

Beyond Criminal Justice: The Role of Empowerment and Communities of Practice in Addressing Violence
Against Women and Girls

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Abstract

This paper explores the limitations of national government action to eradicate Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and advocates for a complementary, community-based approach to empower women and girls. Using national and international data, the paper highlights structural issues such as underreporting, inconsistent crime recording, and public mistrust in law enforcement. It presents a case study of the Femme Power programme by Blossom Training and Development, a grassroots initiative in West Yorkshire that combines self-defence, legal education, and trauma-informed support to empower women. The programme fosters a safe space for shared learning and peer support and emphasises the need for inclusive, intersectional approaches. Evaluation data indicated a significant increase in participants' confidence and perceived safety, although more thorough evaluation is required to ascertain the long-term effects of the programme. The paper also examines the role of male allyship and social media movements. Recommendations include developing a national quality mark for empowerment programmes, supported by a public body with a repository of best practices and greater collaboration between public and third-sector organisations. The findings stress the importance of holistic, preventative strategies that empower women and engage communities in addressing VAWG.

Keywords: *VAWG, violence, women, girls, empowerment, self-defence*

Introduction

This paper will define the scale of Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the UK and seek to understand the national response by the government. The issues caused by a lack of a coherent, co-ordinated strategy and mistrust in the police will be examined. Third sector responses from around the world are considered, as is the role of men. A West Yorkshire-based community interest company's approach to empowerment training and its nationwide application will be analysed. The paper will conclude with recommendations and address research gaps.

VAWG is high on the national political agenda, with both the Labour and Conservative Parties making prominent mention in their manifestos for the 2024 UK general election. ([Labour Party, 2024](#) & [Conservative and Unionist Party, 2024](#)). This is significant as these are the two largest political parties in the UK Parliament with over 50% of the national vote share ([BBC, 2024](#)). On a European level, the Council of Europe established a treaty following the Istanbul Convention in 2011 ([Council of Europe, 2011](#)); there is a whole chapter dedicated to the prevention of VAWG. Internationally, the United Nations promotes its campaign to eliminate VAWG, citing a statistic that a woman is killed every ten minutes because of gender-based violence. ([United Nations, 2024](#)).

The National Audit Office (NAO) estimates that 1 in 4 women will be a victim of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault during their lifetime in the UK. 1 in 12 women will be a victim of a violent crime each year, and over 20% of all recorded crime in the year up to March 2023 involved violence against females ([National Audit Office, 2025](#)). From an economic perspective, this is estimated to cost society approximately £85 billion p.a. ([Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2024](#)). More importantly is the effect on individuals; studies indicate that there is a relationship between domestic abuse and depression in women. This causal association is two-way; women with mental health conditions are more likely to be victims, and victims are more likely to develop mental health conditions even where there were none before the abuse ([Devries et al., 2013](#)). The same trend is not as conclusive for male victims, although there is not as much available data. Surveys suggest that 71% of women experienced some form of sexual harassment in a public space. This number increases to 86% for 18–24-year-olds ([All-Party Parliamentary Group for UN Women, 2021](#)). The prevalence of VAWG in West Yorkshire is high; in the year ending August 2023, there were 48,967 recorded victims of domestic abuse and 7,419 recorded victims of sexual assault.

([West Yorkshire Police, 2023](#)). The national Honour-Based Abuse charity Karma Nirvana reports that 27% of its calls for service originate in West Yorkshire. This signifies a disproportionate amount; however, it must be pointed out that, although national, they are based in Leeds, West Yorkshire.

Definitions of VAWG vary, but the UK government defines it as “acts of violence or abuse that we know disproportionately affect women and girls” ([Home Office, 2021, p. 8](#)). This is the definition used in this paper.

This paper will examine the Femme Power programme launched by Blossom Training and Development, which is a small Community Interest Company based in Normanton, a small town near Wakefield, West Yorkshire. The programme will include other initiatives to tackle VAWG, the available evidence of what works and how it may be evaluated. Additionally, the paper will make suggestions on how to tackle VAWG at the local level with inspiration to move nationwide.

Literature Review

Government Response

The National Audit Office (NAO) found that the Home Office does not have a full understanding of current committed resources for tackling VAWG, and lacks a consistent definition across public bodies ([NAA, 2025](#)), as also identified by the APPG for UN Women ([APPG for UN Women, 2021](#)). Local areas of good practice are not championed and used as examples due to a lack of feedback mechanism (NAO, 2025). These two factors mean it is hard to truly establish the scale of the problem and measure progress in tackling it effectively. The Istanbul Convention called for signatories, including the UK, to develop comprehensive and coordinated policies to tackle VAWG ([Council of Europe, 2011](#)). However, the UK is not fulfilling the obligations it agreed to in 2011.

The state must do better; the criminal justice system has been underfunded for years. The Bar Council reports that public funding for England and Wales declined by 22.4% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2023/24 ([The Bar Council, 2024](#)). Despite this decline, it appears the criminal justice system response is the only indication that could be considered coordinated. There is now a discussion regarding the response in the legal system.

Punitive Measures

VAWG responses involve a variety of organisations from the public, private and third sector. Often the primary purpose is to provide support for victims; preventative measures come in the form of deterrence from the police and Criminal Justice System with more severe punishment ([Jewkes, 2014](#)). An illustration of this is the government VAWG strategy ([Home Office, 2021](#)), which focuses on the criminal justice system and the punitive measures available. The effectiveness of this has not been established through research. The Sentencing Council concludes that there is little evidence to support the deterrent effect of longer custodial sentences. The reasons for offending are an intersection of many factors, and evidence suggests offenders do not understand the complexity of sentencing, so will not know about any increase in tariff ([Gormley, Hamilton and Belton, 2022](#)).

Strong punitive measures are meaningless if women do not trust the police; victims reported that they did not feel the police would take them seriously ([Home Office, 2021](#)). High-profile misconduct and criminality cases within the Metropolitan Police contribute to feelings of mistrust. However, actions of individual officers were the most common reason for a negative reputation of the Metropolitan Police ([Casey, 2023](#)). In the same report, [Casey \(2023\)](#) found that the Metropolitan Police were institutionally misogynistic. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) identifies that 60% of reported rape cases were discontinued due to evidential difficulties ([ONS, 2021](#)). This can be for a variety of reasons, although it boils down to there being no realistic prospect of a conviction at court, or even grounds to charge the suspect. Despite this, [UCL News \(2023\)](#) points to research published in the *Criminal Law Review* that juries will more than not convict a defendant in a rape trial. Over 15 years, 68,863 decisions by jury were examined; it was found that the conviction rate for rape rose from 55% in 2007 to 75% in 2021. Following the discussion on punitive measures as a deterrent, it is necessary to examine how data collection inconsistencies inhibit a clear understanding of the VAWG landscape.

Crime Recording

Disparities between recorded crime and crime surveys will always occur due to changes in police recording practices ([Office for Statistics Regulation, 2024](#)). This is highlighted by the Office for Statistics Regulation when it found “*The introduction of*

the National Crime Recording Standard in 2002 has led to more-consistent crime recording across police forces, but there remain differences in the interpretation of the Counting Rules both within and across police forces” ([Office for Statistics Regulation, 2024](#)). This is in part due to the findings of His Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS). In a document on police impartiality, it was reported that most chief officers experience improper pressure from significant political figures ([HMICFRS, 2024](#)). This influence includes massaging the figures to suit political ends; however, the largest factor is unreported crime. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for UN Women found the most frequent reason given for not reporting was *“I didn’t think the incident was serious enough to report”* ([APPG for UN Women, 2021. p6](#)). This finding is supported by the College of Policing (CoP), who found that VAWG is so prevalent that many women and girls do not feel it is worth reporting ([College of Policing, 2022](#)). This includes experiences such as being grabbed by strangers.

West Yorkshire Police suggested that misogyny is a motivational factor in an offence ([West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2021](#)). However, this does not have the same legal basis as other protected characteristics covered under the Equality Act 2010. Currently, only motivations that display hostility towards race, religion, disability, sexual orientation and transgender identity are specifically covered in criminal law, and only these motivations result in a sentence uplift upon conviction ([Crown Prosecution Service, N.D.](#)). This displays that some protected characteristics are more protected than others. Beyond the practical issues of recording crime correctly, we have seen that women often do not report incidents. It is essential to consider some myths and perceptions of rape and sexual assault.

Rape Myths

Women report utilising higher levels of precautionary behaviour towards the prospect of a stranger rape rather than an acquaintance. ([Crann et al., 2021](#)) This is a product of societal rape myths; the truth is that only 15% of rapes are perpetrated by a stranger. The rest are committed by somebody the woman knows, most commonly a partner or ex-partner, which accounts for 45% of cases ([ONS, 2021](#)). Those who have been assaulted in the past internalise a victim-centred approach to precautionary actions. These include extreme restrictions on lifestyles to avoid socialising or being

in public. The acceptance of these rape myths creates a massive impact on their life yet does not offer them much protection given the nature of the offender-victim relationship. In fact, being withdrawn reduces the opportunity for gaining peer support and so would, if anything, increase risk of abuse. The educational aspect of the empowerment programmes is essential.

Urban myths tell of superhuman strength when we need it most because of adrenaline pumping around the body. Confirmation bias ensures that occasional examples of hysterical strength form the basis of our understanding ([Peters, 2022](#)), such as when 22-year-old Lauren Kornacki of Virginia, USA. managed to lift a BMW motor vehicle which was crushing her father. She then had the presence of mind to conduct CPR on him, saving his life in the process. [Rape Crisis \(N.D.\)](#) concludes that when most people do not experience hysterical strength when in a situation of extreme danger, feelings of disappointment or even anger develop. [Lodrick \(2007\)](#) advises that anybody working with trauma should understand the five Fs of a trauma response. That is fight, flight, freeze, flop and friend, and these are not a conscious reaction, but an evolutionary response based on what has worked in the past and what is most likely to ensure survival. Not necessarily protect mental wellbeing.

[Crann et al. \(2021\)](#) explore the fact that women report favouring assertive verbal and physical responses to a hypothetical threat of sexual assault. Yet there is evidence to indicate this is not the case in real situations. Feelings of self-consciousness and situations where the perpetrator is known, which would be the majority, prevent these being employed. The result is much more passive responses which are less effective. [Norris et al. \(1996\)](#) explain that women may even be concerned about embarrassment and fears of rejection, thus preventing an active resistance to an attack.

It is unknown how many incidents of sexual assault go unreported; sometimes a perpetrator can commit and get away with multiple offences with multiple victims. The snowball effect of reporting following high-profile events must be considered. It gives strength to women. Next, the impact of heightened awareness and the confidence it inspires is discussed.

#METOO

High-profile incidents encourage reporting. A freedom of information request submitted by the BBC revealed a rise in sexual offence reports in the 6 months

following an ITV documentary about Jimmy Saville. It was found that there was a 9% increase in sexual offence reports overall from the 32 out of 43 Home Office police forces that responded. [Levy and Mattsson \(2025\)](#) found that data from 31 developed OECD countries showed an increase in the reporting of sexual assaults by 10% following the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement was founded by [Tarana Burke \(2006\)](#); however, it came to prominence when the actor Alyssa Milano tweeted in 2017 about her experiences of abuse from the film producer Harvey Weinstein and encouraged women to reply to her tweet “Me Too” if they had suffered abuse ([BBC, 2020](#)).

It is not always celebrities that bring about change. Sometimes, brave women such as France’s Gisele Pelicot now a recipient of the Knight of the Legion of Honour for their bravery in waiving their right to anonymity in a rape case. She sparked international debate around misogyny. Women like Madame Pelicot enable other women to find the strength to report incidents; however, preventative measures must be considered to prevent these heinous offences.

Empowerment

The CoP reported that feminist self-defence classes in Boston, MA. United States provided promising evidence that these interventions are successful in teaching young women ways in which to stay safe and recognise inappropriate behaviour in others ([CoP, 2022](#)). A European Parliament report in 2016 found that the instructors needed to be well trained and have a focus on empowerment. It concludes that women’s self-defence is a promising practice to prevent VAWG. It also identifies that it is marginalised at EU and Member State level. This was published before the UK left the European Union and remains relevant today. The report does offer a note of caution, which synchronises with VAWG itself; there are difficulties with the terminologies used. Without a defined term for programmes that focus on empowerment, practices based solely on martial arts are held at the same status as those women find most enabling. The importance is to see women’s self-defence as inhibiting abuse through assertiveness, boundary setting and seeking help, not just physical control ([European Parliament, 2016](#)).

Despite this preference for empowerment over physical resistance, [Crann et al. \(2021\)](#) explain that forceful verbal and physical responses to sexual assault threats

reduce the likelihood of the assault progressing to rape. [David et al. \(2014\)](#) promote the idea that physical self-defence lessons are useful to women, enabling an increased self-confidence. Most research indicated that amongst the benefits of the programme was a greater sense of safety, and some said that it reduced agoraphobic tendencies. It must be noted, however, that this was a specific group of women; these were all ex-service personnel with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder following a sexual assault, so not representative of the wider population. Research suggests that the military transforms identities and by its nature homogenises servicemen and women ([Heward, 2024](#)).

Criticism of women's self-defence classes includes setting women up to fail with unrealistic expectations of repelling an attack from a much stronger assailant ([Cummings, 1992](#)). As a direct counter to this, [Hollander et al. \(2009\)](#) posit that a victim is a social construct; much of the media reports women as being weak and unable to fight a man off. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. [Mellberg et al. \(2022\)](#) argue that an increased fear of crime leads to poorer mental health outcomes and prevents community cohesion. Community cohesion is essential for women to feel safe in public, although it does not solve the problem of VAWG; a reduction in fear will ameliorate it.

It must be noted that the two studies above involve strong institutions, social services for the former and the military for the latter. There is a need to reach those not under the care of an institution.

Case Study- Blossom Training and Development.

In addition to the punitive measures, the UK government VAWG strategy ([Home Office, 2021](#)) tries to develop a plan for education in educational institutions. Whilst welcome, it does not address those so-called NEETS, or Not in Education, Employment or Training, who may be at a greater risk due to lack of support networks and pastoral care offered by educational establishments. The third sector plays an essential role in preventing some falling through the cracks of state-provided assistance.

Blossom Training and Development is a Community Interest Company (CIC) based in Normanton, West Yorkshire. A CIC is a limited company; however, there are additional restrictions, for example, there is a limit to how much money can be paid to

shareholders. A CIC is run for the benefit of the community rather than private shareholders (GOV.UK, N.D.). It was founded by Madeleine France after she set up a women's self-defence class. The programme veered away from traditional martial arts to a more holistic approach which considers the realities of the high skill level required to be able to use martial arts to protect oneself. As the company developed, more emphasis was placed on empowering women with knowledge.

The full-day self-defence programme consisted of a mix of statistics, law, the concept of consent, trauma responses, reporting practices, and defensive skills which focus on communication, breakaway and disengagement. The sessions are designed for women by women with lived experience ([Blossom Training and Development, N.D.](#)). The programme is free of charge to the delegates and is open to women over the age of 13. The structure is a promising start of a Community of Practice.

Etienne and Beverly Wegner-Trayner describe the phrase Community of Practice ([Wegner-Trayner & Wegner-Trayner, 2015](#)). A Community of Practice is formed by people who come together as they share a passion or a concern. For a Community of Practice to exist, there must be a shared domain of interest. In the case of the Blossom self-defence course, the shared domain is women's safety. There must be a community where members come together and build relationships and share information; this exists when women are brought together in the day sessions. There must also be a shared practice: the skills, stories and experiences within the group. The programme is very much about sharing stories, empowering women and finding a voice. The Community of Practice concept lends itself to the third sector as they are flexible and rely on peer-to-peer learning. They can be a low-cost, effective way of learning and development. Whilst there is cause to be cautious on the efficacy of Communities of Practice in specific settings ([James-McAlpine et al., 2023](#)), [Pyrko et al. \(2016\)](#) comment on the benefits of Communities of Practice and point to the uptake in private industry.

[Rose \(2011\)](#) examines the theory of Groupthink, a disadvantage to a Community of Practice. When it comes to the importance of safety from VAWG, conclusions drawn from group participation must be solid. It would be a dangerous irony if rape myths were perpetuated through the very groups intended to empower women. Connected to this, [Hannington and Govender \(2023\)](#) critique Communities of Practice and how

they may perpetuate ideas aligned to coloniality and further marginalise underrepresented/unheard communities when not facilitated adequately. Conversely, when managed well, they provide a voice for communities that are not heard. The experience of Tarana Burke, the #MeToo founder, encapsulates how intersectionality influences empowerment and responses to abuse. Part of her movement was in response to the Black Lives Matter (BLME) movement focusing on black men being killed; she wanted to highlight the abuse of black women, making sure misogyny was part of the conversation too. Despite this, it took a white female actor to go viral. Despite improvements in black women having agency, it took the conduit of a white person to introduce her message to a white audience. ([BBC, 2020](#)) Finding your voice is one of the central pillars of Blossom self-defence training and aims to be that conduit. Ideas on male involvement in women's empowerment are contested, and there are discussions about the realities of male allies.

Male Allies

The initial proposal for the Blossom Training and Development intervention was a mixed approach of women's empowerment and male allyship. The plan was to have 7 sessions named Switch on to Women's Safety, once a month to mirror the frequency of the women's empowerment sessions. Due to lower than anticipated numbers, this run of events was cut short to 4 sessions, with the resources diverted to the women's sessions. Over the 4 sessions, 22 men attended; over the same period, 70 women participated.

[Crann et al. \(2021\)](#) found that few prevention programmes aimed at boys and men reduce perpetration of VAWG offences. [Miller et al. \(2013\)](#) posit that interventions focused on male adolescent athletes in the US did not reduce the incidents of VAWG or negative bystander behaviours from individuals' baseline results. It did prevent them from getting worse, as was seen in the control group; however, the intervention was delivered by the coach of the athletics team; individuals who had not participated on the team for a while and soon lost the benefits of the programme, suggesting that behaviour models need to be regularly re-enforced. This approach does show modest gains, or at least reduces increases in incidents of VAWG, but is clearly not the solution.

A UK programme based in Merseyside targeting gender-based violence was evaluated by [Butler et al. \(2022\)](#). The Mentors in Violence Prevention Programme (MVP) recruited high school students to mentor other pupils at least 2 years their junior. The evaluation was small-scale and found that improvements in attitudes towards gender-based violence were negligible among the mentees, but improvements were seen in the mentors. This finding is not overly surprising, as [Sigal and Sharma \(2025\)](#) highlighted that mentoring is a reciprocal relationship and the mentor and mentee both develop.

Both studies conclude that there needs to be a longer-term relationship. A constant in the life of the male ally is to act as a role model to continue to reduce gender-based violence. It may also suggest that the interventions work better for those who are more inclined to be a male ally in any case. The mentors had to go through a recruitment process in the MVP programme, so had a buy-in from the start. The interventions work less well, if at all, for those harder-to-reach individuals in more need of the programme. These programmes were conducted within high schools, in some ways a captive audience. Strong trusted institutions are needed to reduce VAWG, even if interventions are done externally. As seen with the interventions targeted towards women, it does not attempt to tackle those not in education or employment.

[Smith et al. \(2022\)](#) explore the results of the Allyship-In-Action Benchmark Study. This was a study of over 1,000 people, both men and women, in mid-sized companies in the US. The findings revealed that in general, men perceive that they are better at spotting gender stereotyping and misogyny than women do. This is echoed by [Van Laar et al. \(2025\)](#), who identified the blindness of privilege. It also reveals that those men who participate in allyship communities close this perception gap in identifying misogynistic behaviour compared to colleagues who were part of no such community. This also points towards longer community relationships to maintain effective allyship.

There is a proverb of uncertain provenance that establishes a fish was the last to discover water. Like the male and normalised male privilege, the perpetrators and enablers of VAWG will not always realise. Women's equality has improved in all aspects of life, including sexual and reproductive rights, suffrage, education, and employment, though there is clearly a long way to go ([Fawcett Society, 2016](#)). These strides, or perhaps small steps, towards equality are threatening to some.

Social Media Movements

Fears are evoked by influencers such as Andrew Tate and others in the Manosphere ([Haslop et al., 2024](#); [Roberts et al., 2025](#)). Here lies a form of populism to mobilise young, disaffected males, which can be monetarised and feed the ego of those driving it. A tragic event where two women were seriously injured during an armed attack in Headingley, West Yorkshire. It has been reported that social media accounts linked to the suspect contained extreme material, some linked to “misogynistic rage” ([BBC, 2025](#))

On the other side of the coin, the Tradwife movement seeks to maintain gender inequalities by harking back to a more traditional time. However, [Stotzer & Nelson \(2025\)](#) highlighted that the motivations for the movement are diverse, and for some influencers, it could be monetarisation or political and for others aesthetic. [Sykes et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that this is a matter of women’s autonomy and that criticism is not founded. Indeed, there is a paradox here that women are criticised for living a certain way to promote women’s empowerment. The empowerment process should be one with women, not to women.

Methodology

All data was obtained by Blossom Training and Development for their 2023 Femme-Power programme of 8 empowerment and self-defence one-day classes. The courses ran from March to November 2023 and reached 152 women and girls, of which 61 submitted written feedback representing 40% of attendees. Attendance varied from 15 in June to 30 in May. The feedback form was accessed via a Quick Response (QR) code, a type of barcode used to store information, in this case a web address containing the online form. This was accessible using a smartphone or similar device’s camera to scan the code. The QR was displayed on the final slide of the presentation, and delegates were invited to scan and complete the form. As a follow-up, Blossom Training and Development emailed all the attendees with further resources and a link to the survey to prompt those who did not complete it at the end of the programme. The purpose of the feedback exercise is threefold. To ascertain the impact of the training, to report back to funders and to reflect on the training methods used.

The questions were as follows-

- How did you hear about Blossom Training and Development?
- What do you want to gain from this course and why?
- Before the training, on a scale of 1 – 5, how confident did you feel within yourself about keeping yourself safe? 1 being not at all - 5 being very confident.
- Post the training, on a scale of 1 – 5, how confident do you feel within yourself about keeping yourself safe now you have completed this course? 1 being not at all - 5 being very confident.
- What changes would you make as a result of attending this course?
- Post this training, do you feel more confident in taking part in wider social activities?
- Post the training, do you feel more confident about spending more time outside in your local community?
- Has this course met your expectations? Please explain why.
- Would you recommend this course to a friend?

Findings

The programme should be evaluated using the Kirkpatrick Model ([Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006](#)), which presents a four-stage evaluation. The four stages are evaluating reaction, learning, behaviour, and results. This is a difficult and time-consuming process, even with large institutions. [Lambert \(2012\)](#) posits that educationalists can frontload their efforts with planning sessions and designing resources, which are enjoyable aspects, but neglected evaluation. What is commonly known as a happy sheet ([Hauser et al., 2018](#); [Lambert, 2012](#); [Spowart et al., 2017](#)) is often utilised by training providers. The happy sheet only addresses level 1 of Kirkpatrick's model: reaction. This is usually based on elements such as housekeeping and likeability of the teacher ([Spowart et al., 2017](#)). This information is valuable to the training provider but does not really assess any deep learning. This can only be

assessed by more in-depth evaluation, which can, for example, be achieved by moving through the four-stage Kirkpatrick model.

An inspection of the collated feedback revealed that 29 respondents mentioned confidence or empowerment in their expectations of the course. 26 expected to learn self-defence techniques, 14 expected to learn knowledge and 11 expected to feel safer because of the programme. The average score when asked about confidence in keeping safe increased from 2.30 pre-course to 4.03, indicating a significant increase in feelings of safety. Only 52 responded to the question: What changes would you make as a result of attending this course? 8 stated that they would be more aware of their surroundings. 10 said they felt more confident, 3 said they would be more likely to attend other groups or classes, and 2 said they would better use their voice, a total of 15 providing answers relating to confidence improvement. 11 indicated they would use their newly found physical skills and 4 said they would now utilise technology such as GPS to keep safe. The person who found the programme most impactful stated that it was life-changing. 3 respondents said they would change nothing because of the course. All respondents said yes or maybe about being more confident spending more time out in the community, and all would recommend the training to others.

To discover if a training programme is successful, one must define the learning outcomes to measure them. The Femme Power programme aimed to give attendees information and skills to stay safe within their community. The programme was intended to be a tertiary prevention scheme.

Conclusion

The MIRDATT model showed that in each phase, including media-triggered events, there is a significant VAWG problem globally, nationally and within West Yorkshire, as the statistics highlight. Agreed definitions must be used by all stakeholders involved in the efforts to reduce VAWG. This will improve the accuracy of recording incidents and quantifying and coordinating the response to the problem by government and the third sector.

Evidence confirms that there is an issue of under-reporting incidents to the police. As studies have indicated, a common reason for this is a lack of acknowledgement of

the seriousness and importance of VAWG by the victims themselves. This is why the holistic approach advocated in the Blossom Training and Development programme is vital. They focus not only on physical tactics and legislation but also explore consent and help women find their voice.

Unlike the national VAWG strategy, the Blossom Training and Development approach is preventative and does not wait for an offence to be committed before action is taken. In this way, it is very much victim-focused and not offender-driven. These two approaches are complementary and have the potential to drive down VAWG. We have seen that empowering women to better deal with potentially dangerous situations has been shown to reduce incidents of rape and serious sexual assault. Should the police and criminal justice system focus on robust and timely prosecution of offenders, then an opportunity can be made to intervene and attempt to rehabilitate offenders in prison to prevent recidivism. The third sector is more than capable of rising to this challenge; however, there needs to be support from the public sector to coordinate and quality-assure such interventions.

The funding environment is competitive, sporadic, and complicated; a great deal of time and resources go into securing funds. Anything to make that process less arduous would be welcome, whilst of course maintaining value for money for the public purse. Also, national policy aspiration may differ from the lived experience of local communities. Not listened to communities are often comprised of those less likely to vote, such as the young, those from deprived areas and those with low educational attainment ([Ledgerwood & Lally, 2024](#)). This results in a lack of voice and less incentive for locally elected officials to listen. Women's empowerment programmes must reflect the plurality of women's experiences. Not only race but culture, issues of poverty, rurality, sexual orientation, and disability. Transgender status is also a factor; however, this issue is extremely contentious and beyond the scope of this article.

Blossom Training and Development exemplifies grassroots engagement with women and girls affected by misogynistic abuse in West Yorkshire. The initiative needs to be situated within the local and national response to VAWG. National strategies are often formulated within statutory frameworks, and the third sector is often needed to fill gaps left by underfunded public sector bodies. Men's allyship programmes suffer

from low participation unless it is part of an institutional offer, such as in a school setting.

The evaluation process in the case study is flawed. This is understandable given the resources available to a small Community Interest Company. By upscaling empowerment classes to involve other providers in the county with common aims and methodologies, a larger, more consistent data set can be obtained. Collaboration with a higher education institution would enable greater depth of research to be conducted and help inform programme content and communities that need targeting. The reliance on happy sheets is a practical solution but only really focuses on perception of the training, not learning or, more importantly, impact. The ultimate question of these programmes must be: does it reduce VAWG? The uncoordinated approach makes it difficult to discover any causal relationship between the training provided and any impact on the levels of VAWG. The evaluation must be extended to glean retention of knowledge, long-term changes in behaviour, and whether the skills had been used in a confrontational situation. This should be contrasted against any previous reaction the subject may have had to an incident pre-training. As it stands, the evaluation only assesses satisfaction with the programme, not actual change. What is promising is that satisfaction was 100% with an overwhelming increase in confidence and intention to use the skills taught.

As has been discussed, crime statistics are not always the best measure. The reasons include decreasing confidence in the police, barriers to reporting, and confidence in recognising and calling out lower-level incidents. As the public becomes better informed and confidence grows, it follows that there would be another “Saville Effect” resulting in more reporting. Crime recording practices are not consistent throughout the territorial police forces in England and Wales, which makes data less comparable; also, the introduction of elected representatives to hold Chief Constables to account and a power to hire and fire can lead to, whether intentional or not, undue political pressure on operational matters, including crime recording. This is why quantitative data is insufficient. The statistics require a study using a mixed-method model such as the explanatory sequential model proposed by [Hanson et al. \(2005\)](#). Whilst the Blossom Training and Development feedback attempted this, the claim of this being a tertiary prevention programme needs to be examined over a longer term with an understanding of local crime figures.

Recommendations

A quality mark backed by a public body should be introduced to differentiate types of interventions. Programmes seeking to reduce VAWG will often describe themselves as empowering. These may range from martial arts training in a female-only environment to a more holistic approach aimed at educating people in legislation and psychology as well as physical self-defence. To gain the accreditation, providers would need to demonstrate the holistic approach to their programme.

A repository of initiatives that qualify should be maintained. Representatives from each organisation involved should be encouraged to exchange ideas and standardise practices where appropriate. However, bear in mind that the discrete nature of communities demands that any intervention to prevent VAWG should be bespoke to that community. It should be made clear that there is a place for the police service in these discussions; however, this is a grassroots movement by women, for women, and the police should by no means be the lead agency. A mixture of stakeholders, including the local authority, combined authority, various healthcare providers, and within the criminal justice system, should all be part of this “impact collective”. This will promote understanding and help publicise interventions.

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