Women Musicians' Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment in Scottish Folk Music

Dr Kelly Johnson | Professor Michele Burman

Dr Amy Cullen | Dr Emily Qvist-Baudry

Ms Stephanie Love | Professor Oona Brooks-Hay

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Executive summary

- The purpose of this research was to gather the views and experiences of women musicians, to develop better understanding and awareness about the nature and extent of sexual violence and harassment encountered when working or participating in the Scottish folk scene.

- The research took place from May to December 2025. It involved three phases of data collection: an online survey (n=409); follow-up interviews with 14 participants; and action learning sets undertaken with key stakeholders to generate ideas and feedback for the report recommendations.

- The findings reveal that while the folk scene was described as welcoming and nurturing, for many women, positive experiences of music-making coexist with experiences of inequality, harm, and exclusion.

- More than four in five survey participants (81%) disclosed personally experiencing sexual violence and harassment while working or participating in the folk scene.

- Experiences disclosed included: intrusive sexualised comments and advances, pressure to engage in sexual activities, harassment and stalking, domestic abuse, sexual assault and rape.

- Most first-hand experiences of sexual violence and harassment mentioned in the survey took place in social settings related to the folk scene, such as 'sessions' or, commonly, when socialising after a performance (72%). Other frequently reported locations included formal performance contexts, such as at music festivals (37%), gigs (35%) or concerts (27%), as well as during rehearsals (25%), whilst on tour (20%), and in educational (20%) and residential (7%) music programme settings.

- The majority of participants identified the individuals responsible for the sexual violence and harassment as being their fellow musicians – with 72% of survey participants disclosing personal experiences involving music colleagues or peers, and 53% involving prominent musicians occupying positions of power.

- For many women musicians who participated in this study, experiences of misogyny, sexual harassment, and violence caused significant, sustained, and far-reaching harm.

- These harms are not rare, isolated, or historical. They are ongoing, often known about informally, and frequently go unchallenged. For many women, this has direct consequences for their safety, relationships, personal wellbeing, and their ability to participate fully in the scene.

- The impacts of sexual violence and harassment directly affected participants' employment, career, and earning opportunities; many described limiting their participation in the folk scene while some left it altogether.

- Gendered power differentials and the existence of a 'boys club' not only facilitated sexual harassment and violence but also constrained women's ability to challenge or report it.

- Perpetration of harm by men of high status and who hold power and influence in the Scottish folk scene can be particularly difficult to challenge.

- Whilst women of all ages raised similar concerns and reported comparable experiences, age emerged as a key intersecting factor in those experiences, with younger women facing additional challenges in disclosing or reporting.

- Without clear safeguarding mechanisms or formal accountability processes in place, women are compelled to manage risk and the harms they experience informally and individually.

- An overwhelming 92% of participants felt that more needs to be done to make the Scottish folk scene a safer and more supportive space for women.

- Participants emphasised the need for action across the scene as a whole, including from the musical community (87%), as well as from key folk-related institutions, including education providers (85%), event organisers (84%), folk societies (82%), and the Musicians' Union (78%).

- The Scottish folk scene is not alone in facing the challenges of sexual violence and harassment. However, participants' accounts clearly underscore the need for structural, collective responses that move beyond informal coping strategies and individualised risk management, towards accountability, safeguarding, and cultural change across the Scottish folk music scene.

- Addressing the issues identified in this report requires more than individual resilience or informal warnings. It requires collective responsibility, accountability, and structural change so that the Scottish folk music scene can be safe and inclusive for everyone.

- Despite the challenges encountered by women participating and working within the scene, some participants described positive and improving responses to sexual violence and harassment. These included experiences of supportive responses from organisers, venues, or organisations, where meaningful action following disclosure helped participants feel safer and more supported.

- We offer a set of 18 recommendations (see p. 32) based on the views and experiences of women musicians and consultation with the Scottish folk scene stakeholders with whom we engaged. The recommendations include a range of actions that we consider are required to address the issues identified in this report. If realised, these recommendations could make meaningful improvements to the experiences of, and outcomes for women working in the folk scene.

1. Introduction

There have been longstanding discussions about the different challenges women musicians face in the music industry. Research has identified gender marginalisation and misogyny as particular challenges affecting women's effective participation in a range of different music genres (Hennekan and Bennett 2017; Crabtree 2020; Hawksworth 2021; Monaghan 2021; Bows et al. 2024).[1] Moreover, sexual harassment and sexual violence have been described as 'widespread, systemic and normalised' (McCarry et al. 2023, p. 220).[2] Within the UK music industry, the recent 'Misogyny in Music' report commissioned by the UK Parliamentary Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) (2024, p. 3)[3] described the scale of such harms as "endemic". Their follow-up report WEC (2025),[4] stated that little had changed in the 12 months following recommendations set out in their earlier report.

Until now, there has been limited research evidence addressing sexual violence and harassment in the Scottish folk music scene. The purpose of this research was to gather the views and experiences of women musicians working and/or participating in Scottish folk music, to develop better understanding and awareness about the nature and extent of sexual violence and harassment encountered. Building on existing work already underway in the scene, we hope this research can be of use for supporting community-wide efforts to recognise, address and improve the challenges facing women folk musicians.

About the study

The research took place from May to December 2025. It involved three phases of data collection:

- An online survey: The survey had 28 questions in total, 22 multiple choice questions with an additional free-text option, and an additional six free-text questions. A total of 409 participants engaged with the survey.
- Follow-up interviews: A total of 14 semi-structured interviews were held, one in person and 13 online, to build a deeper understanding of participant experiences and themes emerging from the survey data.
- Action learning sets: seven stakeholders with relevant expertise attended two online consultation sessions to workshop and feedback on the emergent research findings and develop recommendations.

All stages of the research were conducted on a voluntary, opt-in basis. A small group of individuals working in the sector also served as a reference group to support us in attuning the research to the context of the Scottish folk music scene.

1. Hennekam, S. and Bennett, D. (2017) Sexual harassment in the creative industries: Tolerance, culture and the need for change. *Gender, Work & Organization.* 24(4): 417-434.
   Crabtree, J.R. (2020) *Tunesmiths and toxicity: workplace harassment in the contemporary music industries of Australia and New Zealand.* PhD thesis. University of Technology, Sydney.
   Hawksworth, C. (2021) *Understanding the impact of tacit gender relations on the careers of performers of Scottish traditional music.* Masters Dissertation. Newcastle University, UK.
   Monaghan, Ú. (2021) 121. Stories: The impact of gender on participation in Irish traditional music. *Ethnomusicology Ireland.* 7: 17.
   Bows, H., Day, A. and Dhir, A. (2024) "It's like a drive by misogyny": sexual violence at UK music festivals. Violence against women. 30(2): 372-393.
2. McCarry, M., Käkelä, E., Jones, C. and Manoussaki, K. (2023) The sound of misogyny: sexual harassment and sexual violence in the music industry. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence.* 7(2): 220-234.

After completing data collection, the survey and interview data were coded and analysed to identify key findings and themes presented in this report. All participant information has been treated in confidence, and pseudonyms and other measures have been used in this report to ensure anonymity.

The research has been funded through Glasgow University's Sociological and Cultural Studies Divisional Research seed-corn fund. It received formal ethical approval from the University's College of Social Science Ethics Committee.

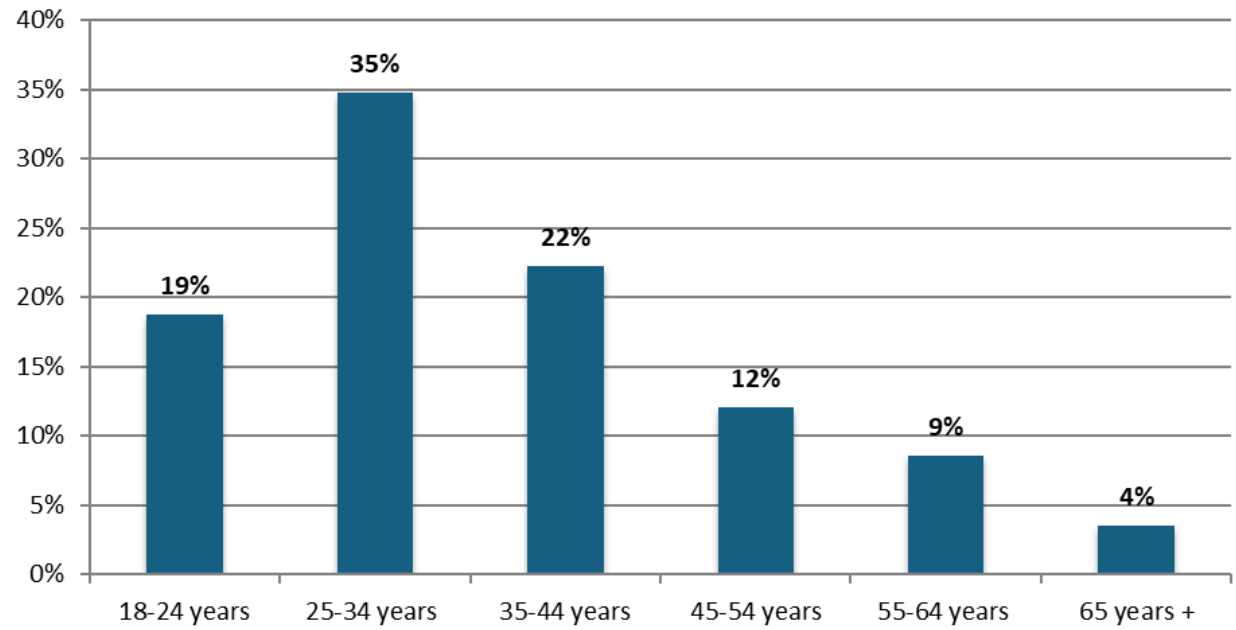
Who took part in the study?

Survey

In total, 409 respondents participated in the online survey, which was available for completion over four weeks (18th June – 14th July 2025). Participant recruitment was targeted towards women musicians, but we also received a small number of responses from participants who self-identified as men and non-binary. Where quotes from the free-text section of the survey are used in the report, these are identified by the prefix 'S' followed by the participant number (e.g. S 069).

Chart 1. shows that participant age ranges span from 18 to over 65 years old, with the most common respondent age group being 25-34 years old. 41% of participants identified as being mid-career; 28% as early career, and 18% as later-career (the remaining 18% responded 'other' or 'prefer not to say').

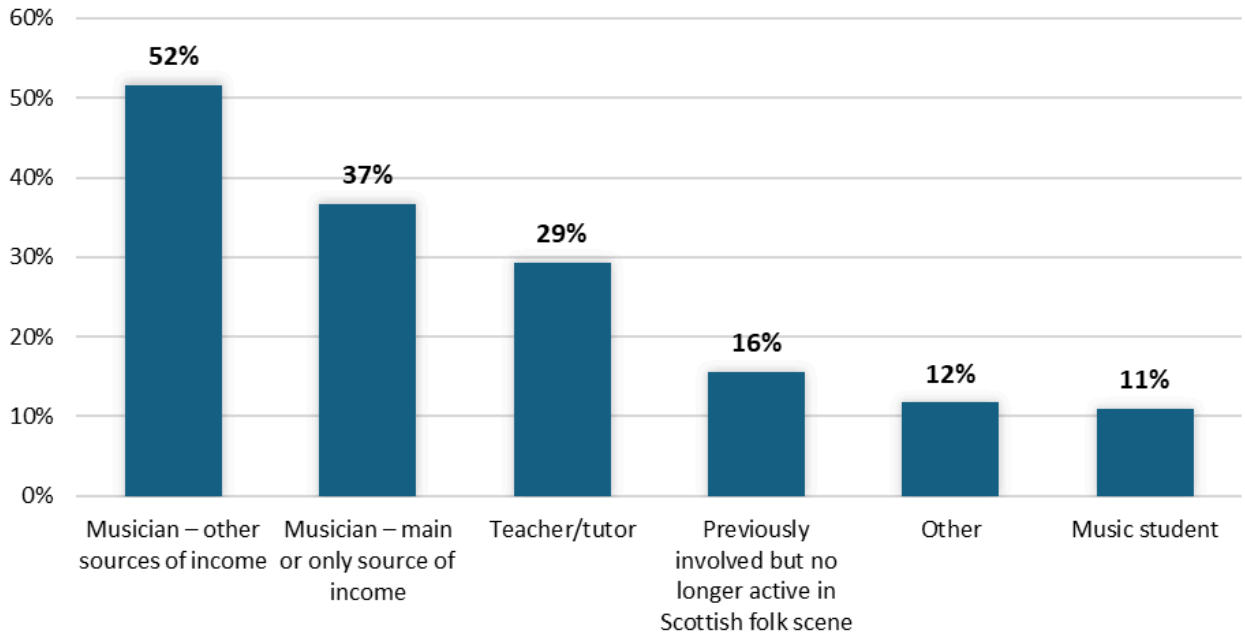
Chart 1. Age of participants



3. Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) (2024) *House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Misogyny in Music Second Report of Session 2023–24 (HC 129).* Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/43084/documents/214478/default/. Accessed: 5th June 2025
4. Women and Equalities Committee (WEC) (2025) *House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee Misogyny in music: on repeat Fifth Report of Session 2024–25 (HC 573).* Available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/48117/documents/251887/default/. Accessed: 5th June 2025

We also asked survey participants about the nature of their work and/or participation in the folk scene, although many respondents shared that they engaged with the scene in multiple capacities. 89% identified as musicians, 29% working in an educational capacity, 11% as music students, and 16% as no longer active in the Scottish folk scene.

Chart 2. Type of work/participation in the Scottish folk scene

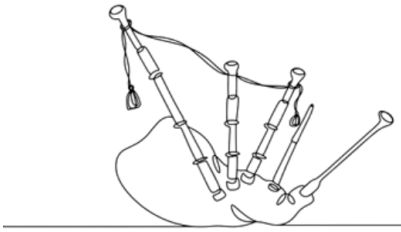


Interviews

We did not collect detailed demographic information from interview participants; however, 13 interviewees were women, and one was a man. Interviewees affiliation to the scene echoed survey participants, and included musicians, music students, educators, and some who were no longer involved in the scene. The vast majority of interview participants had experiences of sexual violence and harassment, and some had experiences of reporting to organisations both within and outside of the Scottish folk scene. Quotes from individual interviewees are identified by 'I' followed by the participant number (e.g. I 012).

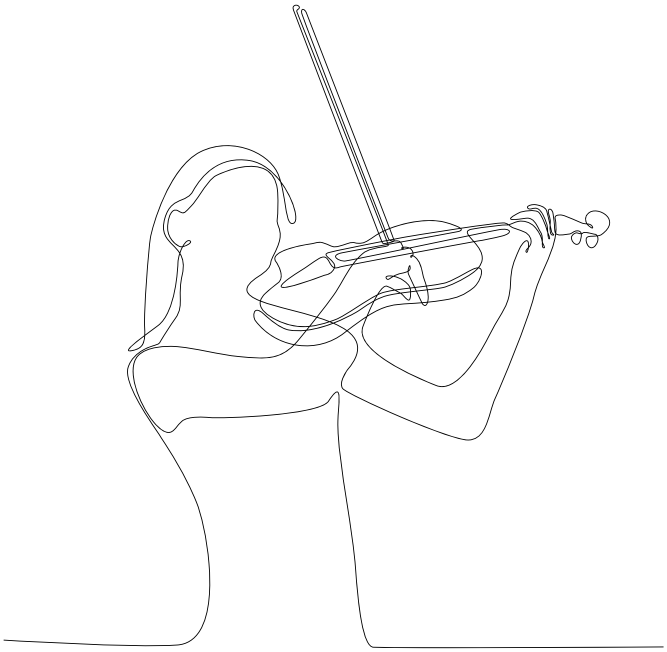
Study limitations

Due to the nature of the research design, it is not possible for this study to make claims about the overall prevalence of sexual violence and harassment within the Scottish folk scene. Both the online survey and online interviews were conducted on a voluntary, opt-in basis, recruiting only for a limited period of time. As is common with research on sensitive topics, it is likely to have attracted participants who had direct experiences of sexual violence or harassment, and/or who held strong views about these issues.



The findings therefore cannot be generalised to represent overall experiences or the prevalence of sexual violence in the Scottish folk scene. The project also provides a snapshot of experiences rather than a longitudinal account, meaning that we cannot assess how conditions in the Scottish folk scene may have changed over time. Moreover, due to the nature of the research design and recruited participant sample, the data were limited in evidencing the intersectional nature and harms of sexual violence and abuse (see e.g. GALOP 2022, Thiara and Roy 2022).[5]

In designing the survey, accessibility and participant wellbeing were prioritised. Participants were not required to answer every question, recognising the sensitive nature of the topic and that some individuals may not wish to respond to all questions (such as those relating to direct experiences of sexual violence). Consequently, participants did not always complete every question in the questionnaire. Following standard practice, the findings detailed in the report present the percentage distribution of responses received for each individual question, rather than in reference to the total number of survey participants (n=409).



5. GALOP (2022) *LGBT people and sexual violence*. Available at: https://www.galop.org.uk/resources/lgbt-people-sexual-violence-report
Thiara, R.K. and Roy, S. (2020) *Reclaiming voice: Minoritised women and sexual violence, key findings.* London: Imkann.

2. Study findings: Sexual violence and harassment in Scottish folk music

How safe is the Scottish folk music Scene perceived to be for women?

The Scottish folk music scene was commonly described by both survey and interview participants as being close-knit, and central to Scotland's cultural heritage and celebrated national identity. Many participants spoke warmly about the strong sense of connection, creativity, and community the scene offers, and its close-knit nature. At the same time, many participants described experiencing serious and ongoing sexual violence and harassment, particularly affecting women musicians working or participating in the scene.

'[The Scottish folk scene is] full of really beautiful connections and experiences but there's also of course a darker side to that.' (S 025, 25-34 years)

This sense of contradiction – that the scene can be at once nurturing and unsafe – runs throughout the research findings. For many women, positive and vibrant experiences of music-making coexist with experiences of misogyny inequality, harm, and exclusion. With regard to the folk scene, the survey found that:

- **66%** agreed that sexual violence and harassment is an issue
- **77%** agreed that sexism and misogyny is a problem
- Only **43%** of participants feel the Scottish folk scene is a safe place for women

For example, one participant described the scale of the problem of sexual violence and harassment in stark terms:

An 'open secret'

In common with other research which found that most perpetrators were known and bore particular reputations for their inappropriate behaviour (Hawksworth 2021), participants in our study were well aware of particular male aggressors. Many explained that they became aware of the extent of sexual violence and harassment through informal conversations with other women working and/or participating in the scene. These conversations were often supportive, but they also revealed how common these experiences were.

'I think you just realise when you start to have those conversations that you're not the only one who's experienced stuff like that…but then it also was frustrating to know it's more widespread' (I 027, 18-24 years).

'Lots of women are talking about this among ourselves and we all know a lot of incidents, either experiencing it ourselves, or friends and colleagues. It's a much bigger problem than people realise and it's taking place in plain sight.'
(S 196, Age not provided)

For some, this created a sense that the sexual violence and harassment is an "*open secret*" - widely known about, but rarely publicly recognised, addressed openly or challenged. One participant referred to it as *'all so hush-hush and 'under the rug' that it can be hard to get any real sense of it.'* (I 029, 45-54 years).

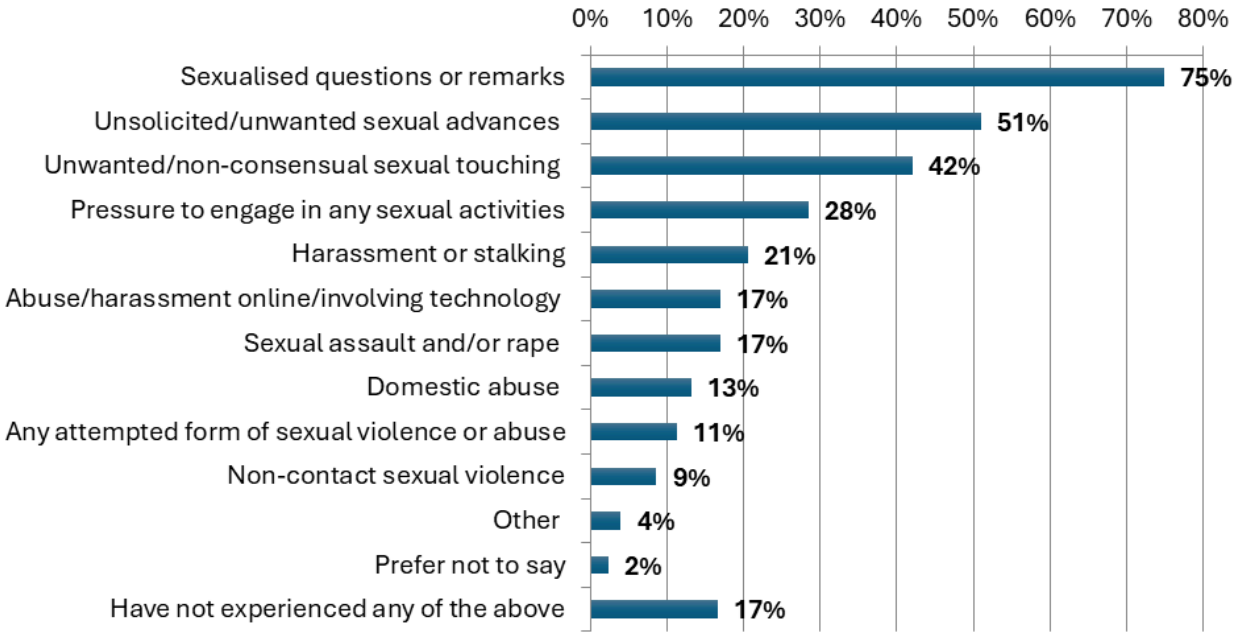
Because of this, there was a strong desire amongst participants for evidence that addresses the extent and nature of women musician's experiences of sexual violence and harassment on the scene – to raise awareness, to build better understanding, and to counter any attempts to dismiss or minimise the issue.

The extent and nature of sexual violence and harassment

Overall, 81%, or more than four in five, survey participants disclosed personally experiencing some form of sexual violence or harassment while participating or working in the Scottish folk scene. These experiences included: intrusive sexualised comments and advances, pressure to engage in sexual activities, harassment and stalking, domestic abuse, sexual assault and rape. Chart 3. below details the forms of sexual violence and harassment disclosed by survey participants, and their prevalence.

It was particularly striking that these experiences were not isolated or 'one-off' events; 78% of the survey participants who disclosed personal experiences of sexual harassment and abuse reported multiple and varied incidents of harassment and abuse, taking place across different folk-related contexts and settings, and often taking place over a lengthy period of time. This reflects sociological understandings of the 'continuum' of sexual violence – which understands women's experiences as an interconnected and cumulative spectrum of sexually abusive behaviours across their lives (see Kelly 1987).[6]

Chart 3. Forms of sexual violence experienced by survey participants



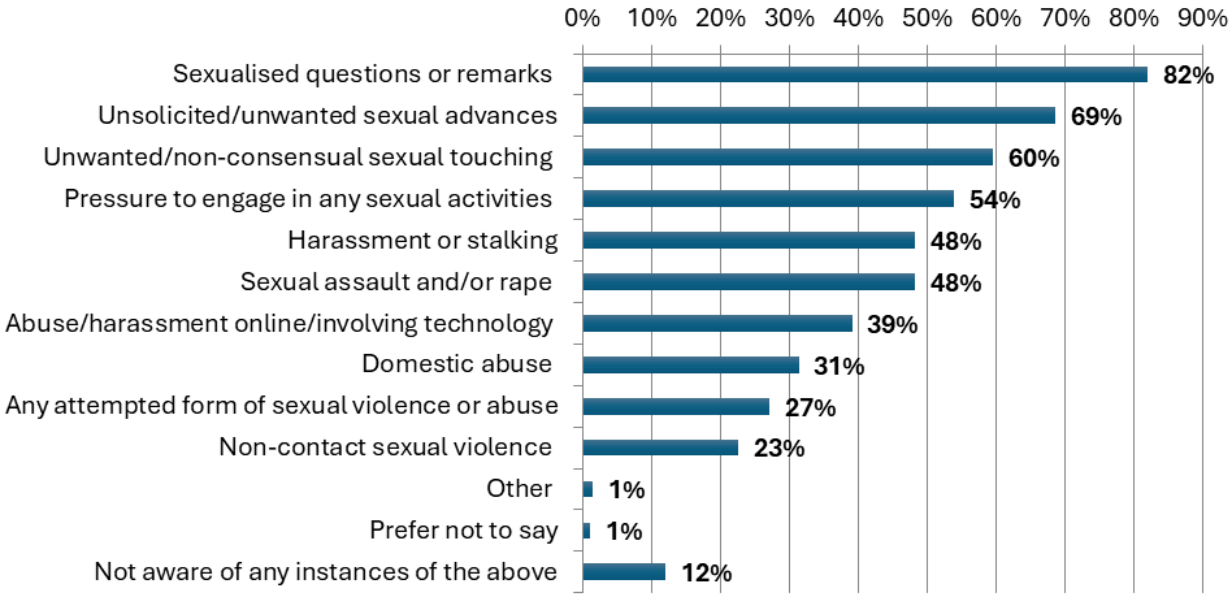
6. Kelly, L.. (1987) 'The continuum of sexual violence', in *Women, violence and social control* (pp. 46-60). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

A very high proportion of survey participants (87%) reported that they were aware of instances of sexual violence and harassment experienced by other women musicians working or participating in the folk scene.

'*Of all my close friends working in the folk scene, I'd say nearly all of them have experienced sexual violence and/or harassment whilst working in this industry. I've also heard about many other women who have experienced sexual violence and harassment. It's devastating and rife*.' (I 051, 35-44 years)

Chart 4. below provides a detailed breakdown of the different forms of sexual violence and harassment that participants were aware of other female musicians experiencing. The figures are stark, particularly in relation to the prevalence of sexualised questions or remarks (82%), unwanted sexual advances (69%), sexual touching (60%) and pressure to engage in unwanted sexual activities (54%). It is also notable that almost half (48%) were aware of a rape or sexual assault that another female musician was subjected to.

Chart 4. Forms of sexual violence survey participants were aware of others experiencing



Forms of sexual harassment and violence

Sexualised remarks, unsolicited sexual advances and pressure to engage in sexual activities

75% of responding survey participants experienced sexualised questions or remarks, the most prevalent form of sexual harassment or abuse identified in the study. Similarly, unsolicited and unwanted sexual advances were a common experience, reported by 51% of participants. Indeed, some described these experiences as a 'routine backdrop' to their work and participation in the scene:

It's just, it's happened to everybody...and my story's...not the worst' (I 016, 18-24 years)

> ***'I've had to lock myself in a car, I've had to leave gigs and go home, and I've had to continuously say no to a guy wanting to sleep with me. I've had married musicians kissing me...I've been hassled for ignoring drunken advances and called names. It puts me off the whole scene.'***
> **(S 029, 45-54 years)**

Within participant accounts, there was a sense that these behaviours were normalised and efforts to challenge or reject sexual advances were frequently dismissed, downplayed or met with considerable resistance.

Almost a third (29%) of survey participants experienced pressure to engage in sexual activities. Of the behaviours reported, men getting into bed next to sleeping women musicians – who, because they were asleep, could not consent to such intimate physical proximity – appeared to be concerningly common. Typically, this happened when touring or staying away from home following a performance:

'[After a gig] *I went and stayed at his house...after getting into my own bed...he got in...The next morning, [he] gaslit me...'why did you come back and stay here?...You better watch yourself because you are a pretty woman working in the folk scene.' So, [he] made it all out to be my fault and my problem*.' (I 030, 25-34 years)

Other women shared accounts of being 'pressured into sex' or engaging in sexual activities. This includes a number of examples where men made *'sexual propositions to female musicians in return for either money or opportunities in work.'* (S 081, 25-34 years)

'I was offered...a really good...job with quite a prolific band...everybody knows them to have a great reputation. And then as soon as that meeting was done, it was like, OK, do you want [to] come back to my room?...Do you want to, like, have sex... And you're like, oh, OK, is this why I've been given this job, you know?' (I 024, 45-54 years)

Sexual assault and/or rape

17% of survey respondents shared they had experienced sexual assault and/or rape through their work or participation in the Scottish folk scene, and 48% knew of others working in the scene who had experienced these forms of sexual violence.

'I was raped by an [educator]...who is a well-known musician in the scene. He followed me home after a session and refused to leave.' (S 127, 25-34 years)

Some accounts of rape and sexual assault occurred in contexts where women did not have capacity to freely consent due to high levels of intoxication.

Others disclosed experiences of their drinks being spiked: *'I was spiked and woke up in someone's bedroom'* (S 084, 25-34 years). This was perceived by some to be a common occurrence: *'I think many people have been spiked with drugs to make them more likely to accept advances.'* (S 041, 45-54 years old).

Unwanted and non-consensual touching was also common, disclosed by over two fifths (42%) of participants – with descriptions of these behaviours also including groping (which is also a form of sexual assault):

'Some of the personal experiences I can speak to include being groped from behind by a [high-profile musician] …who I hadn't interacted with or spoken to.' (S 052, 25-34 years)

'And after the gig we had gone to, [we] went to a bar and he grabbed my breasts. He'd been talking about them as well that night, and then he just he just grabbed them… and I froze at that point. And it all just became quite kind of normal, that sort of grabbing, groping type thing after that.' (I 016, 18-24 years)

Domestic abuse

13% of participants disclosed experiencing forms of domestic abuse that related to their participation on the scene, and 31% knew of others who had such experiences – most commonly when a current or previous intimate partner also worked in Scottish folk music. For example:

'I got involved with a traditional musician in a relationship…and it ended up with me experiencing domestic violence and coercive control and then having to literally leave everything I owned…because I wasn't safe.' (I 054, 45-54 years)

'I was in a relationship with an influential older male musician…He has a pattern of dating younger female musicians and being emotionally abusive. Since breaking up he has taken it upon himself to make sure I know he is always keeping tabs on me'
(S 167, 25-34 years old).

Some participants acknowledged they had experienced domestic abuse but saw this as a personal rather than a 'professional' issue. However, it is increasingly recognised that domestic abuse impacts women's capacity to work in many ways (see Showalter, 2016)[7], and therefore it is important to recognise it as a workplace issue.

Harassment or stalking

Just over a fifth (21%) of survey respondents disclosed experiences of harassment and stalking in the context of the Scottish folk scene, and almost half (48%) knew of other women musicians who have experienced such abuse. Often these experiences of stalking or harassment involved others working in the scene, including in the context of domestic abuse. However, in the example provided below, the stalker was actually a fan:

'Some fans have followed me to every single gig all over the country, send me emails… and overstep personal boundaries, some also turn up to venues early to try see me… it makes me feel uncomfortable. There is nothing in place to protect me after the show or before.' (S 046, 25-34 years)

7. Showalter, K.. (2016) Women's employment and domestic violence: A review of the literature. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 31: 37-47.

17% of participants personally experienced sexual harassment and violence involving technology, and 39% knew of others who had similar experiences within the scene. These experiences included the use of technology to extend sexual harassment and stalking, for example, through sending unsolicited sexual messages and images:

'I know of an older musician who sent pictures of his genitals to women, as a proposition. [They] often [select] women to groom them by using social media or messaging to connect with them.' (S 059, 35-44 years)

'He was constantly sexually harassing myself and a huge number of other women and young women in the folk scene and he sent us pictures of his dick...and very sexualised messages late at night...a serious breach of...boundaries.' (I 016, 18-24 years)

'I had a [musician] send me an explicit video of him masturbating with the caption – 'looking at ur instagram' - which was unsolicited and made me feel a bit horrible.'
(S 042, 18-24 years)

Participants reflected that much work related to Scottish folk music now takes place online, involving the use of professional social media profiles and online platforms to organise and promote events. This makes safe and equitable access to these online spaces just as important as safety in 'real-world' settings.

In the following sections, the different contexts in which sexual violence and harassment were experienced are outlined in terms of who these behaviours were perpetrated by and where they took place. These contextual factors provide an important basis for understanding the unique dynamics of sexual violence and harassment in the Scottish folk scene, as described by the research participants.

Who are the perpetrators?

The vast majority of participants identified the individuals responsible for the personal sexual violence and harassment they disclosed as being their fellow musicians – with 72% of participants disclosing experiences involving music colleagues or peers, and 53% involving musicians occupying prominent positions of power.

Chart 5. shows that musicians, fans and audience members were the next most common group (31%), followed by 20% of cases involving someone acting in an educational capacity (i.e. as a teacher, tutor or instructor). Individuals perpetrating these behaviours working in other contexts related to the folk scene were also identified, including event organisers (13%), production professionals (12%) and event promoters (6%).

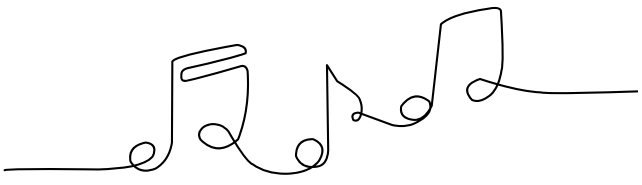
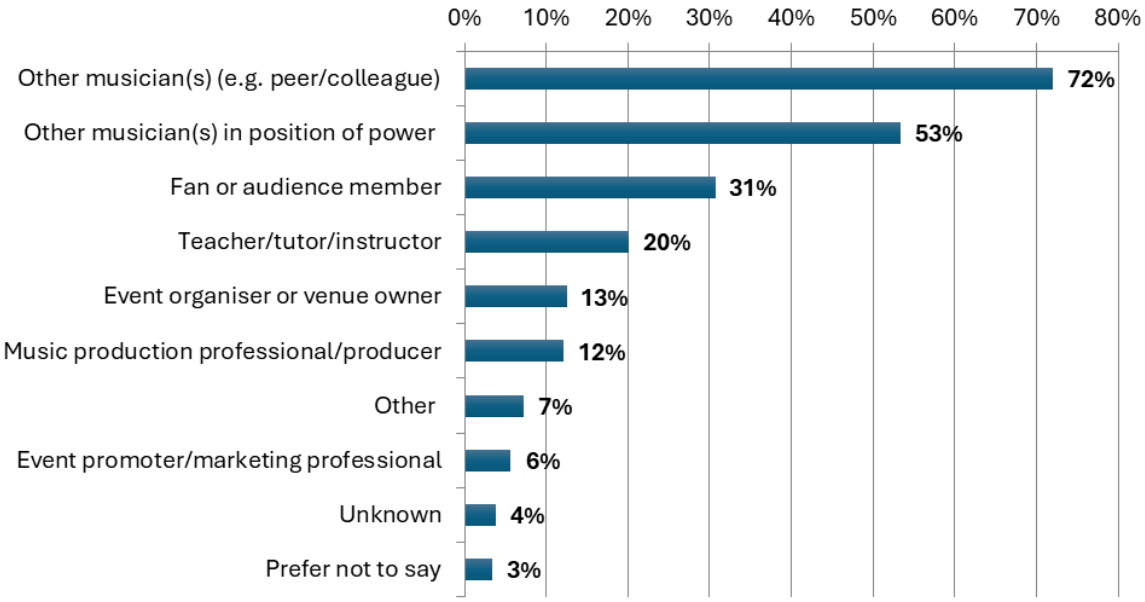


Chart 5. Identity of person/persons perpetrating sexual harassment/violence

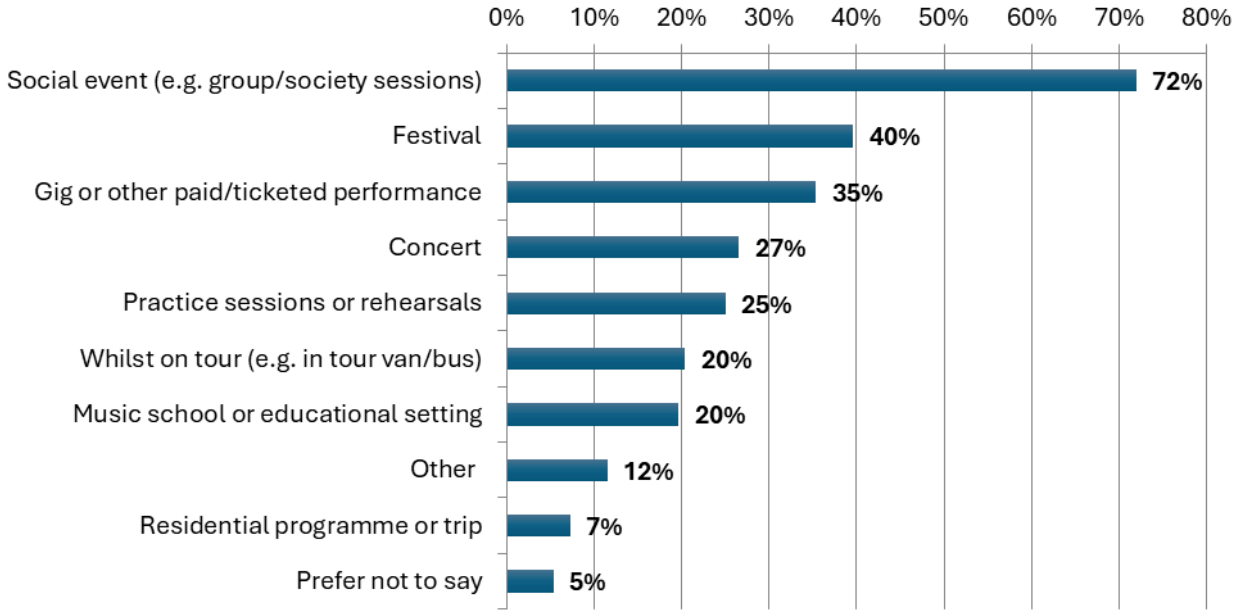


Locations and settings

As Chart 6 shows, most first-hand experiences of sexual violence and harassment mentioned in the survey took place in social settings related to the folk scene, such as 'sessions' or, commonly, when socialising after a performance (72%). Following this, sexual harassment/violence was most commonly reported in formal performance contexts, such as at music festivals (40%), gigs (35%) or concerts (27%).

Other common locations were during rehearsals (25%), whilst on tour (20%), and in educational (20%) and residential (7%) music programme settings. Other contexts participants mentioned included online settings, for example on social media or during online meetings.

Chart 6. Locations and settings where participants experienced sexual harassment/violence

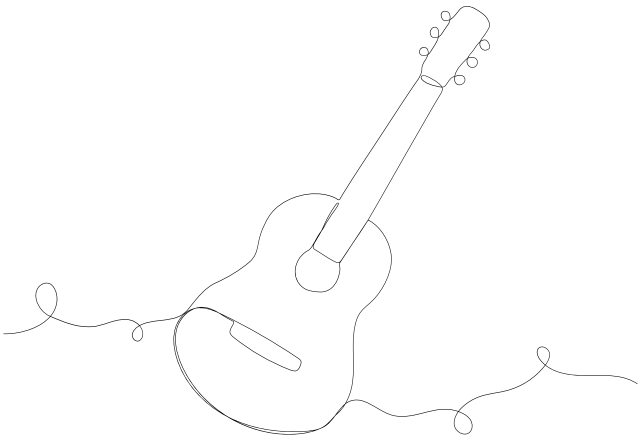


Teaching and educational settings were identified as particular spaces of concern, with a fifth of respondents identifying these as locations where 'blurred boundaries', admiration, and trust could be exploited:

'The career hierarchy from student to professional is very blurry and it is easy for people to ignore their responsibilities or assert their own power over others.' (S 075, 25–34 years)

Some participants spoke of their experiences at music camps and educational establishments that they had attended from a relatively young age, and how they were initially unaware that they were in fact experiencing grooming from older tutors.

Dynamics such as these, including age and power, are discussed in more detail within the following section alongside other salient factors within the folk scene such as gender, sexism, and industry status to deepen understanding of sexual violence and harassment within this context.



3. Compounding contexts: Unchecked power and gender inequality

Gendered power and the 'boys club'

Many of the women who participated in the research described the Scottish folk music scene as male-dominated, often describing it as having a 'boys club' culture. This description resonates with the wider UK Parliamentary WEC (2024, 2025) inquiries into misogyny in the UK music scene, which also found the existence of a 'boys club'. As one of our study participants said:

'There's pressure to be 'one of the lads', to be acceptable. Often, I have been the only or one of the few women in the band/tour so the pressure is on.' (S 062, 55–64 years)

This environment also placed pressure on women to conform, to tolerate any inappropriate behaviour, or remain silent in order to belong, or sustain their careers. Music opportunities and career progression were often tied to the approval of older, established men, creating conditions in which sexual violence and harassment could occur:

A lot of the most successful people in the trad scene...are men and so a lot of what you might be craving as a musician and in a hypercompetitive environment is that validation from someone that you respect and look up to in terms of your musicianship. But...it is a vulnerable situation...and I think that that is likely what gets taken advantage of.' (I 025, 18-24 years)

'There are so many predatory men who are still given the lion's share of opportunities...there are men with power and influence running loose, many of which are abusing that power for their selfish gains' (S 080, 35-44 years)

Participants spoke about the importance of gaining and maintaining social capital in the scene. For example, the importance of having 'good craic' to sustain bookings, emphasising the importance of remaining positive and being seen as fun and entertaining. 'Speaking out' against men in positions of power and influence was described as 'difficult' and generated fears of being labelled an 'angry woman' or a 'troublemaker.'

Moreover, the following participant reflects how everyday sexism is normalised which then bleeds into the normalisation of sexual violence and harassment:

There's a culture of complicity in terms of...not responding...shutting down or dismissing when men are making, say, misogynistic jokes and rape culture, stuff like that' (I 025, 25-34 years)

This culture was also recognised by men within the scene, who described difficulties challenging it:

'I am a man working in the Scottish folk scene...I try and speak out and call things out but sometimes I'm a small voice in a large group of "lads" and find myself overpowered.'
(S 152, 45–54 years)

Fame, status, and industry power

A central theme across participants' accounts was the role of fame and status in enabling the perpetration of harm. Several described experiences involving known male perpetrators, who were recognised as successful performers, educators, and industry gatekeepers, characterising them as 'powerful', 'prominent', or 'influential.'

'We are working and skirting around people who have a lifetime of harassment and assault under their belts, who now occupy positions of prestige and authority.'
(S 078, 25-34 years)

Holding influence in the scene was seen as another key factor insulating perpetrators from challenge and consequences:

'*I do think that sometimes people's talent can maybe make them either feel or actually be immune to criticism or for their behaviour to maybe not be excused...who abuse like a position of power...then they are somewhat protected by the status that the scene gives them.'* (I 027, 18-24 years)

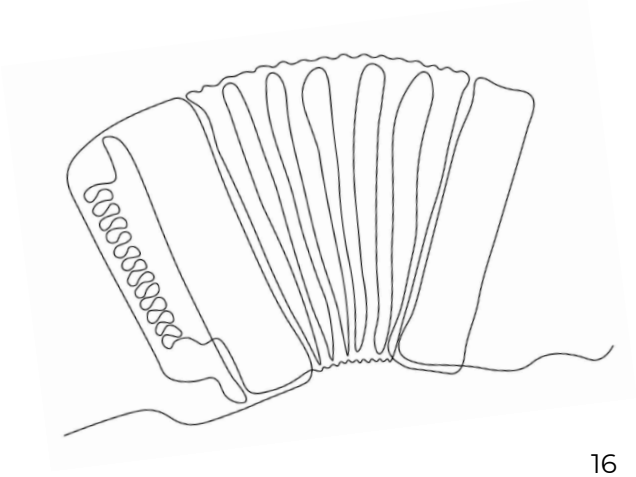
Harassing with impunity was particularly the case when those harmed held less social, financial, or professional power:

'Those deemed 'low status' in folk - staff, audience members, young musicians and people on the fringes...are most at risk...and I fear their voices are less likely to be heard.'
(S 036, 25-34 years)

The small size of the Scottish folk scene means that highly influential figures were frequently around and regularly interacted with musicians at all career stages. This meant that women often felt both 'at risk' and unable to disclose to others what had happened to them for fear of being disbelieved.

Indeed, one participant shared her experience of domestic abuse when she was in a relationship with a 'celebrity' musician:

'*The person was a 'much loved character' on the scene, so he was believed, and I wasn't.'*
(S 023, 45-54 years)



Age, gender, and positions of trust

Whilst women of all ages raised similar concerns and reported comparable experiences, age emerged as a key intersecting factor in those experiences. Gendered power imbalances were intensified by age and career stage. Concerns were shared that younger and less established women were more likely to be targeted, and often faced additional barriers in challenging inappropriate behaviour:

'*...I think for younger people it is a really hard thing to call out...it is usually always somebody older and that is such a tricky dynamic.'* (I 030, 25-34 years)

Several participants expressed their concern for younger women entering the scene – describing their discomfort knowing the potential harms they might face, and the limited support or safeguarding opportunities available:

'That's the hardest bit is when you see younger, less experienced women... about to hit the same experiences your generation of women had... you are thinking, oh god, it's really hard for young women coming into [Scottish folk music].' (I 049, 35-44 years)

Although the survey did not ask specifically about sexual violence and harassment experienced by minors, disclosures relating to abuse experienced by young women and girls under 16 were common and often linked to music camps and educational establishments:

'Before the age of 16 I was groomed twice and sexually harassed and assaulted. These were by prolific [Scottish folk] figures.' (I 129, 18-24 years)

Some experiences detailed the ways in which the sexualisation of young girls were normalised, creating the conditions possible for sexual violence to occur:

'I can remember being at a session... and I was about 15... a man who was in his 20s at least making comments about my chest and stuff like that. So that would be the kind of thing that is just normalised and ignored or part of the joke' (I 025, 25-34 years)

'I think because trad has a mix of people from all ages there is a lot of opportunities for older men to take advantage of younger women. I was most involved in the trad scene when I was a teenager and experienced on a number of occasions men quite a bit older than me sexualising/objectifying me/making particular remarks.' (S 027, 18-24 years)

Alcohol and drug use

Power inequalities were further compounded by a culture of alcohol and drug use that participants described as embedded in the folk scene, most prominent when socialising and networking in pubs, bars, and informal social environments. These alcohol and pub-centred networking practices were described as important for career progression but were also experienced as 'risky' or described as environments which could be used to facilitate sexual violence:

A combination of a heavy drinking culture and lack of accountability, the 'boys club' mentality that can still be found everywhere makes for quite a risky place for women - particularly young women - to work in' (S 002, 35-44 years)

"*I was in the same space as people that were a lot older than me, I was only 15 years old, I was drinking alcohol, they were drinking alcohol…people were playing, late at night…and then that's how men that are older are able to pressure underage girls into having sex with them."* (I 025, 25-34 years)

Crucially, alcohol and drugs are not causal factors of sexual violence, but they do form part of the gendered social context in which it occurs – serving to facilitate, excuse or minimise sexual violence and harassment:

'Drugs and alcohol are often used as excuses for men's behaviour…Late nights and drinking are commonplace in the scene and can create a very toxic environment.'
(S 051, 35–44 years)

Lack of recognition, normalisation and blame

Participants also described how sexual violence and harassment could be minimised and normalised in the folk scene, making it harder to challenge inappropriate and harmful behaviour.

There were numerous examples of women's experiences not being taken seriously - for example, being dismissed as 'gossip' or for being 'dramatic', generating a sense of men's talent and community harmony being prioritised over women's safety concerns:

'On multiple occasions I have been told "don't ruin him for me" when trying to open up…if you speak out you are labelled "bad craic."' (S 108, 25–34 years)

'…the toxicity of people normalising bad behaviour was so depressing…Even female role models…saying that if you are sorry then [sexual violence and harassment is] ok?'
(S 164, 18-24 years)

Participants shared examples of their experiences being trivialised with several describing how colleagues 'laughed off' disclosures:

'I've had conversations with good pals about a specific person and they laugh and say, 'but he's good at ___' and I have asked them explicitly if they'd work with them again and they've said 'yes' (I 007, 25-34 years)

Others described facing disbelief and loyalty to perpetrators:

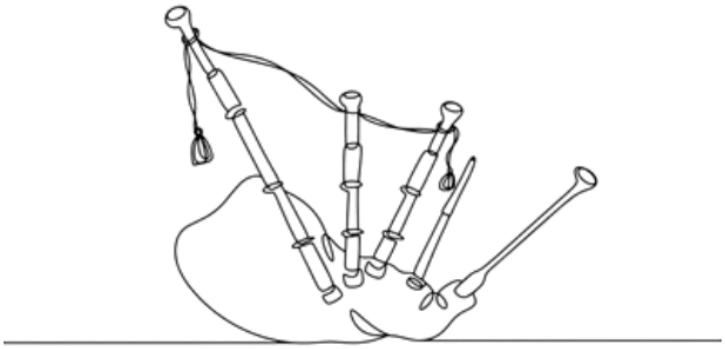
'I made myself tell someone that is a huge fan of this person and they didn't believe me. They were, like, "no way, well, it wouldn't put me off that person, I still think they are absolutely amazing"' (I 045, 45-54 years)

Similarly, participants shared experiences of disclosing sexual violence and harassment, only to be met with discomfort, silence, and a reluctance to get involved – reinforcing the feeling that such harms were tolerated rather than treated as serious violations.

' ...These experiences are part of people's lives; this isn't something to stay quiet about or be on the fence about. Too many times, I've heard people say, "Oh that's a shame but I'm not getting involved"' (S 161, 25-34 years)

Relatedly, participants described ways in women were blamed for instances of sexual violence and harassment. Echoing insidious societal gender inequalities, we noted women musician's alcohol consumption was sometimes used against them in discussions of sexual violence and harassment in the scene. For example, by problematically applying double standards by suggesting women who had engaged in drinking were 'irresponsible' or had undermined their own credibility - ultimately shifting blame and focus away from perpetrators' actions and choices.

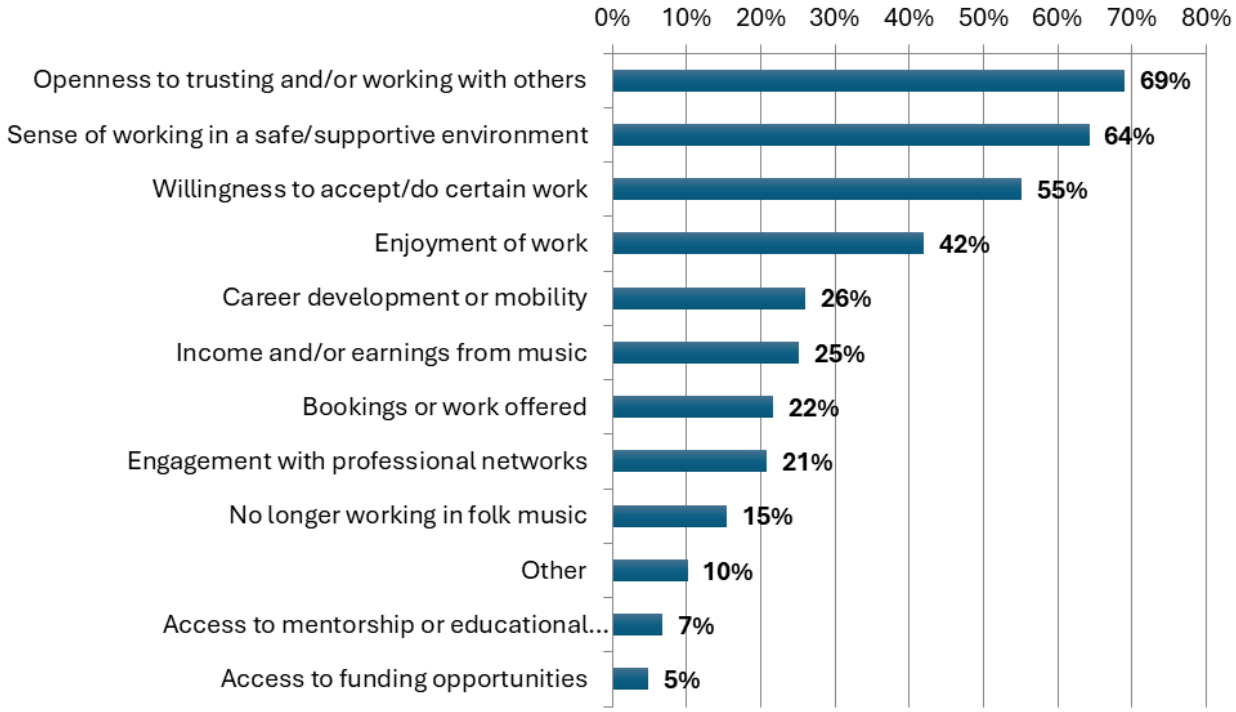
Other participants described further ways in which they felt blamed for what happened, for example with suggestions they had 'led on' the perpetrator, or 'not read the signs.' One survey respondent shared that following an incident of sexual violence, a venue owner *'told the poor [victim-survivor] "that's what you get for being young and beautiful."'* (S 182, 25-34 years)



4. Harms and impacts

For many women who participated in this study, experiences of misogyny, sexual harassment, and violence caused significant, sustained, and far-reaching harm, as Chart 7. shows. These impacts had profound effects on their personal lives and relationships and had direct consequences for their work and participation in the folk music scene. Central to these harms were diminished feelings of safety, dignity, justice and agency.

Chart 7. Impact of sexual harassment/violence reported by survey participants



Emotional and social impacts

Echoing the common experiences of victim-survivors of sexual violence and harassment, women musicians participating in this study told us how their experiences negatively affected their wellbeing, and left them with enduring feelings of shame, guilt, fear and anger.

"I still, to this day, feel stupid for letting this happen, guilty as I didn't stop what was happening and deeply regret it ever happened. I still feel 'soiled' and extremely ashamed and embarrassed, even though I know he was in the position of power.' (S 004, 65 years+)

Participants also shared how in addition to the abuse, significant harms also stemmed from feeling blamed, disbelieved or having their concerns minimised:

'One of my closest... friends (who works in the scene) took a job working with one of the perpetrators after I'd told her about what he'd done to me, and others. This was really, really hurtful and difficult for me...' (S 051, 35-44 years)

The fear of being disbelieved, blamed or not taken seriously for sexual harassment and violence is a common experience in all contexts where such abuse occurs. This does not only have the effect of deepening the trauma but also deters women from disclosing to others.

Other participants shared how their experiences impacted their intimate and family relationships, and affected their physical and mental health, intimacy, and emotional openness.

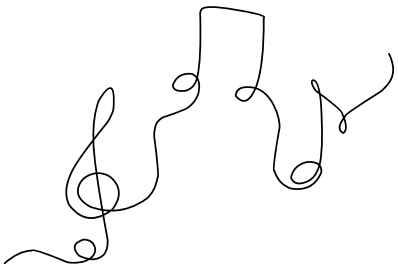
'I think it interferes with relationships afterwards…trust and self-respect. It is almost like holding back a part of yourself and not being able to be yourself because you are trying to protect yourself' (I 045, 45-54 years)

'A big part of myself felt like it had been changed or, sort of, taken away…my relationship as well… things like intimacy was really impacted.' (I 029, 45-54 years)

Despite the emotional cost, many women told us they shared their stories through this project out of a desire to protect others, particularly younger women, from experiencing similar harms. This resonates with existing research on why women decide to report and speak out:

I'm traumatised, I will never forgive certain things…I wanted to share my information, because…if I had this information at 28 years old…how much less self-loathing would I have had…And…I'm really just genuinely worried about those girls, you know. (I 054, 45-54 years)

> ***'It still feels raw many years down the line. I wish I could speak out more. Some don't believe me because they are men and take sides…Time is a healer, but why should we use our precious time healing rather than living a full life.'* (S 019, 55-64 years)**



Leaving the scene

Participants also shared the significant impacts that sexual harassment and violence had on their careers, and broader engagement with the scene. For some women, continuing to participate in an environment that proved unsafe or felt toxic or unsupportive was untenable. 15% of respondent participants reported they no longer worked in folk music as a result of sexual harassment and violence – a concerning figure which speaks to the ways in which women are pushed out of industries featuring significant gendered inequalities. This signals a concerning loss of talent and expertise for the scene:

'I felt so unsafe in the Scottish folk scene by the time I was finishing my degree…that I never continued' (I 031, 25–34 years)

Women who left the scene told us they did so due to traumatic personal experiences, restricted employment opportunities, diminished enjoyment of the work, concern about being blamed, being unsupported or subject to community gossip.

> ***'My experience of the folk music scene has been so toxic that I now no longer work in it...it is difficult to list all the different ways it has impacted me and how many incidents have taken place from 'banter' remarks to assault.'* (S 091, 25–34 years)**

Effects on employment, career, and earning opportunities

For women who continued to work or participate in the scene, they shared how their career opportunities (21%), progression (26%) and earnings (25%) had been negatively impacted by sexual violence and harassment. Over half (55%) of women musicians reported that it had a limiting impact on the work they were willing to undertake, creating significant barriers to employment and career development.

Women who disclosed or challenged sexual harassment and violence described similar outcomes. A quarter (24%) of those who spoke up reported negative effects on bookings and work offered to them.

'The whole thing of 'will I lose out on this festival or this job if I call out this person...?' ... having to miss out on lots and lots of jobs because of predators out there.' (I 031, 25-34 years)

Moreover, the risk of these impacts had a significant chilling effect, discouraging disclosure and reducing confidence to challenge unacceptable behaviour:

'I felt that challenging the behaviour would damage the working relationship and potentially exclude me from opportunities to perform or take part in projects with them or with others in the future' (S 075, 25-34 years)

Other participants described how, although they didn't leave the scene altogether, they restricted their participation significantly, again limiting their possibilities:

'I was, like, "I don't want to put myself in this environment if this is what it is like".'
(I 030, 25-34 years)

'As a performing musician the culture never appealed to me, and I never felt comfortable or safe, so I always stayed on the periphery. On reflection if young women had been respected and supported things may have been very different!' (S 179, 45-54 years)

Loss of safety, trust, and enjoyment of work

Participants also told us about significant harms they experienced related to safety, trust, and their enjoyment of work. More than two thirds (69%) of survey respondents reported reduced openness to trusting or working with others, and 64% reported feeling unsafe or unsupported at work.

With the absence of any formal safeguarding, many women felt responsible for managing their own safety – sharing how they avoided particular venues, events, or opportunities due to fear of being targeted, or encountering known perpetrators. Due to the relatively small size of the scene, there was a sense that perpetrators could turn up at any folk-related event:

'You really do see the people who have done you wrong, like, all the time.' (I 024, 45-54 years)

'I'm always on edge when in trad spaces that his name will come up or he will physically be there. I can never fully relax.' (S 127, 25-34 years)

This proximity shaped women's sense that the scene was unsafe, regardless of whether they had directly experienced sexual violence and harassment themselves. Consequently, women across generations described this experience of the scene as inhibiting, exhausting, and emotionally draining.

'I'm just a little bit more wary who I go with, who I sit with...' (I 027, 18-24 years)

Others described the significant disappointment and loss of faith they experienced - where the excitement and creative vibrancy of the scene felt tarnished, replaced by a sense of injustice and mistrust of others:

'I was very young when this first happened to me...it has really opened my eyes to everything and made me see that it happens so much more often than we think, sadly.'
(S 147, 18-24 years)

'...don't meet your idols because they're really not who you think they are' (I 024, 45-54 years)

Consequently, 42% of responding participants reported reduced enjoyment of their work. For some, this involved loss of creative confidence, disrupted relationships with their music, and led to a diminished sense of belonging:

'I stopped playing and attending certain gigs etc due to the assault...I didn't play my [instrument] as it reminded me too much of the incident.' (S 146, 25–34 years)

5. Disclosures and responses

Disclosing sexual violence and harassment

For the most part, disclosing sexual violence and harassment was considered to be very difficult to do. Most commonly, participants talked with those closest to them about their experiences (e.g. their partner, friends, and family). A quarter (25%) of survey participants also sought counselling support, and 14% sought specialist support from third-sector gender-based violence organisations. A relatively small proportion (10%) reported to the police.

Notably, 60% of survey participants disclosed sexual violence and harassment to others working or participating within the folk scene. Mostly these reports were informal - 85% spoke to colleagues and 22% shared information via informal networks. However, some participants told us they did report to formal societies (16%), event organisers (11%), educational institutions (10%) and the Musicians' Union (7%).

Barriers to reporting

There were 40% of survey participants who told us they had never spoken to anyone about the sexual violence or harassment they experienced in the Scottish folk scene. For some, this was something that they had carried with them privately for many years.

The following examples highlight that fear of backlash, reputational damage, and professional exclusion in a relatively small scene shaped decisions about whether and how to disclose experiences of sexual violence and harassment.

'The scene is small and tight knit and saying anything would end my career completely'
(S 151, 45-54 years)

'It's a very small scene, and once you're blackballed, that's it. They really do stick together, and I've seen men "close rank" even though they know something really bad happened.'
(S 023, 45-54 years)

There was a shared perception that protective mechanisms and means for redress were limited, and the difficulties of disclosing were exacerbated by the close-knit nature of the scene:

'There also needs to be better systems in place of protection and for reporting. Because trad is a very insular community, everyone knows everyone which I think worsens the culture of fear and silence that stops victims from speaking out.' (S 027, 18-24 years)

Some participants were fearful about the likelihood of backlash, describing their fear in stark terms:

'Even in an anonymous survey I am frightened to put more details…' (S 167, 25-34 years)

I firmly believe that it would be like a well bursting if women felt they could safely report it.'
(S 182, 25-34 years)

These fears are not unfounded; many participants told us about experiences of being discouraged from speaking out, and others about the hostility they faced when they tried to do so:

'I was shunned. I was the bad guy. That's the thing...the men are so protected by both older men and women.'" (S 182, 25-34 years)

There was also uncertainty about where to turn and concern about who to trust:

'I have not [reported], because I don't know who to talk to. The connections one particular person has makes me fear what might happen if I speak out' (S 087, 35-44 years)

Some participants told us they have become more cautious about disclosing over time, limiting who they speak to after experiencing unsupportive or dismissive responses:

'Only with friends that I one hundred percent trust. I tried to talk to someone once and it really didn't work out...they were seemingly not interested...didn't know how to act...So, I got careful after that.' (S 084, 25-34 years)

Nowhere to formally report sexual violence and harassment

A persistent theme across the data was the absence of a clear, independent and effective formal mechanism for reporting sexual violence and harassment within the Scottish folk scene.[8] There are very high levels of freelance working in the scene. Most musicians and performers are self-employed and, as such, are not as protected as those working in other industries. As several participants explained, there was nothing like an 'HR' department within the scene they could seek guidance from or to whom they could report incidents. This significantly narrowed their options when seeking protection, support and accountability.

'We need a place for musicians to go to report these instances in a formal way that isn't the police.' (S 051, 25-34 years)

Many participants contrasted the folk scene with other workplaces, highlighting the extent to which musicians lacked protections that would be standard elsewhere when responding to sexual violence and harassment:

'If someone was continuously displaying dangerous behaviour in a workplace... that perpetrator would face consequences. Why should victims of [sexual assault and rape] not have that protection in this line of work?' (S 124, 25-34 years)

8. Please note the discussion in this section refers to the lack of formal mechanisms within the Scottish folk scene. The Musicians' Union Safe Space can provide those concerned about sexual violence and harassment with advice and support, and support union members with raising a complaint or seeking redress. Contact details are provided at the end of the report.

Concerns were also raised about the lack of independence in the responses of some folk organisations receiving disclosures, with descriptions of instances where reports of sexual violence and harassment were downplayed or suppressed. This was attributed by participants to a desire to protect the organisations institutional standing:

'[We need] platforms to report and investigate claims, [anonymised] sweep it under the carpet to save their reputations' (S 047, 45-54 years)

The lack of formal routes for redress left many participants feeling that sexual violence and harassment in the Scottish folk scene would only be addressed if it reached a clear criminal threshold and the individual was willing to report to the police. As one participant said:

'The only times it's dealt with is if it gets so bad then it's a legal matter, but the grey areas of 'not bad enough to call the police' – they're the incidents that make the space feel unsafe.'
(S 089, 35-44 years)

Sexual violence and harassment – regardless of whether it meets a criminal threshold - is a workplace issue which requires a workplace response. Arguably, folk scene institutions, music societies and festival and event organisers have a duty of care for ensuring a safe, non-discriminatory environment for their members, musicians, technicians and performers. This should include preventing and addressing inappropriate behaviour which causes them harm.

Informal networks and responses

In the absence of a formal reporting mechanism and standardised safeguarding practice embedded across the scene, participants often described relying on individual and informal responses to sexual violence and harassment. Particularly, participants told us about informal, predominantly female networks they draw upon which offer solidarity, and where participants can share information and warn each other about perpetrators of sexual violence and harassment.

Such networks provide opportunities to have open conversations about the challenges women musicians face, and were described as invaluable:

'I also think that speaking to other women is so helpful...women in the traditional music scene really lift each other up.' (S 147, 18-24 years)

'Sharing experiences with others who understand the context is helpful as you can feel supported and less alone.' (S 081, 25-34 years)

However, participants also reflected on the limitations of relying on networks and informal responses more generally, noting these do not provide meaningful accountability, and could normalise expectations that women should anticipate sexual violence and harassment and manage this risk individually:

'The culture of whispered warnings among women does very little to protect any of us.'
(S 127, 25-34 years)

'We're all angry about it, but don't feel like actual changes get made…I've been advised who to avoid, but it still feels more like when than if, these things will happen.' (S 028, 35-44 years)

Others described experiences demonstrating that it can be hard to make disclosures in these contexts, and that generally informal responses carry risks of being inconsistent, uninformed or unsupportive:

'It's nice to vent. Sometimes nice to feel solidarity, although some of the worst stuff I don't talk about.' (S 028, 35-44 years)

Participants shared that another key way in which some individuals informally responded to sexual violence and harassment is by choosing to stop working with known perpetrators, and encouraging others to do the same:

'I speak to women, often the women I'm close to collectively disclose and then boycott certain male musicians, educators and managers.' (S 161, 25-34 years)

However, many participants reflected on the significant, additional labour as well as opportunity costs that these informal approaches generate for women musicians and their allies. The following participant, for example, noted that foregoing work leads to loss of income and career opportunities, compounding existing inequalities on the scene:

'Conscientious…people are losing money and opportunities by doing the right thing and wishing to not be associated with men who are known to have acted indecently…or been violent to women…[Perpetrators] continue to receive praise and support while victims…are forced to navigate an already skewed and difficult industry.' (S 090, 25-34 years)

As previously mentioned, others described the difficulty of occupying positions which involve calling out inappropriate behaviour and advocating for change on the scene. This was likely to lead to backlash and stigmatisation for being seen as being 'overly negative' or the 'angry' woman in the room.

6. Ongoing work and supportive responses making a difference

Despite the challenges encountered by women participating and working within the scene that we have documented in this report, some participants also described positive and improving responses to sexual violence and harassment within Scottish folk music. These responses were experienced as making a meaningful difference to women's sense of safety, wellbeing, and encouraged their continuing participation in the scene.

These included experiences of supportive responses from organisers, venues, or organisations, where meaningful action following disclosure helped participants feel safer and more supported:

'I feel safer to participate knowing I can speak to [anonymised organisation] and have had their support in ensuring my safety at festivals...I would not have been able to participate if it wasn't for this.' (S 211, Age not provided)

'I have reported to an event organiser...They were very supportive and have never booked the person I spoke about again...I was satisfied.' (S 119, 35-44 years)

Participants also identified examples of innovative practice currently taking place within the scene:

'Safeguarding policies – for example, [anonymised organisation] have great ones.'
(S 063, 25-34 years)

'A code of conduct agreement...which clearly outlines unacceptable behaviour and the consequences...I have seen one or two used more recently and they are a really positive step.'
(S 039, 45-54 years)

As the following participant stresses, it is important that such good practice examples are recognised, rolled out more widely and embedded across the scene to improve consistency:

'...the nature of our freelance work means that we can be working one day in a place that has considered everything and another place the next that's considered nothing at all.'
(S 089, 35-44 years)

Alongside specific interventions and supportive responses, participants also recognised ongoing work, particularly that involving awareness-raising and the introduction of safeguarding policies and codes of conduct, was having a welcome and positive cultural impact within the scene. For some, this was experienced as there being an increased openness to sharing experiences, naming sexual violence and harassment, and recognising the significant the harms it can cause:

'I imagine [sexual violence and harassment] has always been going on, but it has been trivialised in the past…it is only in the last five years or less…that people have actually started talking about these things and brought it up as a problem rather than laughing it off.'
(I 030, 25-34 years)

Together, these accounts show that ongoing work in the scene is contributing to positive change, improving awareness, safeguarding, and support for victim-survivors.

Frustration, hope and calls for change

Another dominant theme across participant responses was a resounding call for change. An overwhelming 92% of participants felt that much more needs to be done to make the Scottish folk scene a safer and more supportive space for women. Participants emphasised the need for action across the scene as a whole, including from the musical community (87%), as well as from key folk-related institutions, including education providers (85%), event organisers (84%), folk societies (82%), and the Musicians' Union (78%).

Some participants expressed frustration and a sense of hopelessness that the same conversations about sexual violence and harassment keep happening without meaningful change. However, others were able to draw hope and motivation from what they saw as positive and emerging practice within the scene. Across responses, there was a wealth of energy, ideas, and solutions coming directly from those affected, which have directly informed the recommendations set out at the end of this report.

Calling out wrongdoing and shifting responsibility

Some participants spoke powerfully about the need to clearly name inappropriate behaviour, stop protecting those who cause harm, and openly acknowledge sexual violence and harassment as serious issues through honest discussion:

'Open discussion naming the problematic behaviours…making it much clearer that such behaviours are completely unacceptable and why…organisations giving 'air' to discussions around this issue…with the hope of greater understanding…and resulting enhanced safety.'
(S 062, 55-64 years)

Many participants also called for zero tolerance and clear consequences for sexual violence and harassment, stressing that meaningful change requires a whole-community response rather than placing responsibility on victim-survivors.

'Everyone should be getting involved…there is a narrative that 'if I'm not part of the problem then I must be part of the solution'… that just isn't how this works. People have to make an effort to make everyone feel safer.' (S 016, 18-24 years)

Changing culture and practice

Other participants highlighted the importance of education as part of prevention and cultural change, alongside clearer, standardised policy frameworks addressing safety, reporting sexual misconduct and accessing support across the scene:

'Access to guidelines on how to report abuse & misconduct. Safe spaces for women to talk and get support.' (S 040, 45-54 years)

'I think organisations of any kind should have to adhere to a collective set of industry standard checks. A framework, maybe set out by the MU [Musicians' Union], that any organisation, from small community education groups to large scale festivals, need to sign up to in order to run. This would set a standard and a baseline that everyone would have to adhere to' (S 089, 35-44 years)

Some participants also stressed the importance of addressing wider structural inequalities within the scene, including by increasing the representation of women occupying leadership roles and other positions of power:

'Maybe the bigger festivals should commit to rotating leadership...shaking up the power structure and dynamics...' (S 094, 35-44 years)

Finally, participants emphasised the need to maintain the momentum the scene has built in challenging sexual violence, harassment, and related inequalities, and to collectively sustain and build on existing efforts:

'It is maintaining the momentum and continuing to support and invest in the good work that has been going on – it is keeping it rolling, it is keeping it moving, listening, talking, sharing and promoting.' (I 045, no age given)

7. Conclusion

In this report, we have presented research which provides clear and concerning evidence of sexual violence and harassment experienced by women musicians while working and participating in the Scottish folk scene. While many participants described the folk scene as 'creative', 'nurturing' and 'culturally important', these positive experiences coexist with experiences of sexual violence and harassment that undermine women's safety, dignity and inclusion.

Research participants revealed a high prevalence of sexual violence and harassment, including sexualised remarks, pressure to engage in sexual activities, stalking, domestic abuse, sexual assault and rape. These experiences were rarely 'one-off' or isolated incidents, and they took place across different settings and career stages. The findings show that such experiences are most commonly perpetrated by fellow musicians, including prominent and influential figures, and are concentrated in social and professional spaces that are central to participation in the scene – such as during post-gig socialising, sessions, when touring, and in formal performance spaces and educational environments.

Sexual violence and harassment were described as an "open secret" within the folk scene – known about, but often normalised through silence or minimisation, and rarely formally acknowledged or met with meaningful consequences. These conditions are compounded by gendered power inequalities and a lack of consistent safeguarding and reporting mechanisms, forcing many women musicians to manage risk and the harms they experience informally and individually. The harms described by participants were profound and far-reaching, affecting women's personal wellbeing, careers and creative lives, and in some cases resulting in women withdrawing from the Scottish folk scene entirely. This speaks starkly to how the consequences of sexual violence and harassment not only cause significant harm to individual women but also impoverishes the Scottish folk music scene overall by narrowing whose voices, talents and futures are able to flourish.

We know the Scottish folk scene is not alone in facing the challenges of sexual violence and harassment – it is a problem for the wider music industry and society more broadly. Research conducted in other music contexts highlight that male-dominated environments, informal and insecure employment, fewer safeguarding and accountability mechanisms, and insufficient legal protections can intensify gendered power inequalities (e.g. WEC 2024, McCarry et al. 2023). Recognising this does not dilute the findings of this report or its importance for the Scottish folk music scene. We also want to acknowledge that men and non-binary folk musicians also contacted us disclosing experiences of sexual violence and harassment. This underscores the need to tackle sexual violence and harassment in all its forms and make the Scottish folk scene more accessible for everyone.

Through this research, participants also highlighted the solidarity, resistance and ongoing work in the Scottish folk scene that is making a difference. The actions of supportive organisations and networks, women musicians subjected to sexual violence and/or harassment and their allies speaking out, and emerging safeguarding practices show that change is possible and already underway. Building on this momentum requires community-wide recognition that sexual violence and harassment is a workplace issue that affects the Scottish folk scene.

Policy and practice-led efforts are also required to embed collective and consistent responses across the scene, to better protect and support victim-survivors and ensure that those who engage in inappropriate and harmful behaviours face accountability. Addressing these issues is not about undermining the folk scene, but about safeguarding its future – creating conditions in which everyone can participate safely and equitably. We hope the findings and recommendations set out in this report provide an evidence-base which speaks to the urgency of the issue, and which can be used to inform, support and galvanise sustained further action.

8. Recommendations

The focus of this project has been to develop an evidence base on women musician's experiences of sexual violence and harassment in the Scottish folk scene. However, following the strength of feeling and response to the project, we also worked with some key Scottish folk scene and sexual violence stakeholders to discuss our emergent findings and workshop some recommendations to support pathways to change.

We have distilled the key messages from the survey responses and interviews which encapsulate the ways in which research participants conceptualise and experience sexual violence and harassment in the Scottish folk scene, and which highlight the challenges that this poses.

In consultation with the Scottish folk scene stakeholders with whom we engaged, we offer a set of 18 recommendations, organised under the three themes of Improving Accountability and Access to Justice, Recognising and Supporting Victim-Survivors and Prevention and Culture Change.

The recommendations include a range of actions that we consider are required to address the issues identified in this report. If realised, these recommendations could potentially improve the experiences of, and outcomes for women working and participating in the folk scene.

As researchers, we believe that the recommendations are best addressed through collaborative action by employers, organisers, bookers, institutions and funders. Some of these recommendations support previous report recommendations (see e.g. Bhachu et al 2025)[9] and work already going on in the scene. It is heartening to see these synergies, which we hope will add further support to standardising improved practice and safeguarding measures across the Scottish folk scene.

Improving Accountability and Access to Justice

1. Strengthen mechanisms for reporting and responding to sexual harassment and violence connected to the Scottish folk scene
2. Embed and uphold codes of conduct and sector standards, setting clear expectations for professional behaviour
3. Embed the use of working agreements1 or similar, which address sexual misconduct and:
    - Establish behavioural boundaries in working or organised activity contexts (e.g. citing a code of conduct)
    - Articulate what musicians can expect from those organising or employing them (i.e. measures in place to prevent and respond to misconduct)
    - Clarify reporting routes and what will happen if a code breach occurs
4. Organisers and employers should undertake risk assessments to identify potential risks to musician safety and equality, taking clear steps to mitigate any potential harm
5. Funders can also strengthen accountability by ensuring Fair Work Convention equality and safety standards are embedded in their funding conditions, monitoring compliance, and supporting good practice across the sector

9. Bhachu, D.K., L. Brown, and M. Morris (2025) 'Safeguarding Young People in Traditional Music'. The Bit Collective: UK. Published March 2025.

Improving Accountability and Access to Justice

6. Ensure victim-survivors have access to confidential advice, advocacy, and support
7. Organisers can provide clear, transparent information in advance about workplace/event conditions to expect – e.g. line-up and facilities – and increase efforts to improve accessibility
8. Establish clearly communicated pathways for reporting concerns about safety, equality, or harassment – in advance, during events, and retrospectively
9. Address any reported concerns, and develop safety plans where issues or risks are identified
10. Ensure a designated safeguarding person is available, e.g. on site at events and in educational or residential settings
11. Provision of immediate practical support, such as:
    - A place of safety
    - An emergency contact
    - Access to funds or support to leave unsafe work situations
12. Invest in longer-term career support for those impacted by sexual violence, and other forms of inequality and marginalisation – including targeted mentoring, supported re-entry opportunities, and development funding
13. Support and sustain peer networks, including women's networks or broader equality-focused groups within the scene

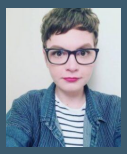
Prevention and Culture Change

14. Take further steps to address structural inequalities within the scene, by increasing the representation of women and other marginalised groups in leadership, decision-making and positions of power
15. Embed time and space for discussion about conduct, power, equality and respect within community, educational, key event and development contexts
16. Embed training workshops in key folk institutions and educational settings, for example addressing:
    - Professional conduct and sexual harassment
    - Informal and freelance work settings
    - Bystander intervention training
    - Feminist self-defence training (suggesting skills or practices to increase confidence in responding safely to harassment or harmful behaviour)
17. Ensure all training and resources are developed in collaboration with specialist organisations with expertise in sexual violence, using trauma-informed and best-practice approaches
18. Fund and support collective and creative initiatives that foster reflection, dialogue, and accountability across the community

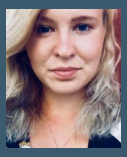
About the research team

Based at the University of Glasgow, the researchers are a team of gender-based violence researchers. All are criminologists based within the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research.

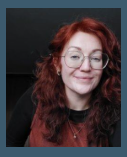
Kelly Johnson is a Senior Lecturer of Criminology. Her research expertise is in the policing of domestic and sexual violence, victim-survivors, criminal and procedural justice, emerging forms of abuse such as cyberflashing and image-based sexual abuse, and feminist theory.



Amy Cullen is an Research Associate. Her primary research interests cover fines and financial penalties, theories of punishment, and women's experiences of justice. Amy also has several years of research experience on a range of projects relating to domestic and sexual abuse, policing, and gender-based violence.

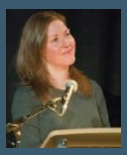


Emily Qvist-Baudry is a Research Associate. Her research interests and experiences ranging from interactional aspects of violence, prison violence, video data to policing of rape and sexual assault, domestic abuse, and gender-based violence.



Stephanie Love is a PhD candidate in Criminology. Her research interests include gender-based violence, technology-facilitated (sexual) violence in spaces such as online dating and technofeminism. Stephanie has several years of experience as both a practitioner and researcher within criminal justice settings.

Michele Burman is a Professor of Criminology. With a background in sociology, psychology and law, Michele is a feminist criminologist with long-standing research interests in women, crime and criminal justice, and responses to gender-based violence.



Oona Brooks-Hay is a Professor of Criminology. Her research interests include police and criminal justice responses to sexual and domestic offences, victim-survivor experiences and understanding of 'justice', alternative forms of justice, feminist advocacy and practice, creative methodologies and forms of representation.

Sources of Advice and Support

Musicians' Union Safe Space
You can report to Safe Space online
Or by emailing: safespace@theMU.org
Website: https://musiciansunion.org.uk/safespace
Safe Space provides all musicians with advice on your rights, information about relevant support services and different options in cases of bullying, discrimination and inappropriate behaviour. We can also help MU members with raising a complaint, seeking redress and disciplinary action under MU rules.

Rape and Sexual Assault
Rape Crisis Scotland
Tel: 08088 01 03 02 (freephone)
E-mail: support@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk.
Website: www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk
Rape Crisis Scotland have a national helpline that supports people of all genders aged 13+ who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. They can provide you with details of support services in your local area, including advocacy support to assist those engaging with the criminal justice system following a rape or sexual assault.

Survivors UK
Website: https://www.survivorsuk.org/
Information, support & counselling for men and non-binary persons who have been raped or sexually abused

Domestic Abuse
Scottish Domestic Abuse Helpline
Tel: 0800 027 1234 (freephone)
Textphone: 0800 027 1234
Website: http://womensaid.scot/
24-hour free telephone service providing information regarding domestic abuse.

Legal Advice
Scottish Women's Rights Centre
Tel: 08088 010789
Website: https://www.scottishwomensrightscentre.org.uk/

Sexual Health
Sandyford Sexual Health Services
Tel: 0141 211 8130
Website: http://www.sandyford.org/

Mental Health
Scottish Association for Mental Health
Tel: 0141 530 1000
Email: enquire@samh.org.uk
Website: www.samh.org.uk
SAMH works to support people who experience mental health problems, homelessness, addictions and other forms of social exclusion.

Further Reading and Resources

- Bhachu, D.K., L. Brown, and M. Morris (2025) *'Safeguarding Young People in Traditional Music'*. The Bit Collective: UK. Published March 2025.
- The BIT Collective
- The Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority (CIISA)
- The Maket Collective: National Piping Centre
- The Musicians' Union Safe Space
- *Women and Equalities Committee (2025) 'Misogyny in music: on repeat'. Fifth Report of Session 2024-2025 HC 573*. House of Commons: UK. Published 4 June 2025.