

WOMEN IN SHETLAND SHARED THEIR VIEWS



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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a Shetland-wide survey conducted in November 2024. The purpose of the survey was to gather insights into the key issues, challenges, and opportunities experienced by women in Shetland.

Developed by Shetland Women's Aid, the findings of the survey will be used by the Shetland Violence Against Women Children and Young People Partnership (SVAWCYP) to improve specialist services for those affected by gender-based violence (GBV) in Shetland. Data from survey responses has also been shared with Shetland Islands Council, NHS Shetland, and ZetTrans to support the development of the SIC's Equalities Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report.

"[This survey] is very necessary. I hope the feedback leads to some meaningful action."

In the survey, gender-based violence (GBV) was defined as "including, but not limited to domestic abuse (including coercive control), rape, sexual assault, harassment, stalking, female genital mutilation (FGM) and honour-based violence". All references to GBV in our report align with this definition.

The survey was live for two weeks, running from 31st October – 14th November 2024. Open to all women in Shetland, the survey was published via Google Forms and shared online via social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram. It was also shared on Shetland Women's Aid's website, and posters with a QR linking to the survey were distributed to local businesses across Shetland.

"I think it's really important that you are gathering the views of women in Shetland. On the surface it seems like men and women are treated the same, but when you look into it, they're not. It's just really hard to put into words, when a lot of it is so subtle."

The survey was anonymous; however, respondents could choose to leave their details if they wanted to participate in further research.

The survey received 58 responses, offering a diverse range of perspectives on discrimination, gender-based violence, community awareness, and service accessibility. While gender-based violence (GBV) is a significant area of focus for Shetland Women's Aid, this report also addresses broader concerns impacting women in Shetland, particularly those unique to rural island life.

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 a survey to gather insights into the key issues, challenges and opportunities experienced by women in Shetland.

The findings will be used by the Shetland Violence Against Women Children and Young People Partnership (SVAWCYP) to improve specialist services for those affected by gender-based violence. In addition to this, we will be sharing relevant findings with Shetland Islands Council, NHS Shetland and ZetTrans to support the development of their Equalities Outcomes and Mainstreaming Report. The purpose of this report is to create meaningful improvements for those who experience discrimination and disadvantage in Shetland.



SCAN FOR SURVEY

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

Closing date is Thursday 14th November.



Message from Shetland Women's Aid

At Shetland Women's Aid, we want to thank every woman who took the time to share their experiences with us. We will continue to fight for your rights to live peacefully, free from abuse and discrimination, and we want you to know that your voices matter. We hope that local decision makers take note of these survey findings and implement the necessary changes. Together, we can create a safer and more equitable Shetland for everyone.

Please note that this report contains discussions of gender-based violence, including domestic abuse, sexual violence, and discrimination. Some readers may find these topics distressing. If you have been impacted by any of the issues addressed, contact information for local support services can be found at the end of this report. You are not alone.

All quotes used in this report have been anonymised to protect the privacy and safety of participants. Any identifying details have been removed, and care has been taken to ensure that no individual can be identified from their responses. Please contact Shetland Women's Aid directly should you have any questions or concerns. We can also provide a blank copy of the original survey on request.

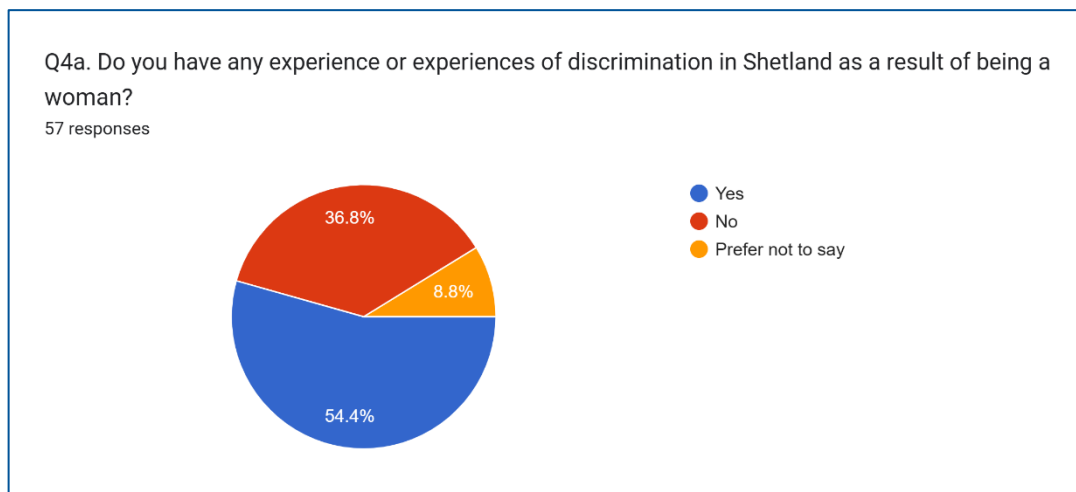
"I appreciate all the support I have had through some of the most difficult times in my life. Women's Aid is such a valuable service."

"There is noticeable improvement for Shetland women this last few years, but there is room to do so much more."

Key Figures

Please note that there was not a requirement to answer every question in the survey.

- 58 women responded to the survey over a 2-week period.
- **31 women (over 54% of respondents) stated that they had faced discrimination in Shetland as a result of being a woman.** 21 stated that they had not, and 6 preferred not to answer.
- **30 women (51.7% of respondents) stated that they have been affected by gender-based violence in Shetland.** 28 stated that they had not.
- 15 women stated that they have received support for gender-based violence in Shetland. This means that **half of those affected by GBV in Shetland did not receive support.**
- 8 women stated that they chose to report their experience to the police. This means that **over 73% of those affected by GBV in Shetland chose not to report to the police.**
- Of the 58 respondents, 47 women gave detailed feedback on areas requiring change, including housing, transport, healthcare, and employment.



CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN SHETLAND

Respondents expressed an array of challenges regarding being a woman in Shetland, impacting on their safety, autonomy, and overall wellbeing. It is important to note that some of these concerns are not exclusive to Shetland. Many of the issues raised throughout the survey responses are indicative of a wider issue; systemic gender inequality experienced across the UK, and the wider world.

However, many of the responses received do indicate that although women across the country face similar issues, some of these issues may be exacerbated by the unique challenges living in an island community can present; namely, Shetland's geographical rural location, traditional culture, and a community where "everyone knows everyone".

We have separated our key findings into themed sections; however, it is essential to recognise that these themes are interconnected. Many women's experiences span multiple challenges, and no single issue exists in isolation. Each woman's individual experience is unique, and we must acknowledge the intersections that shape their lives.

Safety, Fear, and Gender Based Violence

Many respondents described a persistent fear of harassment, domestic abuse, and sexual violence. Most women reported feeling safe on the streets but expressed concerns about safety at public events and within their own homes. This highlights the fact that GBV is more likely to be perpetrated by someone they know, rather than a stranger.

Several women recounted their own experiences of GBV, ranging from groping and sexual harassment to rape and physical violence. When asked about the biggest challenges faced as a woman in Shetland, one participant said, *"knowing that every woman has experienced some form of normalised violence, harassment, misogyny, sexual abuse and trauma"*. This sentiment was echoed in many other answers, with one woman stating, *"I can't count the amount of times I've been sexually abused here! Being a woman in Shetland is hell on earth."*

The issue of Shetland's "drinking culture" is apparent in the responses of the women who recounted their experiences of gender-based violence, with many stating that the pubs are not safe for women *"unless you just 'go along with' all the sexual jokes and harassment. It's become so normal that it's not even seen as a problem"*. Respondents said that some pubs are not welcoming to women, and in regard to groping on nights out, *"There is a lack of understanding of women's right to say no. Sexual harassment is far too common. This makes me worry for young girls."*

"I really don't ever feel comfortable on nights out here. I do not go to the bars or pubs as I have rarely had an experience where I haven't felt discomfort or fear. I have no trust that my personal space or boundaries will be respected or that men register this as important at all."

Over half of those who completed the survey said that they have been affected by gender-based violence in Shetland, including but not limited to domestic abuse and coercive control, rape, sexual assault, harassment and stalking. One shared her experience of being sexually assaulted by a classmate and living with the lifelong effects of the trauma. Another spoke about living with domestic abuse and thinking this was normal, because it seemed to be accepted by the community around her. There were also multiple answers relating to spiking on nights out, and the fear of the potential consequences of being intoxicated in public.

It is clear from the responses received that gender-based violence is a prevalent issue for women in Shetland, with this topic receiving the most detailed and personal responses.

Some additional quotes regarding safety, fear, and GBV:

"There is a real problem with a certain generation of men in Shetland around consent and boundaries with women. I don't know a single woman in Shetland who hasn't been either harassed, assaulted, spiked, stalked or followed home at night."

"Women's physical safety is often ignored."

"[I'm] living in fear in the same small community as my abusive ex-husband."

"There's also abuse and control, and sexual violence, but I think that happens everywhere. Shetland is no different."

"Some people in the community don't want to choose sides when domestic abuse isn't 'visible' to them, but by not choosing sides they side with the abuser."

"I have not suffered from violence, but lots of intimidation from drunk men being over friendly/over touchy etc. Makes my skin crawl and is quite traumatic. I doubt there's a woman on Shetland who has not experienced this."

"All I know is that however badly men treat women now at least we talk about it. I was terrified of my husband."

Culture of Misogyny

Summarising the findings of the survey, it is clear that there is a culture of misogyny and sexism ingrained in Shetland, where gender-based violence and other forms of discrimination are normalised. When asked about the challenges of being a woman in Shetland, one simply answered, *"an age old traditional patriarchal culture"*. Another said that there is a *"normalisation of sexual violence (including groping and inappropriate remarks) in Shetland."*

Many respondents cited a "boys club" mentality in the community, including in businesses, workplaces, and organisations, where women have been made to feel excluded or less than, and *"you need to be made of strong stuff to stand by your beliefs on daily basis"*.

Speaking to the acceptance of misogyny in Shetland, Up Helly Aa was used as an example in many participants' answers. While several women acknowledged recent changes to "allow" women into Lerwick UHA's main event as positive progress, it was seen by many as not good enough. One woman said there is *"still a lot of misogyny and negative views surrounding UHA"*, and another said that *"women are generally not made welcome in the galley sheds"*. Several respondents said that change must start with girls being included in the Junior Jarl Squad. Respondents also linked Up Helly Aa with incidences of gender-based violence and discrimination. One said, *"I have been kissed by men 50+ when I was 15 at events such as Up Helly Aa when I was obviously struggling to get away"*. Another described how it appears as if men are given a free pass to *"have sex with any women they choose on this one night while their spouse and other female members of their family work in the halls serving soup and sandwiches."*

Shetland is perceived to have a somewhat traditional culture, according to the survey responses, and this results in sexism and discrimination. One woman said, *"the community is very old fashioned in terms of gender and gender roles"* and another said that while rules have changed, *"attitudes are taking time to catch up"*. One respondent described being treated differently at work because she was doing a job typical of men. In regard to the workplace, another said, *"I was called a "good girl" when I did my work well - men in my workplace were not called "good boys". I was asked to make teas and coffees, and take lunch orders. Men who, on paper, did the*

same role as me were not asked to do this.". Speaking on discrimination and double standards, one woman said, *"I have been expected to look "presentable" and wear makeup, while my male counterparts have not."*

It is clear that the normalisation of sexism in our community contributes to women in Shetland feeling unsafe, unheard, and underappreciated.

Some additional quotes regarding a culture of misogyny in Shetland:

"The culture where it is okay to make sexist, misogynistic jokes and if you try to challenge this you are considered a 'kill joy' or over sensitive as 'it's just a joke'. People (men and many women) believe there is equality and don't recognise the deeply engrained behaviours, expectations, undertones of gender inequality that displays itself every day."

"Attitudes towards women in Shetland is a challenge, like probably everywhere else in the world. Sexist and misogynistic comments/"jokes" not only go unchecked, but are actually made by prominent men in our community. You only have to look at Up Helly Aa acts as an example. It can feel unsafe to call out these behaviours because you don't want to stand out in a small community. That does feel unique to Shetland, being a small place where it's easier to go along with the status quo."

"There is also a 'lads culture' in places which also excludes women or makes women uncomfortable. This can restrict women from progressing to their desired goals in life."

"The music industry in Shetland can be challenging for women. Most bands (of all genres) contain known abusers, and there is a culture of certain musicians preying on young women and girls. There is also a lack of representation, and so it feels like there is a lack of opportunities for women and girls to play music live, and feel safe and secure at the same time."

"There really needs to be a whole culture shift in Shetland."

Barriers to Support and Justice

When asked about reporting gender-based violence in Shetland, many women cited a fear of not being believed, and social repercussions as reasons for not reporting or seeking support. Some women mentioned that reporting would destroy their support system, as their abuser was part of their family or community. Others spoke of a culture of silence and victim-blaming. This problem is not unique to Shetland; however, it can be made worse in a rural area where isolation can feel like a very real consequence of speaking out.

When asked what prevented her from seeking support, one woman said, *“doing so would have blown up the family and therefore my only support system”*. Another woman stated, *“Shetland has a small community and there is a lot of prejudice and gossip which influences people’s attitudes and actions.”* On not being believed, women surveyed said that this fear was true regarding both loved ones and professionals in Shetland.

Many participants also identified that GBV has become so normalised in Shetland that, even as victims, they didn’t recognise it as a crime. Perpetrators are rarely held accountable, both in court and in the community, and therefore social acceptance made women feel hesitant to report. One woman said, *“I didn’t want relatives (or other locals) to know and also felt like I was maybe overreacting”*. Another said they had, *“lack of awareness/understanding of what I had experienced”*.

The survey found that over 73% of those affected by GBV in Shetland chose not to report to the police, and this appears to be directly related to a lack of trust in authorities. *“The police’s attitudes towards women who have experienced gender-based violence (particularly domestic abuse) is a significant challenge. There is a huge culture of victim blaming and diminishing the experiences of women. I do not think that sexual and domestic crimes are taken as seriously as they should be, and the criteria for getting close to a charge is extremely high”*.

Many women said that the police in Shetland protect those closest to them. This is a huge barrier when it comes to reporting, whether or not it is true. Others said that there is a lack of proper understanding of GBV within the

local police force. One respondent said, *"the way the police gaslight and talk down to victims is repulsive"*, and another stated, *"our police force need to recognise how rife sexual violence and domestic abuse are in this community and prioritise an effective response to this. Violence against women is at a crisis level, but it does not feel like local police take their responsibility to address this seriously at all. I know too many women who have been met with disinterest, judgement and ignorance when trying to get justice or protect other women from dangerous men in this community."*

Of those 58 who took part in the survey, 8 women spoke about their actual experiences of reporting to the police, and their responses were notably mixed. Some said that individual officers were helpful, but that there was a lack training and awareness across the board. *"The police officer I spoke to was nice enough, but he did have to ask me some questions that felt a bit victim-blamish"*. One respondent said, *"some officers were respectful and helpful, others less so. One referenced to my husband as a 'good guy'"*.

Another huge barrier identified from the survey was the perceived lack of justice available to victims of GBV in Shetland, and feeling *"what's the point?"*. Many women noted that the conviction rate for all forms of GBV is low, and felt that when perpetrators of abuse are convicted, the punishment appears to be too lenient. Others stated that the threshold for convictable evidence is high, with one respondent saying, *"It happened behind closed doors, with no evidence other than "he said she said" so I knew a charge, let alone a conviction, was incredibly unlikely."* Many of the women who responded to the survey said that they didn't want to go through the stress of the reporting process, and possible trial and sentencing, only to have a negative outcome. On Shetland's court system, it was noted that *"court is not a safe and welcoming space for women, and it is very easy to run into men who have been charged with crimes against women and girls. The court appears to be set up to make the accused feel safe and respected, rather than the victims."*

It is clear from the results of our survey that there are substantial barriers when it comes to women seeking support, and justice, for gender-based violence in Shetland.

Some additional quotes regarding barriers to support and justice:

"I was worried about being believed or looking like I was making things up for attention. It took me a while to fully understand that what I experienced was actually rape/sexual assault, and not just "a bad night"."

"We all know that rape convictions are so rare. Everyone will know what's happened to you either way and you may be branded a liar."

"What prevented me at the time was fear of not being believed and the danger that could pose to my safety."

"I was blamed for the severely drunken state he was in."

"I didn't think of it as a criminal thing, even though I know it was. I wasn't in danger or anything, it was just a controlling relationship."

"In general, perpetrators of domestic abuse and sexual violence are not held to account in Shetland. Due to our close-knit community, and certain attitudes, harmful behaviours often go unchecked. For example, prominent members of the community standing up for known (at times, convicted!) abusers and sex offenders. People in our community make excuses for perpetrators, at the expense of the victims - often women."

Women's Healthcare

When asked about challenges regarding being a woman in Shetland, the topic of women's health was frequently mentioned. Some respondents noted that while women's health is often underfunded and under researched worldwide, the geographical location of Shetland presents additional challenges. There is limited access to specialist women's services, and a lack of clear pathways for women requiring specific healthcare. One participant noted that there is a gynaecologist in Shetland, but did not know how to access this service. She went on to say, "*access to abortions are limited*" and "*we still have to travel to the mainland for a wider variety of options*".

In regard to healthcare, another woman said, "*women's health care is hit and miss, and getting a second opinion about gynaecological issues is pointless*". Several participants noted the link between trauma and underlying health conditions, "*the trauma that women too often experience is unrecognised and not understood as the root cause of a lot of the health problems they eventually are diagnoses with. Lots of women in this community have significant and debilitating auto immune diseases that we are just beginning to understand is related to trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence.*"

Many women agreed that women's health issues are not taken seriously in Shetland. One respondent said, "*it seems that often healthcare workers brush women off and don't take them that seriously. Everything seems to be blamed on periods and left at that*", and many other responses echoed this.

There was a call for more women-only health services, and a suggestion of a specific sexual health clinic time for women, for safety reasons. "*I don't feel safe visiting the sexual health clinic in case I get harassed or see one of the people who sexually abused me when I was younger*".

On the subject of health, some respondents noted the effects that gender-based violence has on our local healthcare system, "*it's a public health issue and national crisis and we all have a responsibility to actively and robustly respond*". Others noted the link between mental health and GBV, suggesting

that if local mental health services were improved, this would have a positive effect on local charities providing specialist GBV support.

It is clear from the survey submissions that improving access to healthcare, and the quality of that healthcare, in Shetland is a priority for women.

Some additional quotes regarding women's healthcare:

"Women's health is still a grossly unexplored and underfunded area. Again, the burden women are expected to carry in terms of health is also enormous and largely invisible. Health issues women face are often written off, undiagnosed and minimised by healthcare professionals."

"I feel women have to go above and beyond to advocate for their concerns to be taken seriously in the healthcare world. I think it is due to this expectation that women suffer in silence, not take up space and not be visible in ways that cause disruption."

"I think women should be listened to regarding their own health and bodies."

Travel and Transport

A lack of safe and reliable travel options was repeatedly mentioned by respondents when asked about challenges regarding being a woman in Shetland. Responses looked at both travel in and around Shetland, and also barriers to leaving the island. A lack of late-night public transport came up as a safety issue, with one woman stating, *"It would be good to see more women bus drivers on evening shifts, when women passengers are most likely to feel unsafe. Same goes for taxi drivers."*

Regarding busses, many stated that affordable public transport around Shetland was a huge issue for women, mothers in particular. The high cost of living and travelling on and off the island was also seen as a significant barrier, especially in terms of accessing healthcare. Some respondents did not see transport as a gendered issue, while others noted that the high cost of travelling to and from the island *"means that it's expensive for women to see their support network and potentially leave an abusive relationship."*

Many respondents noted that childcare is typically seen as a "woman's role" and therefore it is important that women can travel around Shetland at a low cost for attending appointments and social support. It was also noted that due to childcare responsibilities, mothers tend to work part-time and cannot easily rely on infrequent bus timetables.

One woman commented on how expensive it is to leave an abusive relationship, citing ferry costs and lack of transport as significant factors. Another said, *"Lots of women can't drive in Shetland and many have small children and may feel isolated in rural villages. Having more regular buses to Lerwick would help to connect these women with services and support around work and childcare commitments."*

Housing

When asked about challenges regarding being a woman in Shetland, the topic of housing was also frequently mentioned. Some respondents stated that this was an issue for everyone, not just women, but some did note occasions where women were more likely to be negatively impacted by the so-called housing crisis. Many women said that there was a lack of affordable housing for single women, in a safe area of Shetland, and one woman called for *"more affordable housing for single women so we don't have to rely on being in a relationship to afford rent"*.

Some participants asked that priority be given to families, single mothers and pregnant mothers regarding housing allocation. There were also several calls for adequate housing for people leaving situations of domestic abuse. When asked about improvements which could be made to services, one respondent said, *"safety when housing vulnerable young women needs to be addressed. Emergency housing with mixed sexes sharing bathroom facilities is not acceptable or safe"*.

Another woman noted, *"Housing policy needs to change, there are times when people should be removed from tenancies especially when violence or verbal threats have occurred"*. There was also a number of requests for Housing Officers to be better trained to assess the needs of women, particularly those who are victims of abuse.

Workplace Discrimination, Childcare, and Economic Barriers

Many women who responded to the survey described experiencing sexism in the workplace, including sexual assault and harassment. When asked about the challenges of being a woman in Shetland, one respondent wrote *"male chauvinism in the workplace"* however, it was noted by another woman working in a male dominated workplace that *"there has been some improvement in the last 10 years"*.

Several women noted traditional gender stereotypes, and how women are often expected to have children, and be the main caregivers of those children. *"Childcare/education industry is very female orientated, which puts a lot more pressure on women."* Many respondents referred to the conflicting roles that women must place in our society, having to decide between raising children or being financially independent.

One woman noted that there is *"very little awareness of childcare issues and what working in a school/childcare involves. If you're providing the childcare - there is very little childcare for your own children!"*. Another said, *"Childcare in Shetland tends to be considered a women's role, and therefore men are left out of the conversation. There are some new baby groups specifically aimed at dads, and it would be good to see more of that, so that the burden and responsibility of childcare can be shared more easily."*

When answering a question on their experiences of discrimination in Shetland, one woman said, *"Things tend to favour the man, time wise as well. It's the woman who has to fit work around school hours and childcare etc"*. Another echoed this sentiment by saying, *"My career suffered with lack of childcare I was told it was my fault for having them"*. Overall, there was a clear theme of childrearing being a woman's responsibility, and therefore women suffer in the workplace.

Many said that there is a lack of opportunities for young mothers in Shetland to make their own money or learn new skills, and several women suggested night classes and creches to make things easier for single parents. Many also cited maternity leave as a challenge, as well as returning to work and having to work part time hours to accommodate childcare. It was pointed

out several times that this is not something men tend to have to think about in the same way.

Some additional quotes on workplace discrimination, childcare, and economic barriers:

"An understanding that the "gender pay gap" doesn't actually mean that men are paid more than women for doing the same job, but more that women are socialised into jobs that pay less, and usually have to work part time to be responsible for childcare."

"In schools, sports and opportunities should not be separated by gender. It would be good to see girls encouraged into construction, plumbing, electrician, etc. and boys encouraged into care work, hairdressing, childcare, etc. to even the field for everyone a bit."

"As women are proportionally having to meet childcare needs, some can't get to evening activities"

"Being undermined at work. Eg. Men taking credit for my ideas, being rushed to help where male colleagues wouldn't be."

BENEFITS OF BEING A WOMAN IN SHETLAND

Our survey asked women, “What are some of the greatest benefits to being a woman in Shetland, if any?” and responses were notably mixed, with many answering “none” or acknowledging that any benefits to living in Shetland are not gender specific. While the aim of this report is to highlight women’s concerns and identify key areas of improvement, it is also important to acknowledge the positive aspects of life for women in Shetland.

Many women expressed benefits of living in a small community and spoke of a “sisterhood” of supportive women. One said, *“there are a number of successful strong women in Shetland so it’s a great benefit to be among them and be inspired by them”* and another commented that the *“Shetland sisterhood is strong and persistent”*.

Speaking on the benefits, someone said, *“The strong women. There are some who heartbreakingly buy into the misogyny and perpetuate their own form of harm against women who speak out, but there is a huge amount who are trail blazers and want things to be better for future generations”* while acknowledging the challenges, *“There are also lots of opportunities to get involved in local things to develop themselves and perhaps push for cultural change, although this is incredibly daunting when knowing the deep rooted sexism you are up against here.”*

“In a word, the benefit is ‘potential’. We could use our community spirit to really look at this issue of violence against women and beat it here, but it needs to be EVERYONE’S responsibility. We all need to say that it is wrong and entirely unacceptable that women here suffer what they do. As a woman I still see that potential, although I often feel bleak.”

Many respondents highlighted the specialist support services that are available for women in Shetland, naming both Shetland Women’s Aid and the Compass Centre, and stating, *“we are lucky to have two local charities that specialise in gender-based violence”*. Another noted that the Shetland Islands Council appears to be taking gender-based violence seriously, citing new GBV training as a good example of governance.

Numerous respondents highlighted that overall, it feels safe to live in Shetland. We are lucky to have wide open spaces here, and at least in public daytime settings, things are not dangerous. Most respondents mentioned that the streets in Shetland feel much safer than they do on the mainland, with one woman commenting, *"I am not usually afraid to walk home at night."* Another said, *"After living in big cities Shetland is, by comparison, extremely safe"*.

Acknowledging the reality that the abuse women face in Shetland is often in private, one respondent noted that, *"the streets are usually safer but a lot of violence still happens behind closed doors"*.

Some additional quotes on the benefits of living in Shetland as a woman:

"There is a lot of support for young mothers to meet up with each other, I think. Generally, women look out for each other on nights out"

"Safer than the mainland"

"Lots of opportunities. Good community"

"NHS services here are excellent. When I've needed it, I've always been able to access timely, sensitive support. It's also good to see that there's good provision in the third sector for women - Women's Aid, Compass, and the Menopause groups for example"

"Small woman business owners"

"Generally speaking, our maternity department is excellent, considering that we're an island community. However, I wouldn't view this as a benefit as such, as it should be the bare minimum wherever you live."

"A small community is great when it is supportive, but it is not helpful when false information, gossip is leading to judgement, which should not be part of any local authority's service."

WHAT ABOUT THE MEN?

While the survey was created to understand the views of women living in Shetland, several respondents proposed that men should be surveyed too. One woman suggested, *"I believe there should be a focus not on the female services but also male services. Each tailored to relevant needs in Shetland."* While answering a question on the biggest challenges you face as a woman, one wrote, *"No difference to that of woman anywhere in UK and also that of men also"*. It is clear from the responses received that there was a strong minority of participants who did not understand why women specifically were being consulted, and did not acknowledge experiencing life in Shetland any differently, due to their gender. Some respondents did not like the questions being answered, and did not view their gender as a barrier in any way.

Someone wrote, *"I don't feel that discrimination against women is a problem. I do think that there is a lack of support available for men though and real stigma around them speaking up"*.

However, many women did call for a gendered analysis to be taken in regard to service improvement and were grateful to have the opportunity to share their views.

"Apart from domestic abuse and rape, people don't really think about any other women's issues. If you do bring up stuff it's "what about men". Shetland is as sexist as anywhere else."

"I don't think the local community thinks of things with a gendered lens. It feels that when organisations are trying to be inclusive, there's a move towards being "gender neutral", rather than take into account that men, women, and non-binary people have different unique needs. There's nothing wrong with some gender-neutral things, but it does dampen down the understanding of what women in particular need."

"Brilliant that you are doing this survey"

"Thank you for doing this questionnaire. It is crucial".

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE MAKERS

The purpose of the survey was to gather insights into the key issues, challenges, and opportunities experienced by women in Shetland, with a view to addressing these challenges. The survey invited women to suggest improvements, both to support women affected by gender-based violence, and to ensure general life for all women in Shetland is safe and equitable. Of the 58 respondents, 47 women gave detailed feedback on areas requiring change, including housing, transport, healthcare, and employment. These women want their voices to be heard, and it is up to local change-makers to implement their suggested changes.

Suggested improvements regarding GBV:

- **Prevention Education:** This was perhaps the most suggested improvement, with calls for a better community understanding of the impacts of trauma caused by gender-based violence, as well as the warning signs of abuse. There were calls to educate children from a young age on harmful gender stereotypes, consent, and equality, both at home and school. There were also many calls to better educate professional services such as social work and housing support, on how to respond to victims of domestic abuse in a trauma-informed way. Many respondents acknowledged that specialist education in Shetland already exists, however schools, workplaces and organisations must make better use of the knowledge available to them.
- **Cultural Shift:** There was a call for people in Shetland to acknowledge the seriousness of GBV and the link between traditional and sexist values. Many women suggested that our community must support survivors of GBV better, avoiding gossip and victim-blaming. There were pleas to stop publicly supporting known perpetrators of GBV, allowing there to be little consequences for their actions. There were also suggestions of a “back to basics” campaign on feminist issues in Shetland, to tackle harmful behaviours and stereotypes.
- **Men as Active Bystanders:** Many women asked for men to intervene and challenge inappropriate or threatening behaviour from other men. There were suggestions to encourage “prominent local men” such as elected members, to speak out against misogynistic

behaviour and better support women publicly. There was an acknowledgment that there are many good men in Shetland, but to actually be good men, they must call out harmful behaviours amongst their peers, and this can be difficult in a small community.

- **Police & Justice:** Women asked that the police better prioritise responses to sexual violence and domestic abuse, and to make it clear to the public that they want to hear from victims. Women asked for better understanding from professionals throughout the criminal justice process, allowing women to feel safer to speak up and report GBV. Respondents asked that the police better acknowledge the barriers to reporting and examine perceived victim blaming in their approach.
- **Specialist Services:** While there was praise for existing services specialising in GBV, there was an acknowledgement of extremely long waiting lists for “non-urgent” support such as counselling and trauma therapy. Many referenced local mental health services also being stretched and lacking a specialist understanding of the effects of GBV.
- **Trauma-informed Healthcare:** There were calls to ensure that all medical procedures are trauma-informed, recognising that women who have experience trauma may find invasive procedures and dentistry difficult.
- **Housing:** There were suggestions to prioritise housing for women and children who are victims of domestic abuse in Shetland, and single mothers. It was also important to many respondents that victims of GBV are housed in a separate area from their abusers, and that Housing Officers are trained by GBV specialists.

Other suggested improvements regarding life for women in Shetland:

- **Accommodation:** There was a significant desire for more affordable housing options, particularly so that single women do not have to rely on being in a relationship to afford rent.
- **Transport:** Women asked for more affordable transport, both in Shetland and in regard to leaving the island. There was also a call to encourage more women to become bus and taxi drivers, especially at night. More regular bus services were also requested.

- **Women's Health:** Respondents asked for more publicity and education around women's health and options in Shetland, particularly in regard to gynaecological issues. Some asked for women-only health clinics, and a drop-in service to ask about periods, endometriosis, etc. without needing a doctor's appointment. There was a call for clearer pathways for accessing women's health support.
- **Employment:** Women asked for better opportunities in Shetland for roles traditionally seen as male-dominated, in fields such as construction, plumbing, and electrical work. Respondents also asked that employers better understand the needs of working mothers and offer more flexible working arrangements. There was a suggestion of a "Women in Business" event, aimed at supporting women to network and connect with their peers.
- **Training:** Survey participants asked that women, particularly single mothers, have better access to night classes and free training, to improve their chances of reemployment in the future. Women asked for opportunities to learn practical skills like basic home maintenance and DIY.
- **Childcare:** Women asked for more flexible and affordable childcare arrangements, and for childcare to be seen as a parent's job, and not a women's job. Better access to temporary creche options to allow for appointments was requested. More family friendly activities and social events were suggested, to allow women to socialise with their peers while looking after their children.
- **Drinking Culture:** Women called for better alternatives to drinking alcohol in social settings and asked for campaigns to tackle the normalisation of excessive drinking amongst men in Shetland.

Some quotes on improving life for women in Shetland:

"I also think that everyone who works with the public, in any way, should be trained in gender-based violence. Not just to be able to respond better, but to also understand why women don't report, or why they choose to stay in abusive relationships."

"There needs to be a lot of prevention work for children and young people, and this should be delivered by workers who actually know what they're talking about. I have been aware of some youth workers

and educators saying quite untrue things about rape and domestic abuse, and this can cause more harm than good"

"The SIC should encourage their staff - the men in particular - to view gender-based violence as an issue for everyone to solve. Training should be required on induction, just like child and adult protection."

"Education on the bystander effect in schools and colleges."

"Therapy sessions should be more readily available"

"Some decent places to go out! The pubs are really man-centric and not particularly nice places to spend an evening."

"Have ladies only nights at social places like pubs, clickimin."

"Some work still needs to be done with employment opportunities. There are still some no go areas for women."

"Deal with toxic masculinity in schools!"

"I had an emergency section for my second baby and the whole process was quite traumatising not knowing what was going on in regards to my own body. Someone explaining to me what to expect would have been way less traumatic."

"Sober supporters in/around pubs at weekends."

"I think if someone came in and educated male colleagues on sexism in the workplace and examples of that then maybe there would be a clearer understanding of what you can and cannot do."

"Perhaps a 'back to basics' campaign on what Feminism means - why both men and women can and should live by feminist values for the good of all people. Perhaps highlighting common quotes/jokes/assumptions that are actually misogynistic but that are so common people don't even see it as that. Work on parents as role models for their sons and daughters."

"PLEASE give police and defence solicitors here a significant amount of training and do something like a campaign (like WisToo) about the police and court to voice people's difficult experiences and push the police and defence solicitors here to change. If they don't change, NOTHING WILL."

"I also wish the sheriffs, police men, council workers would get training in gaslighting. With the right understanding it should be easily seen from a writ or any official document."

"It would be good to see higher rates of pay for services which are predominately seen as "women's work" - social care, education, health, domestic labour, catering, service industries, childcare, etc."

"fathers to be encouraged to take flexible working and longer paternity leave to support their partner"

"I think SIC have a lot of equality policies etc. and in the office jobs they probably do quite well, but not when it comes to roads, labour...anything practical. There really needs to be a whole culture shift in Shetland."

CONCLUSION

The findings of this report underscore the urgent need for systemic changes to improve the experiences of women in Shetland. Addressing gender-based violence, discrimination, and access to services will require collaboration between policymakers, service providers, and the wider community. However, Shetland has many strengths, including substantial community networks. By building on these positives and taking action to address key challenges, Shetland can become a safer, fairer, and more inclusive place for everyone.

If you would like more information on any of 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@mensadviceline.org.uk