic all the responses I've had when asking for help"

Just as women described the long-term impact of trauma on their bodies, many also spoke about the difficulty of being believed when seeking medical support. While some respondents noted that these challenges are not unique to Shetland, they nevertheless shape women's experiences locally, particularly in a context where access to specialist services can require travel beyond the islands.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF CHILDCARE

Across these responses, a consistent theme emerges - women often feel that they must advocate forcefully for their own health in order to be heard. The same can be said in regard to motherhood. Many women spoke about the realities of childcare and caregiving responsibilities, and how these shape their choices, opportunities, and financial independence. While family networks can be a strength in Shetland, formal childcare provision and flexibility were repeatedly raised as challenges.

Several respondents reflected the issue that domestic responsibilities and *"childcare tends to fall disproportionately on women"*. Some reasoned that this was down to the gendered expectations of who is responsible for looking

after children, pointing out that things may look different if men were considered equally responsible for looking after children.

“I also see women around me taking the majority of responsibility for childcare, parenting etc. I see women taking huge career breaks to have kids, but very rarely men.”

For women with caring responsibilities, childcare provision and flexibility were described as central to decisions about work and financial independence.

THE INTERSECTION OF MOTHERHOOD AND EMPLOYMENT

For many respondents, the realities of childcare did not sit separately from employment; they shaped it. Decisions about working hours, career progression, training opportunities and financial stability were frequently described as being influenced, and limited, by caregiving responsibilities.

“My jobs are stereotypical for women (social care, childcare, etc.) and are quite low paid. I have always had to work multiple jobs to fit around childcare and my partner's full-time job. I almost don't see of it as a challenge, but just the way it's always been. I think a lot of women are in similar positions.”

While Shetland offers strong community networks, the lack of flexible childcare provision and affordable choices, particularly outside of Lerwick, was repeatedly identified as a barrier to women's full participation in the workforce. One woman spoke in detail about limited childminding options, saying *“this directly affects a women's ability to work full-time/career progression.”*

Several women reflected that motherhood continues to carry professional consequences. Questions about future plans for children, assumptions about availability, and traditional gender expectations were described as shaping how women are perceived in recruitment, promotion, and leadership spaces.

“[I’ve] been asked in multiple interviews and conversations if I plan on/have any children because that will limit what I can do and if it fits with what they are looking for”

“There can also be a sense of traditional gender expectations still influencing work, roles, and how women are perceived. At times, it can feel isolating, especially if you don’t fit into typical community norms.”

Taken together, these reflections highlight how gender inequality is not confined to individual incidents but embedded within everyday structures. From healthcare appointments to childcare provision and workplace expectations, women described navigating systems that were not always designed with their realities in mind. While many spoke with pride about community strengths, there was a clear sense that progress requires a more explicit recognition of how gendered expectations continue to shape opportunity in Shetland.

“I feel there is a ‘traditional’ mindset present where there are particular expectations placed on women to be caregivers and homemakers. These roles are heavy (and of course highly rewarding), however when this becomes a default choice for women then there is no actual choice. This is not freedom. This outdated mindset is limiting for women and harmful for not just the women directly involved but the whole community.”

GENDERED EXPECTATIONS AND CULTURAL NORMS

Alongside the structural issues raised in healthcare, childcare, and employment, many women reflected on the deeper cultural expectations that continue to shape life in Shetland. These expectations were not always described as hostile or overtly discriminatory. More often, they were framed as traditions, habits, or *“just the way things are”*.

Yet respondents repeatedly pointed to the ways in which women are expected to nurture and accommodate others, despite facing risk of harm, while men are more often positioned as *“the head of the household”* and leaders of public celebrations. One woman noted the difference in how men and women are perceived by describing, *“being called emotional or bossy”*

when men are celebrated as confident.” Another said simply, “The double standards of gender expectations wear you down”.

“I think it can be a challenge just to be taken seriously - in social settings, in work/business, family etc.”

“Generally, men and women are held to different standards in the community.”

“There is still a very strong feeling here that men ‘rule the roost’ in all areas of our community.”

Shetland is often described as a place of strong women. Many respondents reflected on this identity with pride, acknowledging the long history of women sustaining homes, crofts, and communities while men worked away. Strength, resilience, and self-sufficiency were deeply woven throughout the responses. Yet some women who completed the survey questioned what that strength has historically required. Being capable of running a household, raising children, and holding communities together has not always translated into equal freedom of choice, visibility, or authority.

“In Shetland women are allowed to be strong.”

“Historically, Shetlanders have grown up surrounded by strong matriarchal figures, and so in many ways, women here are seen as capable and determined and independent. As long as they know their place, women in Shetland are “respected”.”

Many women referenced Up Helly Aa as an *“obvious example”* of how gender roles can still be clearly reinforced in public life, citing the difference between what men and women have been allowed to do. They raised questions around participation, visibility, and exclusion.

“I wanted to be in UHA but obviously wasn’t allowed and had to bake for the men instead, lol. It’s everywhere, it’s just so engrained that people don’t notice.”

“Discrimination is subtle, mainly. Being expected to dress, look or act feminine, without explicitly being asked to. Being told to be a good girl, to be kind, to not cause a fuss. Aside from Up Helly Aa I’m not sure if I’ve been excluded for being a woman, but certainly treated differently.”

“Participation in Up Helly Aa would be a prime example of discrimination that every woman in Lerwick has experienced, whether they actually cared or not.”

“Obviously there’s Up Helly Aa - I haven’t been able to fully participate in the way I would have liked to. This created rifts in family dynamics and in school. And while the “rules” have changed, I think it will take a long time for social attitudes to catch up.”

Sports and leisure were further examples where women described being treated differently to their male counterparts. From recreational activities in school, to social opportunities as an adult, respondents spoke of their choices being limited by their gender.

“I don’t think women need celebrated as such, more so just being accepted into more groups that were traditionally men only. Shetland Darts, for example, still don’t let women play in their league.”

“Being a woman that plays football, it has taken a long, long time for people to take this seriously and be able to talk about it without feeling judged”

“As a child, many boys would not consider me part of their sports teams, to the point I couldn’t partake in any.”

In everyday settings, similar patterns were described within families, workplaces, and voluntary organisations. On being referred to by *“pet names”* both in work and social settings, one woman was clear, *“This reinforces a hierarchy where women are infantilised, and signals that women’s expertise are not taken seriously.”* Respondents spoke at length about the expectations placed on men and women, and how these traditional roles can cause harm.

“On a personal level, my family is completely divided at Christmas time with men relaxing in the living room while women are cooking and tidying up in the kitchen. It might not seem like a big deal, but it speaks to a greater acceptance of traditional men's and women's roles, and the harmful attitudes that go along with that.”

Women spoke about being expected to take on administrative tasks, emotional labour, and domestic responsibilities – often alongside paid employment. These expectations were widely understood as being “women’s work”.

“In social groups and committees, I have been expected to act as secretary/minute-taker/administrator. I am also expected to be the organiser or the caregiver in these situations. If there is a job such as writing a thank you letter, organising catering, checking in on someone, arranging childcare, etc. then nine times of out ten, it will fall to a woman to do these things. Saying all of this, women in these situations will still be interrupted or spoken over, as if we have no idea what we're doing.”

These reflections illustrate how gender inequality in Shetland is often subtle, familiar, and deeply embedded in everyday life. Many respondents were clear that these patterns are not always recognised as discrimination at all. Instead, they are framed as tradition, humour, or simply “*how it is here*”. It is within this context that minimisation takes root. Not as a dramatic denial of harm, but as a quiet resistance to naming it.

A CULTURE OF MINIMISATION

Cultural expectations do not only shape women’s roles and opportunities in Shetland. They shape how harm is recognised, discussed, and responded to. Across the survey responses, a recurring pattern emerged. Not of outright denial, but of minimisation.

Minimisation did not always appear as a refusal to believe women. More often, it appeared as discomfort, defensiveness, or a reluctance to disrupt relationships and the social status quo. Several respondents described

conversations about men's violence against women as *"too political"*, divisive, or unnecessary – particularly in a place where social ties are close, and reputations matter.

"As Shetland is close-knit, where everyone knows everyone, it is impossible to completely avoid the misogynistic, homophobic, and victim-blaming attitudes still present in the community. There is a fear that speaking too openly or too directly about men's violence against women will damage personal, social, or professional relationships"

"Another catch of living in a small community, is that talking about women's issues can feel divisive or "too political". Conversations about men's violence against women can trigger defensiveness or denial. I think more so in Shetland than elsewhere, because these violent men are known and loved, and not necessarily seen as a problem in the first place."

In a community where social networks overlap and anonymity is limited, acknowledging harm – and who caused it – can be particularly complex. The men who perpetrate abuse are not distant figures – they are described as colleagues, neighbours, family members, and friends. As one woman said, *"perpetrators are our neighbours, co-workers, friends not rare strangers"*, and later, *"Even physical violence gets excused if the perpetrator is 'well respected' enough."*

"Communities can hold information about men who are unsafe, yet there's a reluctance to name it, because it disrupts the status quo."

"I think people like to see the good in others, which can also be a negative because it means they don't [want] to acknowledge when a "good guy" isn't so good."

"People in Shetland are quick to forgive abusers, and blame victims, or not believe victims, as they don't want drama or disruption in their lives, so they'd rather sweep under the rug than face the real problem."

When harm is minimised in this way, and perpetrators appear to be protected, women have explained that they are left to weigh not only the impact of the violence itself, but the potential consequences of naming it. Speaking up is rarely a simple act. It can mean risking relationships, reputation, and a sense of belonging.

“Some would rather defend the behaviour of their male relatives rather than accept that their behaviour is wrong. This is particularly devastating when other women hold this view.”

Throughout the responses received, many women described a disappointment of *“unsupportiveness from other women”* in their communities. Respondents spoke about how difficult it can be when other women hold harmful beliefs around gender, minimise violence, and openly support perpetrators of abuse.

“I think there's a lot of internalised misogyny from women here, and that makes sense. We're a small community and nobody wants to stick out for being "difficult". Women's suffering and inequality is so engrained in all of us, that people just don't see it as anything other than normal.”

“A huge challenge, it's tough to say, is other women. There is an enormous amount of internalised misogyny in Shetland, amplified by gossip culture. Women putting other women down, and trying to show that "they are not like other girls" by inferring that men and boys have it harder. The whole "what about the men" thing is taxing.”

“Unfortunately, a challenge that we do have in Shetland is internalised misogyny and hostility from other women. When the backlash for speaking out in a small community can feel so isolating, it is understandable that some women in Shetland want to distance themselves from feminist movements.”

While many respondents described this backlash as exhausting and isolating, several also reflected that in a small community, distancing oneself from feminist language can feel like a strategy for social survival.

"It's an old tradition to not voice your problems in public in Shetland or you are labelled a drama queen or crazy."

"I also admit tae bein discrimnatory myself. I've been programmed for decades (via media, social interactions, songs etc) tae be sexist so it could take a bit o effort to check myself"

This creates a paradox: women often support one another, but not always at the expense of the men they know and love. Yet it is clear from dozens of responses that in spite of the threat of backlash, and a culture of minimisation, women in Shetland do group together. This has been described as essential, especially when barriers to formal support are engrained into life in Shetland.

"There is a strong sense of community in Shetland, and the positive of that is most women here do look out for each other through informal networks. Unofficial information sharing can look like gossip or hearsay, but in a small place like Shetland, those hushed conversations can be lifesaving."

When harm is minimised, defended or absorbed in this way, accessing formal support can feel like a step that carries social risk as well as personal vulnerability.

ACCESS AND BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

While many women described life-changing and compassionate support from specialist services in Shetland, the overall picture is more complex. Accessing help is not simply a matter of availability. It is shaped by understanding, confidentiality, professional response, and the perceived consequences of speaking up. Across the survey responses, women described a landscape where support can be exceptional, and where it can also be inconsistent, delayed, or difficult to navigate.

When support is trauma-informed, consistent, and collaborative, women describe feeling believed, stabilised, and able to rebuild their lives. One woman illustrated accessing specialist services as *"lifesaving"*, going on to say, *"I wouldn't be here without the unwavering belief and support I received"*. Many respondents described in detail how VAWG-specific services such as Shetland Women's Aid and the Compass Centre were *"invaluable"* in their recovery from the effects of gender-based violence, particularly by getting *"to the root of the problem without medication"* through a variety of therapeutic techniques.

"I have had wide open arms from SWA. They helped me through the time when I had just left the abusive marriage-counselling. They have listened and reassured me and I know that they will ALWAYS have my back -especially when I feel I can't face it all or forget my strength."

"I was really grateful for the specialist support I received and Women's Aid made me feel heard and believed in a way I hadn't been before and that support changed everything for me."

"I wouldn't have been able to leave my situation without the support I received. I got access to a new home and counselling I would have never been able to afford when it all happened."

"I feel that there is good support from Women's Aid and the Compass Centre for those who are affected and know many people who have used these services who have nothing but good things to say about their experiences."

Our findings show that while support from specialist services can be transformative, outcomes can vary if sessions are time-limited and organisations are stretched. Women acknowledged long waiting lists for therapy and raised concerns about capacity issues across services.

“All services are stretched on resources, and this is having a huge impact. Shared understandings between professionals takes time and relationships need to be built.”

“I was referred to Women’s Aid by my daughter’s primary school during a GIRFEC meeting. I had 6 weeks (I think) of sessions. They were very helpful. I was then put on a waiting list.”

“Our issues aren’t magically going away, we need support for as long as we need support. It sort of felt like I was just starting to feel a little better and lighter, but then the support was taken away.”

While specialist services were generally praised, experiences of support within mainstream services – including healthcare, education, social work, and housing – were described as more inconsistent. On describing the support she received, one woman wrote, *“mainstream services can be hit-or-miss depending on who you get”* and this was reiterated by other respondents, reflecting that outcomes depended on which professional they encountered. These inconsistencies were not described as isolated incidents, but as a broader pattern of uneven understanding across services. Some respondents expressed frustration that recognition of women’s needs does not always translate into institutional action.

“Women understand other women’s needs but there seems to be zero acknowledgement from council or government.”

Where understanding of coercive control, trauma, or gender-based violence was limited, women described feeling left to navigate complex systems alone. Many said that they weren’t signposted to support when they needed it most, and there was a lack of collaboration between public services. These missed opportunities to signpost women to specialist support were described as particularly harmful, especially for those who were at risk at the time.

"I didn't know there was support available to me. I disclosed to my housing officer (a woman) who didn't tell me there was support available. I also had police involvement due to violence, and they didn't signpost me to anywhere either. I was young and vulnerable and if I had known I could have received support, I would have."

"The SA incident happened at school and teachers did not deem it severe enough to take action."

"There are pockets of people and organisation who understand the challenges women face in our community, but the big organisations - NHS and SIC - as a whole miss the mark. They seem more concerned with maintaining the status quo than affecting meaningful change."

Many responses also indicated a lack of understanding around the gendered nature of abuse, with services reluctant to hold perpetrators accountable in fear of seeming to "take sides".

"Many services unintentionally place the burden on women to navigate complex systems while men's behaviour is not addressed."

"In a place this small, it's scary to reach out and you worry people will know your business, take his side, or decide it's not serious enough to help."

"Lack of understanding of domestic abuse by children's services. Not just challenging but outright dangerous."

Some of the women who responded to the survey described working within specialist services themselves, explaining how difficult it is to navigate wider Shetland systems that are not set up with victims of gender-based violence in mind.

"It's a strange and exhausting position: pulling women out of crisis while working within structures that replicate the same control, minimisation, and silencing we're trying to stop. I witness the harm"

every day (coercive control dismissed, risk ignored, children's trauma sidelined). Yet, as a woman advocate, I'm often spoken to as though I'm overreacting or making things too political."

"Working in the VAWG sector, it often feels as if you have to pick your battles or water yourself down to have any chance at all to make positive change. You can't be too direct. You can't focus on women too much without also acknowledging men's needs. If you're not careful, you risk alienating people who disagree with you. In Shetland's VAWG sector you have to be gentle and calm and accommodating to have any hope of eliminating men's violence, or even just getting folk to acknowledge it as a problem in the first place. It feels completely backwards."

"Professional attitudes in work relating to women and domestic violence are an ongoing challenge"

In a small, interconnected community, the decision to seek help is rarely straightforward for women impacted by gender-based violence. It carries social, emotional, and sometimes institutional risk.

Women weigh not only their own safety, but the safety and stability of their children when deciding whether to report. Several respondents described fears that child protection responses would misunderstand coercive control, minimise post-separation abuse, or inadvertently empower perpetrators. Others described institutional pressures on mothers to *"keep the peace"* and avoid naming abuse, outweighing concerns for children's safety.

"I'm not sure if this is discrimination or not, but I was absolutely not listened to by Children and Families Social Work. I was expected to "mitigate risk of harm" to my children because I'm their mother, whilst their abusive father was empowered by the support given to him by social work."

"Social work also downplayed what was happening and treated it as a messy breakup, not abuse even though me and my children were exhausted, frightened, and walking on eggshells."

“Social work need clear guidance on recognising patterns of harm and intervening early. There are NO early safeguarding measures anywhere.”

“Too many women are dismissed because harm isn’t visible or doesn’t fit neat categories, especially when abusers use rural isolation and child contact to maintain control.”

In these circumstances, seeking help can feel like a stepping stone into another system that fails to recognise the dynamics of abuse. Across the survey findings, the ability to recognise abuse – and to have that recognition validated – emerged as one of the most significant barriers to seeking support.

For many respondents, accessing support required first recognising that what they had experienced was abuse. This was not always straightforward. Several women described only identifying coercive control, sexual assault, or patterns of harm years later, often after encountering awareness campaigns or speaking with other women. Others reflected that the behaviours they experienced felt so normalised within their social environments that it did not occur to them to seek help at the time.

“I hadna realised it had been rape as i hadna understood consent. It was “normal” to be groped, harassed, and women should be glad o da attention or at least [be] submissive or polite”

“There have been too many incidences to count, but as a whole, the main reason [for not seeking support] has always been “this is just the norm” and to suck it up.”

“I really feel like it's all so normalised. How can I ask for support from women who have probably experienced it themselves, too?”

“I’ve experienced various degrees of sexual assault (including one rape) in Shetland and at no point did I consider getting support. Mainly because I didn’t want to acknowledge there was a problem to

address. Some of the assaults felt so normal, that it would have been unusual to complain about them."

These reflections suggest that harm was not always absent of impact, but absent of language. Without clear recognition of coercive control, consent, or patterns of abuse, several women described adapting to circumstances rather than naming them. Where behaviours are widely minimised or framed as "*just how things are*", the threshold for seeking support becomes difficult to define.

"I didn't feel like I needed support and now I think it's probably too late."

"I felt like I could deal with it alone."

"I was really young and didn't want to make a scene as my family already doubted me anyway"

Our findings show clearly that many women did acknowledge that they needed professional support but felt as if they wouldn't be believed or understood. Women told us that when considering speaking out, Shetland's culture of victim-shaming held them back. On the question of barriers to support, one respondent said, "*Fear of being dismissed or blamed. Fear of not being believed in such a small community.*" This fear was palpable throughout our survey.

"It can feel like you're constantly weighing up whether reporting something will lead to backlash in such a small community"

"I felt embarrassed and I thought everyone at school would think I'm lying."

"Shame and stigma are still a driving force in women not being able to speak about their experiences".

"It's still very much victim blaming, therefore victims feel unable to speak out against their abuser."

"I was and still am so scared of my family cutting me off and taking my abusers side over mine. And the shame of living in Shetland and being known as a victim of childhood sexual abuse, and the worry of being blamed for causing it on myself. Plus the fear of getting no justice in court and having no proof of historical abuse."

For some women, the decision not to seek support was shaped not only by shame or fear of community backlash, but by a lack of confidence in what would happen next. Where recognition of abuse was fragile, and institutional responses were perceived as inconsistent, the prospect of reporting - particularly to the police or through the courts - carried its own risks.

REPORTING HARM AND NAVIGATING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

As part of this survey, women were asked directly whether they had reported experiences of gender-based violence to the police, and if not, why. They were also invited to describe their experiences of engaging with the justice system, including navigating police responses and court processes. The responses revealed a nuanced and often difficult picture. While some women described feeling supported and taken seriously, many others outlined barriers that influenced their decision not to report, or described experiences that left them feeling unheard, disbelieved, or retraumatised.

WHY MOST WOMEN DO NOT REPORT

For some women, the decision not to report was shaped long before any contact with police. Concerns about evidence, confidentiality, family impact, and the likelihood of conviction weighed heavily. In a small, interconnected community, these considerations were intensified by fears of social fallout and reputational harm. Several respondents reflected that they were unsure whether what they had experienced met the threshold for police involvement, particularly in cases of harassment or emotional abuse.

"I didn't report the various sexual assaults because, at the time, they felt so unnoteworthy. Why would I be the one to report what happens to every single girl at some point in their life?"

"It has always felt pointless going to the police about anything where you have no definite proof. And some behaviours are so normalised, like inappropriate touching on nights out. I don't see any way that I could report someone for grazing my bum or touching my waist, when I'm pretty sure that happens to every woman."

One woman described the intense worry of being *"hated for snitching or ruining someone's reputation"* and many more felt that the risks associated with reporting outweighed the possibility of justice.

"I have children with this man. I didn't want to complicate the girls' lives even further. Also, the abuse was over 15 years where I don't have 'evidence' saved - except from the post separation abuse messages."

I feel that historically women's domestic abuse cases aren't taken as seriously as they should and the rates for prosecution are heartbreakingly low."

"I felt as if there would be no chance of conviction. Very little evidence. I suppose I also worried what people might think if they found out. More than anything else, I just wanted to move on and not drag things into court."

"I didn't report instances of sexual assault because there was little proof. I also wasn't prepared to be questioned about what I was wearing, how much I had to drink, what I'd said to lead him on... Victim blaming is everywhere, and I'm sure that includes the local police force."

"I didn't report the rape because I knew there would be no evidence. It would be my word against his. I didn't want to put myself through the turmoil of reporting, knowing that a charge, let alone a conviction, would be unrealistic."

"I haven't [reported] yet, but I am considering it. What's holding me back is the [thought] that I won't be taken seriously"

"Knowing how hard it is to get a conviction for rape or serious sexual violence made it feel pointless and even risky like I'd go through all that pain just to be dismissed. It's hard to come forward when the stories you hear make you feel like the system is set up to fail you before you even start."

The words of the women who responded to our survey reflect a calculated assessment of risk. Women weighed the emotional toll of recounting traumatic experiences against the perceived likelihood of conviction. They considered the impact on their children, their employment, their reputation, and their safety. Where conviction rates were believed to be low and victim-blaming narratives persistent, reporting was described as a gamble rather than a safeguard.

EXPERIENCE WITH POLICE AND CRIMINAL PROCEEDINGS

For those who reported, whether by choice or following police intervention, experiences varied significantly. While some women described compassionate and professional responses, others reported encounters that reinforced the very fears that had initially held them back. Consistency emerged as a central concern.

“Police on mainland were great, very supportive, present and responsive. When I moved home, I was made to feel like I was wasting police time in Shetland and ceased reporting. I felt belittled and unheard.”

“I spoke with police twice or three times. They were great but I couldn’t go through with making a complaint.”

“Police attended my property after neighbours report domestic incident. I found the officer that spoke to me and asked me question about what abuse I’d experienced – inexperienced, intimidating and cold. He stood and spoke at me in my bedroom, that added to my discomfort. While the other sat down and had a chat with my ex in the living room.”

“I was also lucky to have a police officer who took me seriously and signposted me to help straight away that first contact makes such a huge difference when you’re scared and unsure and have not experienced empathy from someone else for so long in an abusive situation. But it shouldn’t come down to luck cos many of my friends have had the opposite experience with police, and women deserve consistent, compassionate responses every single time”

“I was lucky that the officer I eventually spoke to believed me and treated me with respect, but it shouldn’t come down to luck when it’s a about justice and stopping abuse. Knowing how many women are ignored or doubted made it even harder to come forward, and that fear almost stopped me from reporting at all.”

The concept of luck, when it comes to reporting, was a thread throughout the responses to the survey. One woman reflected that Shetland is not immune to wider institutional challenges within policing across the UK. She said, *“Police have inconsistent responses, they cannot deny that they have misogyny issues, how is this causing harm and what's stopping that bleeding into practice.”*

Among the most serious concerns raised were perceptions of bias in a small community where officers may have prior relationships with those involved. One woman described presenting video evidence of sexual abuse but felt that local connections influenced how her report was handled. She characterised her interaction with police as deeply retraumatising, explaining that she felt dismissed and gaslit rather than supported. Similar concerns were echoed by others.

“I also worry about the lack of domestic abuse awareness within policing which not always malicious, but inconsistent training, local ties, and a culture of minimising certain behaviours can leave women feeling exposed or unheard.”

“[I] worry about confidentiality and bias when officers know perpetrators personally.”

“It is very clear that Shetland police defend people they have a positive relationship with”

For many women, however, engagement with the justice system did not end with initial police contact. Where cases progressed, experiences of criminal prosecution introduced further complexities and, in some cases, additional harm. Delays, evidential thresholds, and court procedures were described as daunting, and at times retraumatising. Some respondents expressed deep frustration with criminal court outcomes.

“Women don't get justice in the courts in Shetland.”

“I have received zero legal justice despite having reams of evidence and medical experts who can confirm I am telling the truth.”

"[THE POLICE] were supportive and caring but it came to nothing - my word against his. I was 14."

"I reported my childhood sexual abuse to the police. Nothing came of it due to there being lack of evidence at the time."

Put simply, one respondent said the *"criminal justice system fails to be trauma informed. Civil court fails to protect children from abusive fathers."*

Despite the survey specifically asking about police reporting and experiences of the criminal justice system, many women took the opportunity to tell us that it was within civil court where they felt the most institutional harm.

CIVIL AND FAMILY COURT: CHILD CONTACT AND POST-SEPARATION ABUSE

For women with children, engagement with the justice system often extended beyond criminal proceedings. Family court processes, including child contact arrangements and post-separation disputes, were frequently raised in survey responses. While these processes are designed to prioritise the welfare of the child, several women described experiences where coercive control and patterns of abuse were minimised, reframed as conflict, or insufficiently understood.

"There's also a deep issue with coercive control not being taken seriously, especially in child-contact cases. Post-separation abuse is minimised, and the legal expectation to "co-parent" can put women and children in the firing line. Family court processes sometimes hand abusers new tools to maintain control."

"I tried to explain coercive control during a civil court hearing and was basically told to "grow up," like the emotional harm didn't count unless he'd hit me."

"Civil courts granting child access to abusive dads."

“Narcissistic abusers use the system to continue their cycles of abuse – family court, contact, mediation, maintenance payments, divorce proceedings etc.”

Concerns regarding civil court processes favouring the offending parent, or failing to recognise how domestic abuse affects children, came from professionals working in the sector as well as from victims themselves. It is clear there are fears around civil and family courts legitimising perpetrators of abuse.

“My experience is that there are decisions made now in family court that perpetuate coercive control, and show bias towards usually male offenders, without consideration to the wellbeing of the primary carers, usually the mother.”

“Child contact is frequently used by abusers to continue domination, and women’s concerns are too easily reframed as “conflict.”

“Coercive control is widely misunderstood especially in the family court system, where women’s safety concerns can be dismissed as “conflict” and abusers can weaponise child contact for post-separation abuse.”

The perception that justice processes may minimise or misunderstand gender-based abuse was a significant theme. At the same time, several respondents disputed this framing, suggesting that men are more likely to be disadvantaged within the justice system. These contrasting views are not peripheral; they illuminate the contested cultural narratives that shape how harm, responsibility, and equality are understood in Shetland.

CONTESTED NARRATIVES

While the majority of respondents described experiences of harm, minimisation, and institutional barriers, a minority rejected the premise of this survey altogether. Dozens of women expressed gratitude for having a confidential space to share their concerns. Others responded with a single question: *"What about the men?"*

"Lots of people (particularly other women) feel that focussing on women's issues somehow takes away from men. That "women already have it all" and "what about the men?". I know that there are women who have complained about this survey, and folk asking "why isn't there a survey for men?!" and I think that in itself shows a lack of understanding."

While most respondents used the survey as a call for change, a minority used it to criticise the survey itself.

"I have found this entire survey grossly offensive and demeaning. I can only assume it was put together by misandrist feminists - and you don't represent me or most other women I know. You are utterly divisive."

"Surprised and disappointed that you felt the need to do this survey. Things have swung so much in our favour that [it] is men that are now being discriminated against."

A recurring theme among these responses was the belief that gender equality efforts have *"gone too far"*, and that men and boys are now the primary victims of discrimination.

"It used to be women that were disadvantaged and discriminated against in society. Now, the pendulum has swung too far the other way. Men and boys face far more discrimination."

"The people who are in need of more support, are men & boys - so give your misandrist heads a wobble."

A minority of vocal respondents repeatedly demanded that Shetland Women's Aid conduct a similar survey focussed on men, with one saying, "*I don't recall ever seeing a similar survey for men, and I know the male members of my family & friends are mostly unimpressed when I mentioned this survey to them*". Many other respondents pre-empted these requests. Several women noted that discussions about men's needs were frequently raised only in reaction to initiatives focussed on women.

"I do feel that on the whole, things are moving in the right direction. I just hope one day to have a conversation about women's needs without someone saying "but what about the men?". Of course there are conversations to be had about men's needs, but the topic is never brought up unless in reaction to something for women."

"There are a lot of women here who don't want to acknowledge we have any challenges to tackle whatsoever, going as far to say that we have it "too good" and "what about the men?". This causes a huge societal divide and means that we're fighting battles on multiple fronts - it feels impossible to hold perpetrators accountable when there are other women who can't or won't acknowledge that violence against women and girls is even a problem in Shetland."

"If you try to bring up violence against women and girls, it's "that happens to men too". If you try to have a conversation about mental health, it's always centred around male suicide rates. I think there's a lot of internalised misogyny from women here, and that makes sense. We're a small community and nobody wants to stick out for being "difficult". Women's suffering and inequality is so engrained in all of us, that people just don't see it as anything other than normal."

A smaller number of responses went further than calling for men to be included, by adopting highly charged language and drawing on wider political narratives. These included accusations of "*toxic feminism*" and "*misandry*" towards Shetland Women's Aid, references to "*cultural Marxism*", and suggestions that public services are "*matriarchal*" and therefore responsible for perceived societal decline.

A limited number of comments linked women's safety in Shetland to immigration and "*multiculturalism*". While these views were not representative of the majority of responses, their presence is notable. While this report seeks to accurately reflect the range of responses received, it does not seek to amplify rhetoric that falls outside the scope of the survey's purpose.

For women working in the violence against women sector, this rhetoric is not abstract. Being labelled "*divisive*" or "*misandrist*" reflects the social and professional risks attached to speaking publicly about abuse in a small community. In some instances, criticism extended beyond disagreement with the survey and into personal attacks directed at frontline workers.

"Stop moaning and get on with doing things."

"You need your collective heads examined"

"I'll tell what a load of crap this the next time I see you."

This underscores the complexity of advocating for change in a close-knit community, where challenging harmful behaviour in the very place you call home can carry consequences.

WHAT WOMEN ARE ASKING FOR

The women who responded to this survey did not only describe harm – they described what needs to change. Their responses reflect not hopelessness, but clarity. Across themes of justice, education, healthcare, housing, and community life, women articulated practical steps that would make Shetland safer, fairer, and more accountable.

This section remains close to women’s own words. The recommendations that follow translate these priorities into specific actions for change-makers across Shetland.

1. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE EXIST

Change begins with recognition.

Many women said that meaningful progress in Shetland will only happen when discrimination and violence are acknowledged openly – not minimised, reframed, or treated as “too political” to discuss.

Misogyny, coercive control, harassment, and structural inequality are present here. Women were unequivocal. Naming this reality is not divisive. It is foundational. Acknowledgement is not symbolic. It shapes how resources are allocated, how professionals respond, and whether women are believed.

“I think there has to be a huge shift in culture. To reduce discrimination, you first have to acknowledge that it actually happens.”

“Firstly, I think to have any hope for change, there needs to be an acknowledgement that discrimination exists in the first place. We need to see more willingness from the community to acknowledge misogyny, homophobia, and structural inequality as real and present in Shetland. We need to be able to have conversations about women's issues without being labelled difficult, or political or polarising. That requires a top-down approach – we need to see our community leaders start and continue these conversations.”

“More people need to challenge sexist 'banter'. Bystanders should call out inappropriate behaviour/comments from their peers- by modelling this, it should help to prevent those around us acting in this way.”

2. PRIORITISE PREVENTION

Women were clear that prevention must begin early, and it must be consistent.

Misogyny, harassment, and harmful online influences are present in schools and youth spaces. Respondents described this not as isolated behaviour, but as a safeguarding issue.

Prevention cannot be treated as a one-off awareness session. It requires sustained, age-appropriate engagement around consent, healthy relationships, gender roles, pornography culture, incel-influenced narratives, and everyday sexism. Several respondents described existing prevention work as valuable and expressed a desire to see it expanded and embedded.

“In education, schools urgently need consistent prevention work – not one-off talks. Girls are telling us about misogyny, sexual harassment, and incel-influenced behaviour among boys. This is a child protection issue, and it is not being treated as such. No-one is systematically asking young girls what they’re experiencing.”

“Schools need structured, ongoing VAWG-prevention, not one-off lessons.”

“More education in schools in a fun, relaxed and engaging format. SWA are doing great work with this in secondary schools, but I’d love to see more of it.”

“I’d love to see whole terms at a time being explored (such as the duration and content of the ‘Own My Life’ course). I’d love to see the kids have to work on a presentation etc to display their understanding. I’d also love to see this kind of work being done in primary schools (age appropriately of course).”

“Schools require consistent prevention work on respect, digital harm, porn culture, and incel-influenced attitudes and girls need to be asked what they’re already facing.”

3. PLACE RESPONSIBILITY ON MEN AND BOYS

Women described the quiet exhaustion of being expected to manage risk alone.

Many called for men and boys to be active participants in change - challenging peers, disrupting sexist “banter”, and taking ownership for addressing harmful behaviour within male social spaces.

Women were clear that this is not about blame, but about shared responsibility. Gender equality, they emphasised, benefits the whole community and requires visible male leadership, particularly in male-dominated spaces.

“It would also help if men challenged their friends more, instead of leaving women to manage situations on their own. Bringing up VAWG should not feel challenging or like you are being a nuisance.”

“Getting men to be active lik through da white ribbon campaign. Flippin da statistics. So, rather than xx% of victims bein women, xx% o perpetrators wir men. Role modelling.”

“I also think we should be more proactive in supporting and celebrating (good) men. I worry that our boys are being raised feeling that they are already a problem.”

“We also need men in our community, especially those in public-facing positions, to speak up.”

4. ENSURE SYSTEMS ARE CONSISTENT, ACCOUNTABLE, AND TRAUMA-INFORMED

Women described a landscape where the quality of response depended too heavily on who they encountered. Experiences across police, healthcare, courts, social work, and education varied significantly. Support was sometimes compassionate and effective; in other cases, harm was minimised, misunderstood, or mishandled.

Women were clear that support should not depend on luck. Consistent, trauma-informed responses – grounded in a shared understanding of coercive control, sexual violence, and post-separation abuse – were described as the minimum standard.

Training alone was not seen as sufficient. Women called for clearer accountability where professional responses fall short, and for systems that prioritise safety over reputation, familiarity, or institutional comfort. They were clear about what this should look like in practice.

“Any organisation in Shetland that works with people in any way, should have procedures in place around tackling violence against women and girls. The topic should be treated as seriously as Adult & Child Protection.”

“Police, GPs, and social work should give clear signposting every time abuse is disclosed.”

“There must be a far stronger understanding of coercive control across police, courts, schools, social work, and healthcare. Training has to reflect real patterns – isolation, domination, post-separation abuse, and child contact being used as a tool of harm.”

“I’d encourage organisations and the council to call out all forms of GBV and ensure this is reflected in their policies and regular staff training.”

5. REMOVE THE PRACTICAL BARRIERS THAT LIMIT WOMEN'S SAFETY AND INDEPENDENCE

Beyond cultural change, women identified structural barriers that shape their ability to leave unsafe situations and participate fully in community life.

Housing shortages, unaffordable childcare, limited transport options, inflexible working arrangements, and rural isolation were repeatedly raised as factors that restrict women's safety, independence, and economic security. Women called for services, employers, and decision-makers to design systems that reflect the realities of caring responsibilities and island geography in a small island community.

"We need better housing and rural support, so geography can't be used as a weapon."

"In terms of housing, I would also like to ensure that victims of GBV are housed separately from their perpetrators."

"Improved family and paternity leave would help to ease the burden of child care always falling to women."

"Improved access to childcare and flexible working arrangements so women are not disadvantaged in employment or career progression."

"Without a doubt, space for women on NorthLink. A "women-only" pod room would surely be a simple and achievable starting point."

"In terms of education, I would like to see more traditionally-masculine trades marketed towards girls, and more training sessions available to adults. It would be great if women were encouraged to know basic life skills that men are taught from family/peers - basic DIY, plumbing, car maintenance, etc."

6. MAKE COMMUNITY SPACES SAFER AND MORE ACCOUNTABLE

Pubs, workplaces, festivals, sporting environments, and other social spaces were frequently mentioned as settings where harassment is minimised or dismissed.

Women called for clearer accountability in male-dominated spaces, stronger responses to harassment and spiking fears, and visible leadership from community organisations – particularly during major events and traditions.

Silence, several women noted, protects harmful behaviour. Visible standards, consequences, and leadership change culture.

“Community events should reflect women’s voices and needs, not just established traditions and male-centred norms.”

“I actually think having advocates for, especially young women, at occasions such as up helly aa, would be a good thing. Having a person who can see if there is concerning behaviour there and then, and then offering support and help when needed. It could also deter any harassment at these events.”

“Having women on Lerwick Up Helly Aa committee”

“Bars and venues need to take women’s safety more seriously things like groping, spiking fears, and known offenders hanging around shouldn’t just be shrugged off.”

“Male-dominated spaces also need real accountability. Pubs, workplaces, and community groups can no longer minimise harassment or normalise misogynistic behaviour. If they don’t challenge it, they sustain it.”

“Better lighting in public areas, safe late night transport options, and stronger responses to harassment would make women feel more

comfortable being out socially. Feeling safe encourages more participation in community life."

"I think the idea the new music festival especially aimed at women that took place this year is a great start"

7. STRENGTHEN SPECIALIST SERVICES

Women expressed strong appreciation for specialist organisations in Shetland, describing them as vital sources of safety and support. At the same time, respondents highlighted the need for increased capacity, reduced waiting times, and longer-term options to reflect the scale and complexity of need described throughout this report.

Alongside formal services, many women emphasised the importance of informal, women-led spaces; creative groups, peer circles, and community gatherings where connection can happen without fear or judgement. For some, healing is relational as well as clinical.

"All girls and women should feel they have a safe space to come if they are abused, not ostracised and left to fend for themselves."

"A larger women's aid with more staff, more peer lead support groups"

"Being able to access support, in the way of counselling, would be the first step. It's so incredibly frustrating to not have anyone to speak to."

"Maybe something for "low levels" of GBV. For women who don't want to report, and don't actually need dedicated support, just a safe circle of women to talk with who understand."

"Creating more women-led spaces and activities would make it easier to socialise without constantly being on alert. We need more chances to organise and express solidarity instead of dealing with it individually through therapy, we have all been through so much of the same and can make change together if we share and challenge as one."

“Real commitment from the public sector to work with [specialist] third sector colleagues to challenge men’s behaviour and hold men to account for violence against women.”

“I think organisations could share stats and testimonials more often. Because there’s a lot of people who still think GBV doesn’t exist.”

“I’d like to see women’s aid being talked about more, and seeing flyers/or posters up.”

8. IMPROVE WOMEN’S HEALTHCARE PROVISION

Women raised specific concerns regarding reproductive health, menopause care, trauma awareness, continuity of care, and being believed when presenting with pain or fatigue.

Respondents described gaps in specialist provision, limited access to female clinicians in certain contexts, and a need for greater sensitivity to coercive control within healthcare settings. They called for environments where women feel safe discussing intimate concerns, and where their experiences are taken seriously the first time.

“a womens health clinic staffed by females would be a huge step forward, having to discuss with a male GP why you need testosterone is pretty humiliating”

“Women’s healthcare can be poor here due to lack of specialists. We do not have a gynaecologist here full-time, for example.”

“Healthcare around menopause and miscarriages.”

“Healthcare could also do better at taking women’s pain and fatigue seriously instead of putting everything down to hormones or stress.”

“In healthcare, there needs to be far better understanding of coercive control, trauma, and the long-term physical and psychological impact of abuse. Too many women leave appointments feeling unheard,

minimised, or treated as though their situation is a matter of personal choices rather than safety.”

“Doctors could ask all women regularly on appointments if they have experienced any gender-based violence. Give women a safe place to open up knowing it’s completely confidential and safe, and private away from anyone else.”

“The sexual health clinic and starting of menopause groups is very welcome but prevention / health promotion work could improve targeting health issues specific to women.”

9. TREAT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS AS A WHOLE-COMMUNITY ISSUE

Across the survey, women returned repeatedly to one central point – gender-based violence cannot remain the responsibility of specialist services alone.

Respondents described the need for coordinated, cross-sector working; visible leadership; public engagement; and a cultural shift away from protecting reputations toward protecting women’s safety. Several framed this not as a “women versus men” issue, but as a collective responsibility that strengthens Shetland as a whole.

“We need to start treating violence against women and girls as a whole-community responsibility, not something only specialist services handle. Too often harmful men are protected because they’re well-known or well-liked, and that silence reinforces discrimination.”

“Challenging the culture of “keeping the peace” is essential. Communities must stop prioritising reputations and relationships over women’s safety.”

“There needs to be a cultural shift away from protecting reputations and towards protecting women. In Shetland, information about

harmful men often circulates quietly among women, while the wider community chooses to look away.”

“More of the general public interested in and taking part in workshops/education surrounding GBV etc. If we got more men going to these, and seeing it from another viewpoint, I think that would help.”

“We as a community need to have opportunities to all talk properly with one another, or else there will continue to be a divide.”

PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR CHANGE MAKERS

Change is possible in Shetland.

The women who contributed to this report have not only described harm – they have described hope. Many spoke of strong community ties and deep care for these islands, alongside a clear desire for Shetland to be safer, fairer, and more equal for everyone.

The recommendations below are proportionate responses to the themes identified by women in this survey. They are achievable, rooted in lived experience, and recognise that reducing harm from gender-based violence is a shared responsibility across institutions, organisations, and the wider public.

1. ESTABLISH UNIVERSAL GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE TRAINING ACROSS PUBLIC-FACING ROLES

All public-facing professionals in Shetland should complete Gender-Based Violence Level 2 training (or equivalent), delivered or endorsed by the Shetland Public Protection Committee/SVAWCYP, within a defined timeframe, with refresher training at regular intervals. Completion should be monitored locally.

2. EMBED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AWARENESS WITHIN LICENSING REQUIREMENTS

The Shetland Islands Area Licensing Board should incorporate gender-based violence and bystander awareness training into licensing expectations and require licensed premises to implement visible anti-harassment policies and clear reporting procedures.

3. ENSURE CONSISTENT REFERRAL PATHWAYS TO SPECIALIST SERVICES

All potential referral agencies – including Police Scotland, Social Work, Education, NHS Shetland, and Housing providers – should ensure staff are familiar with local specialist GBV services and consistently provide clear signposting at the point of disclosure. Referral processes should

be embedded within standard operating procedures and induction training.

4. RECOGNISE POST-SEPARATION ABUSE WITHIN CIVIL AND FAMILY COURT PROCESSES

Civil and family court processes in Shetland should explicitly recognise coercive control and post-separation abuse when determining child contact, civil orders, and protective measures, ensuring that the safety and wellbeing of women and children are prioritised in decision-making. Any officials working within Shetland's court system should be trained to understand the effects of coercive control.

5. EMBED SAFE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISCLOSURE ACROSS FRONTLINE SERVICES

Frontline services, including primary care, maternity services, mental health services, social work, and other relevant professionals, should embed routine, safe opportunities for women to be seen alone where appropriate to do so, and ask about abuse as standard practice, with clear pathways for response and referral.

6. ESTABLISH SAFE HOUSING PATHWAYS FOR WOMEN LEAVING ABUSE

Housing providers in Shetland, including Shetland Islands Council Housing Service and Hjaltland Housing Association, should implement and publish a clear, prioritised pathway for women leaving abuse. Allocation and transfer decisions should prioritise safety, take all reasonable steps to avoid proximity to perpetrators, and reflect new legal protections strengthening victims' housing rights.

7. EMBED STRUCTURED, ONGOING PREVENTION EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

Education Services should ensure consistent, structured delivery of age-appropriate prevention education on healthy relationships, coercive control, consent, and online misogyny across all secondary schools in Shetland, in partnership with local specialist organisations.

Prevention education should be embedded within safeguarding frameworks rather than delivered as one-off sessions.

8. PROMOTE VISIBLE MALE LEADERSHIP IN CHALLENGING HARMFUL BEHAVIOUR

Community leaders, employers, coaches, and public figures – particularly men in leadership positions – should actively challenge sexist language, harassment, and harmful low-level behaviours, promoting bystander responsibility and modelling accountability within their organisations and peer groups.

Statutory and third-sector organisations represented within the Shetland Violence Against Women, Children and Young People Partnership should review progress against these actions and provide a public update within 12 months.

CONCLUSION

This report tells two truths at once. Shetland is a place of strength and community. Women spoke with pride about open landscapes, close connections, and resilience passed down through the generations. There is solidarity here. There is love here. And there is harm here.

Women detailed violence, coercive control, harassment, structural inequality, and the quiet exhaustion of managing risk alone. They described systems that sometimes work, and systems that sometimes fail. They described a culture that can both protect and silence. Powerfully, these findings describe the weight of minimisation - how everyday harm is dismissed, reframed, or absorbed rather than challenged.

These findings are not an attack on Shetland. They are an invitation.

This report is an invitation to acknowledge what women in Shetland are carrying. An invitation to ensure responses are consistent, accountable, and trauma informed. An invitation to share responsibility.

As Shetland women said:

“The biggest change would come from services believing women early, responding safely every time, and refusing to normalise the slow, invisible forms of harm that destroy women’s lives. In a community this small, silence is powerful; so is action. The next generation needs to see adults stand up for them now, not after things go too far.”

“I love Shetland, but I hate the deep-rooted misogyny that I can see that takes place here. I can only hope for change in the future, and for women to be seen as equals to men in all areas of life.”

“What I want most is for women in Shetland to stop feeling like they have to survive everything in silence. So many of us walk around carrying fear, shame, and exhaustion while the men who harmed us move freely through the community without anyone challenging them. I just hope people in positions of power in Shetland and the

community truly understands how much pain is happening behind closed doors, and how much difference it would make if women felt believed, protected, and seen from the very first moment they reach out.”

Violence against women in Shetland is not inevitable. Cultural norms are not set in stone. Systems can improve, and our islands have the capacity to change.

The women who completed this survey have done their part. They have spoken. The responsibility now sits with all of us – as professionals, leaders, neighbours, and community members – to listen and respond.

“I appreciate you giving me a voice”

If you would like more information on the contents of this report, please contact Shetland Women’s Aid.

SUPPORT AVAILABLE

Shetland Women’s Aid

Tel: 01595 692070

Email: office@shetlandwa.org

Compass Centre

Tel: 01595 747174

Email: contact@compasscentre.org

Scottish Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline

Tel: 0800 027 1234

Email: helpline@sdafmh.org.uk

Men’s Advice Line

Tel: 0808 801 0327

Email: info@mensadvice.org.uk