



THE UNITED KINGDOM – Gender Based Violence Policy Briefing July 2018 (updated August 2020)

The United Kingdom (UK) is a country in Western Europe with a population of approximately 66 million. According to the World Bank country classifications by income level, the UK is currently classed as a high income nation (US\$ 12,236 or more).

Gender parity across life domains:

The UK has non-discrimination laws in hiring women and a law mandating equal pay ([Equal Pay Act 1970](#)). Nonetheless, women tend to work longer hours and earn less than men. To advance gender equality in higher education and research, in 2005 the [Equality Challenge Unit \(ECU\) established Athena SWAN Charter](#). Women in the UK first received the right to vote in 1918. [The Representation of People Act](#) became law in February 1918. From that point on women over 30, who were occupiers of property or married to occupiers, were the only women entitled to vote. Other groups of women were not allowed to vote until the [Equal Franchise Bill](#) in 1928, which granted equal voting rights to all adults aged 21 and over. Women in the UK are underrepresented in positions of political power, with most seats in parliament being held by men. To date, the UK has had two female prime ministers, namely Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May. As for family life, women and men have equal parental rights in marriage and after divorce. The UK law permits abortion if a woman's **physical or mental health** is endangered by pregnancy or there is a substantial risk that if the child were born it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped. Abortions through private clinics are more easily available. Statutory maternity leave in the UK is a maximum of 52 weeks. For the first six weeks, women receive 90% of their average weekly earnings. For the next 33 weeks, they get £140.98 or 90% of average weekly earnings (whichever is lower). The remaining 13 weeks are unpaid. Most companies and organisations, however, have their own maternity schemes which are more beneficial to women. Women and men have similar rates of primary, secondary, and tertiary education attainment. More men than women are PhD graduates.

Gender equality indexes:

1. [Gender Inequality Index \(GII\)](#) measures gender inequalities between women and men in three important areas: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status. Values range from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating more disparities between the genders. The UK's current GI index is 0.119. Countries with a similar score to the UK are: Croatia (0.122), Greece (0.122), Poland (0.120), Belarus (0.119), Montenegro (0.119), and United Arab Emirates (0.113).
2. [Global Gender Gap Index \(GGGI\)](#) assesses gender gaps on economic, political, education, and health criteria. Values range from 0 to 1, with lower values

indicating more disparities between the genders. According to the Global Rankings Report 2020, the UK's GGI is 0.767 (rank 21 out of 153 countries). Compared with previous report published in 2018, the UK's rank on the GGI dropped by 6 ranks. The UK was ranked the highest on educational attainment subindex (score: 1.000, rank = 1). Compared with previous report, the UK has marked an improvement on its most problematic category, i.e., health and survival (previous score: 0.970, previous rank: 110 vs. current score: 0.974, current rank: 63).

Gender-based violence (GBV):

Lifetime prevalence of GBV in the UK is estimated at 29% (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2020). [Walby \(2009\)](#), UNESCO Chair in Gender Research, estimates that providing public services to victims of domestic violence and the lost economic output of women affected costs the UK **£15.8 billion** annually. The cost to health, housing and social services, criminal justice and civil legal services is estimated at **£3.9 billion**. Violence against women in the UK is most frequently perpetrated in the context of intimate relationships. According to [the statistical bulletin with an overview of domestic violence in England and Wales released in November 2019](#), an estimated 2.4 million adults aged 16 to 74 years (5.7%) experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2019 (1.6 million women and 786,000 men). The police recorded 746,219 domestic abuse-related crimes, an increase of 24% from the previous year. This increase may be partly explained by improved recording by the police and increased reporting by victims. A higher percentage of adults were victims of partner abuse (4.2%), which refers to abuse carried out by a partner or ex-partner, than family abuse (2.0%). According to the [Crime Survey for England and Wales \(CSEW\)](#) published in November 2018, women aged 20 to 24 years were significantly more likely to be victims of any domestic abuse in the last 12 months than women in any other age group. A particularly vulnerable group constituted women in the lowest household income brackets. The majority of victims suffered one type of abuse only. Of these cases, the most commonly experienced abuse type was non-sexual partner abuse (51.8% of all victims). A higher proportion of women than men experienced multiple types of abuse (20.8% compared with 17.1%). Thanks to the introduction of the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS) – also known as Clare's Law - in 2014, women now have a right to know (in prescribed circumstances) if their partner has a violent past. The law means women can be protected by new domestic violence protection orders (DVPOs). Additionally, in 2018, the government conducted a consultation among domestic violence survivors, professionals, and local authorities in order to seek their views on legislative proposals for a landmark draft Domestic Abuse Bill and a package of practical action. The consultation attracted 3,200 responses.

In considering UK's multiculturalism, GBV can take many different forms. Types of violence which predominantly affect women from ethnic minorities include female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage, and 'honour'-based violence. Although all the above are now regarded as GBV and have been outlawed, they were initially treated as condemnable cultural practices. Nonetheless, although FGM has been a specific criminal offence in the UK since 1985 under the Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act (later amended in the Female Genital Mutilation Act 2003), the landmark first conviction for FGM was secured in February 2019. The UK ratified the

[Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) in 1986.

Dating violence:

GBV is not limited to adult relationships. The prevention of adolescent violence has been on UK's political agenda since the 1990s but research on dating violence among UK samples has been sparse. Addressing this significant knowledge gap, a study among 1185 young people who had at least one relationship experience, demonstrated that a quarter of girls (n = 150) and 18% (n = 100) of boys were exposed to some form of physical violence by a partner. Girls were also more likely than boys to report negative impact (such as feeling humiliated and upset) of such violence. Emotional violence was reported by 72% of girls and 51% of boys. Experiences of sexual violence, on the other hand, were reported by 31% of girls and 16% of boys ([Barter, McCarry, Berridge, & Evans, 2009](#)). Findings of another study among young people aged between 15 and 18 years from England (N = 199) and Spain (200) indicated that 25% of English girls occasionally experienced mild victimisation. The same proportion of girls also reported more severe physical victimisation. English boys appear to experience similar levels of occasional mild victimisation (20.5%) but substantially lower rates of occasional severe victimisation (5.1%) than girls. Interestingly, more boys (12.8%) than girls (0%) suffered frequent severe victimisation in the context of romantic relationships ([Viejo, Monks, Sánchez, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2016](#)). In a review of studies examining the prevalence and impact of adolescent dating violence and abuse, it was reported that between 9-25% of girls and 15-32% of boys from the UK experienced physical dating violence and abuse. The prevalence of psychological dating violence and abuse oscillated between 17.9-72% among girls and between 28-51% among boys. Sexual dating violence and abuse experiences, in turn, were reported by 3-31% of girls and 3-16% of boys ([Stonard, Bowen, Lawrence, & Price, 2014](#)). The broad range of prevalence rates are likely due to differences in methods applied across studies. Further, as evidenced by the means of research, the development of technology has provided new avenues for abuse among UK adolescents. Barter et al. (2009) found that 12% of girls and 4% of boys had partners who used mobile phones or the Internet to humiliate and threaten them. Moreover, 42% of girls and 29% of boys had partners who frequently checked up on their movements by phone or text.

Child sexual abuse (CSA):

Another form of violence against women rarely researched in the UK social context is CSA. [Oaksford and Frude \(2001\)](#), in an exclusively female sample of 213 undergraduate students, established that 13.14% of participating women suffered CSA. Although this statistic appears high, these findings should be considered in light of several limitations, including a small sample size as well as the possibility of recruiting a biased sample (i.e., participants who felt comfortable answering questions on personal experiences of CSA). According to the only UK-wide study on child maltreatment conducted to date, 5.1% of young men aged 18-24 years and 17.8% of women reported a childhood experience of contact sexual abuse ([Radford, Corral, Bradley, Fisher, Bassett, Howat, & Collishaw, 2011](#)). A regular child abuse and neglect prevalence study among a representative sample of respondents is needed to inform policy and practice.

UK's most important legislation related to GBV:

1976 – [Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act](#) – An Act to amend the law relating to matrimonial injunction; to provide the police with powers of arrest for the breach of injunction in cases of domestic violence; to amend section 1(2) of the Matrimonial Homes Act 1967; to make provision for varying rights of occupation where both spouses have the same rights in the matrimonial home.

1985 – [Prohibition of Female Circumcision Act](#) – An Act to prohibit female circumcision.

1989 – [Children Act](#) – An Act to reform the law relating to children; to provide for local authority services for children in need and others; to amend the law with respect to children's homes, community homes, voluntary homes and voluntary organisations; to make provision with respect to fostering, child minding and day care for young children and adoption; and for connected purposes.

1994 – [Criminal Justice and Public Order Act \(Amendments to the Sexual Offences Amendment Act 1976\)](#) – The Act criminalises marital rape.

1997 – [Protection from Harassment Act](#) – An Act to make provisions for protecting persons from harassment and similar conduct.

2003 – [Female Genital Mutilation Act](#) – An Act to restate and amend the law relating to female genital mutilation (FGM). Under the Act, carrying out, aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring the carrying out of FGM abroad, even in countries where the practice is legal, is an offence.

2003 – [Sexual Offences Act](#) – An Act to make new provision about sexual offences, their prevention and the protection of children from harm from other sexual acts, and for connected purposes. Rape within marriage is currently governed by section 1 of the Act.

2004 – [Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act](#) – An Act to amend Part 4 of the Family Law Act 1996, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997; to make provision about homicide; to make common assault an arrestable offence; to make provision for the payment of surcharges by offenders; to make provision about alternative verdicts; to provide for a procedure under which a jury tries only sample counts on an indictment; to make provision about findings of unfitness to plead and about persons found unfit to plead or not guilty by reason of insanity; to make provision about the execution of warrants; to make provision about the enforcement of orders imposed on conviction; to amend section 58 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 and to amend Part 12 of that Act in relation to intermittent custody; to make provision in relation to victims of offences, witnesses of offences and others affected by offences; and to make provision about the recovery of compensation from offenders.

2004 – [Children Act](#) – An Act to make provision for the establishment of a Children's Commissioner; to make provision about services provided to and for children and young people by local authorities and other persons; to make provision in relation to Wales about advisory and support services relating to family proceedings; to make provision about private fostering, child minding and day care, adoption review panels,

the defence of reasonable punishment, the making of grants as respects children and families, child safety orders, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, the publication of material relating to children involved in certain legal proceedings and the disclosure by the Inland Revenue of information relating to children.

2007 – [Forced Marriage \(Civil Protection Act\)](#) – An Act to make provision for protecting individuals against being forced to enter into marriage without their free and full consent and for protecting individuals who have been forced to enter into marriage without such consent; and for connected purposes.

2010 – [Equality Act](#) – An Act to make provision to require Ministers of the Crown and others when making strategic decisions about the exercise of their functions to have regard to the desirability of reducing socio-economic inequalities; to reform and harmonise equality law and restate the greater part of the enactments relating to discrimination and harassment related to certain personal characteristics; to enable certain employers to be required to publish information about the differences in pay between male and female employees; to prohibit victimisation in certain circumstances; to require the exercise of certain functions to be with regard to the need to eliminate discrimination and other prohibited conduct; to enable duties to be imposed in relation to the exercise of public procurement functions; to increase equality of opportunity; to amend the law relating to rights and responsibilities in family relationships; and for connected purposes.

2010 – [Crime and Security Act](#) – The Act contains a chapter on domestic violence (Sections 24 to 33). It provides for the issuance of Domestic Violence Protection Orders.

2012 – [Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims \(Amendment\) Act](#) – An Act to amend section 5 of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 to include serious harm to a child or vulnerable adult; to make consequential amendments to the Act; and for connected purposes.

2012 – [Protection of Freedoms Act](#) – The Act made provision about the trafficking of people for exploitation and introduced two new offences for stalking. The offences cover stalking and stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm and distress.

2014 – [Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act](#) – The Act criminalises forcing someone to marry against their will; criminalises the luring of a person to a territory of a state for the purpose of forcing them to enter into marriage; makes it an offence to use deception with the intention of causing another person to leave the UK for the intention of forcing that person to marry; criminalises the breach of a Forced Marriage Protection Order.

2015 – [Serious Crime Act](#) – Section 76 of the Act created a new offence of controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship. The offence carries a maximum sentence of 5 years' imprisonment, a fine or both. Prior to the introduction of this offence, case law indicated the difficulty in proving a pattern of behaviour amounting to harassment within an intimate relationship.

2015 – [Modern Slavery Act](#) – An Act to make provision about slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour and about human trafficking, including provision for the protection of victims; to make provision for an Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner; and for connected purposes.

2017 – [Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence \(Ratification of Convention\) Act](#) – An Act to make provision in connection with the ratification of the United Kingdom of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention). The Convention targets violence against women and domestic violence. It sets out minimum standards on prevention, protection, prosecution and services and states that countries ratifying the Convention must establish services such as hotlines, shelters, medical services, counselling and legal aid.

UK's strategy to end violence against women and girls (VAWG):

In 2016, the UK government published [a new strategy to tackle violence against women and girls](#) to be implemented between 2016-2020. One of the key aspects of the strategy is the strengthening of the legislative framework. To achieve this goal, new offences have been introduced to tackle stalking, coercive and controlling behaviour, as well as forcing someone to marry against their will. The foundation of the strategy, however, is prevention and early intervention. Prevention efforts include educating young people about healthy relationships, abuse, and consent. To support the activities, the government have pledged £80 million in funding. It is envisaged that by 2020, there will be a significant reduction in the number of VAWG victims and that women and girls with violence experiences will be able to access the support they need. Further, in spring 2018, the Government conducted a public consultation on Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse. The Government response to the consultation and a draft Domestic Abuse Bill were published in January 2019. In summary, the Government made 123 commitments designed to promote awareness of domestic abuse and protecting victims and their families. The Bill, in turn, will create a cross-government statutory definition of domestic abuse. Further, the Government will commission a three-year pilot study of mandatory polygraph examinations on domestic abuse perpetrators released on licence identified as being at high risk of causing serious harm. If the pilot is successful, the Government will roll out mandatory polygraph examinations to all high-risk domestic abuse perpetrators in England and Wales ([Domestic Abuse Bill 2020: Mandatory Polygraph Tests](#)).

GBV in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK:

The introduction of social distancing and lockdown-type, stay-at-home measures has resulted in conditions conducive to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of the most vulnerable members of the society. Those who are abused by family members, often have little or no access to the usual routes of escape. Additionally, fewer visitors to the household means that evidence of physical abuse is more likely to go unnoticed. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the world has witnessed a surge in domestic violence cases since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Townsend, 2020](#)). Indeed, emerging evidence from agencies across the UK reveals that domestic violence has increased during the COVID-19 crisis. The National Domestic Abuse helpline reported a 25% increase in calls and online requests since the lockdown began in March 2020 ([Kelly & Morgan, 2020](#)). However, it is believed that the effect of the pandemic on

domestic violence will become clearer once the lockdown-type measures have been lifted.

In acknowledging that certain lockdown measures can increase the risk of domestic abuse, the Government announced that household isolation instructions do not apply if a person needs to leave their home to escape domestic abuse. In June 2020, the Social Care Institute for Excellence published a quick [guide](#) aimed at professionals and organisations who are involved in supporting and safeguarding adults and children during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, national charities produced their own guidance and continue to provide their services to those in need. For example, SafeLives prepared a document entitled "[Staying safe during COVID-19: A guide for victims and survivors of domestic abuse](#)". All national helplines are free to call and can provide interpreter services if needed. Safety and wellbeing advice, along with a list of national helplines, can be found [here](#). Finally, António Guterres, the United Nations (UN) secretary-general, said: "I urge all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19" (see [Fang, 2020](#)).