

Written evidence submitted by GroundsWell (VAWG0051)

The GroundsWell Consortium is an interdisciplinary team of researchers who, in collaboration with local communities and policymakers, are understanding and documenting the role that urban green and blue spaces (UGBS) play in the social, economic, environmental, cultural and health systems that make up urban areas. Specifically, Groundswell is identifying how we can use UGBS to reduce health inequalities that have emerged in these settings and chronic disease prevention. GroundsWell has three main hub cities: Belfast, Edinburgh and Liverpool. GroundsWell researchers, and associated partner organisations, in Belfast received additional funding from the Medical Research Council's Public Health Intervention Development (PHIND/ UKRI158) fund to develop system-oriented interventions and policies to end violence against women and girls in public, outdoor spaces.

In addressing the issue of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), this submission poses that the committee consider:

- That VAWG be considered a public health issue.
- That public, outdoor spaces are crucial settings which have the ability to encourage or discourage VAWG, and thus potentially further widen existing health inequalities.
- The importance of meaningful engagement with stakeholders working in the VAWG landscape, including researchers, policymakers, practitioners, third-sector organisations, charities, community groups, youth groups etc.
- The importance of joined-up thinking across policy and practice, at the national UK level, but also at the local Northern Ireland level.

In Northern Ireland, 98% of women (>18 years old) and 73% of girls (12 – 17 years old) have experienced as least one form of violence in their lifetime. Around 16% of women report the location of their 'worst recalled violence event' being in public spaces such as parks, forests, and streets or on public transport (1,2). As a result, and because of the associated health, social and economic impacts of VAWG, preventing VAWG has been identified as a top government priority in Northern Ireland (3). However, there remains a paucity of evidence into the role of outdoor, public spaces in VAWG. Recent research led by Queen's University Belfast researchers which produced an evidence gap map did not identify any studies investigating the role of public spaces (specifically urban green and blue spaces) in reducing gender disparities or examined violence in urban green and blue spaces against women (4).

In a recent scoping review, we aimed to identify UGBS interventions to prevent VAWG, and provide guidance to support the design, and implementation of future strategies (5). This review identified eight UGBS interventions aimed at preventing violence. The majority (n=5, 63%) implemented 'cleaning and greening' interventions, a Safe Summer Parks Programme (n=1), crime prevention through environmental design (n=1) and a park-based after-school mental health programme (n=1). Each study reported positive intervention effects on violence-related outcomes, including improved safety perceptions, and reductions in arrests, and serious and violent crimes. Whilst this review identified effective UGBS interventions preventing violence in the general population, it highlighted the absence of UGBS interventions to specifically prevent VAWG; and emphasised limited variation regarding intervention type and location.

We have established a VAWG working group in Queen's University Belfast, that involves interdisciplinary researchers from public health, criminology, anthropology, complexity science and architecture, alongside project partners from Belfast City Council (urban regeneration team), The Executive Office Northern Ireland, EastSide Partnership, Belfast Healthy Cities, Women's Aid, Police Service Northern Ireland and Women's Resource and Development Agency. This group oversees the direction of our PHIND research into the development of system-oriented interventions and policies to end VAWG in outdoor, public spaces. The research project aims to: 1) engage key stakeholders in Belfast to develop a systems map of the issue along with areas for potential action and intervention, 2) engage the general public through citizen jury techniques, to prioritise and expand upon the areas for

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action identified by stakeholders, and 3) to engage in meaningful co-development of interventions and strategies with these groups to target VAWG in public, outdoor spaces in Belfast.

In January 2025, we held two participatory workshops with over 30 multi-sectoral stakeholders identified as having previously or currently working on preventing VAWG in Belfast, to answer the question “how can we prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast?” In these workshops, we co-developed a systems map with stakeholder organisations, representing a shared understanding of the physical, social, cultural, economic and political environments contributing to the prevention of VAWG in outdoor, public spaces in Belfast. Furthermore, we used this map to identify and explore interventions and policies to prevent VAWG in Belfast. The systems map, and the resulting potential interventions and policies, can be found in the draft report (NB: This report is still in preparation stage but will be finalized by 31st March 2025) (6).

The systems map contains 31 factors with 69 connections. Development of the systems map highlighted five key main themes to be considered when preventing VAWG in outdoor, public spaces in Belfast:

- (1) Physical: infrastructure, design, and use of public space;
- (2) Attitudinal: knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours;
- (3) Political: public policy, governance, and the political landscape;
- (4) Education: awareness, training, and capacity building; and
- (5) Outcomes.

Eight key action points were identified by stakeholders to prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces:

- 1) Improving societal education about VAWG in outdoor public spaces;
- 2) Inclusive and safe design;
- 3) Societal education in sport;
- 4) Park design and operation;
- 5) Standards around reporting in relation to VAWG;
- 6) Education – broader societal, cultural, and social norm education to improve understanding and public perceptions of VAWG;
- 7) Investment in neighbourhood policing;
- 8) First principles. - policy and agreed guidelines that mandates inclusive and safe design of public spaces through participatory design

In May/June 2025, these action points will be further developed by members of the public through citizen jury approaches.

In conclusion, the existing evidence suggests that outdoor, public spaces are a crucial setting for consideration when addressing the issue of VAWG. The GroundsWell team, through engagement with multi-sectoral stakeholders, have co-developed a systems map to illustrate the VAWG prevention landscape in Belfast which has application across Northern Ireland and across other UK

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nations, and identified preliminary key action points. This research is ongoing, and outputs will be added to our website as they emerge (groundswelluk.org).

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