Preventing violence against women and girls in outdoor public spaces in Belfast: A systems map

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About the workshops

Two participatory workshops were held with multi-sectoral stakeholders, identified as having expertise on preventing violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Belfast, to answer the question:

How can we prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast?

Participating organisations included:

The Executive Office

Women's Resource and Development Agency

Belfast City Council

EastSide Partnership

Belfast Healthy Cities

Police Service of Northern Ireland

Department for Infrastructure

Department for Communities

Department of Education

Sustrans

Age NI

Here NI

The Paul Hogarth Company

Disability Action

Migrant Centre NI

Translink

Public Health Agency

Royal Society of Ulster Architects

YouthAction NI

Walkie Talkie Girlies

Department of Health

involve

Executive summary

A series of participatory workshops were held across two full days in January 2025 involving 30 stakeholders from multiple sectors across Belfast. The workshops were led by researchers from Queen's University Belfast as part of a programme of research which aims to investigate how violence against women and girls (VAWG) can be prevented in outdoor public spaces in Belfast. The purpose of the workshops was to co-develop a systems map that represented a shared vision and identified pathways with the potential to prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast.

The two workshops involved:

Day 1: Identification of factors shaping VAWG in outdoor public spaces, and initial development of the systems map.

Day 2: Refinement of the systems map, and identification of key actions and priorities for future interventions and policies.

Over the course of the workshops, the research team contextualised VAWG in outdoor public spaces, and facilitated stakeholders to think about the problem from a systems perspective, acknowledging environmental, social, cultural, economic and political systems which could be shaping VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast.

The workshops produced the following outputs:

1. A systems map visualising the factors, and their interrelationships, which could contribute to preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast.
2. A list of eight action and priority points with the capacity to prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast.

All outputs, as well as the developmental process, are summarised in this report. Please note, that whilst the research team facilitated the workshops, helped with the design of the final maps, and synthesised the findings, the outputs reflect only the insights of the stakeholders themselves.

Foreword

Professor Ruth Hunter, Centre for Public Health, Queen's University Belfast

Ending violence against women and girls (VAWG) has been identified as a top government priority in Northern Ireland. Researchers, policymakers, and communities are seeking solutions to end VAWG, including in public spaces which has been identified as a key issue.

We have received funding from the Medical Research Council to work with women, girls, and other key stakeholders to design and develop interventions to end VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast. The work will benefit the health and wellbeing of women and girls through preventing violence, abuse, and harassment in outdoor public spaces.

In our research, we will:

1. Map ongoing and planned policies and interventions aimed at preventing VAWG in public spaces in Belfast.

2. Explore the factors influencing use of public spaces by women and girls in Belfast, and map and explore the nature of safe and unsafe public spaces in Belfast.

3. In agreement with stakeholders, develop visual diagrams demonstrating the system and relationship of factors affecting VAWG in public spaces, as well as identifying key action and priority points for interventions and policies aiming to prevent VAWG in public spaces in Belfast.

4. Host workshops with women, girls, men, boys, and other stakeholders to 'sense-check' action points and ideas for policies and interventions, to explore their acceptability, utility, affordability, feasibility, and sustainability.

5. Design, with women, girls, and other stakeholders, potential policies and interventions to end VAWG in public spaces.

6. Develop an action plan with stakeholders to prevent VAWG in public spaces in Belfast.

Our vision is to ensure that outdoor public spaces are safe, accessible, and inclusive for women and girls. This will afford women and girls the opportunity to travel to and through outdoor public spaces, without fear of, or the threat of, violence. Having the ability to spend time in outdoor public spaces has direct and indirect benefits on physical and mental health such as increased physical activity, access to nature, and social connectedness.

This report presents the findings and discussions from a series of workshops with key stakeholders working in preventing VAWG in Belfast. The systems map detailed in the report presents a shared understanding of the physical, social, cultural, economic, and political environments that can lead to the prevention of VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast. The systems map can be used to identify and explore interventions and policies with the capacity to prevent VAWG in Belfast, produce actions, and consider what is needed to implement these actions.

Introduction

In Northern Ireland, 98% of women (≥18 years old) and 73% of girls (12 – 17 years old) have experienced as least one form of violence in their lifetime. Around 16% of women report the location of their 'worst recalled violence event' being in public spaces such as parks, forests, and streets or public transport[1, 2]. As a result, and because of the associated health, social and economic impacts of violence against women and girls (VAWG), preventing VAWG has been identified as a top government priority in Northern Ireland[3]. To help address this challenge in Belfast, an interdisciplinary team of researchers (public health, systems science, social justice, urban planning and social psychology) and partner organisations (The Executive Office, Belfast Healthy Cities, Belfast City Council, EastSide Partnership) have secured funding from the UK Medical Research Council's Public Health Intervention Development scheme (PHIND) (award number UKRI158), to co-design and co-develop interventions to prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast.

Possible interventions may inform the design of outdoor public spaces and how they are used, or they may seek to change the attitudes, behaviours, and social and cultural norms of people (including men and boys) living in Belfast. Within the context of this research, outdoor public spaces refer to parks, greenways, streets, footpaths, public squares, and public transport. This work will benefit the health and wellbeing - including the physical, social, mental, and cognitive wellbeing - of women and girls through preventing violence, abuse, and harassment in outdoor public spaces and will consequently produce learnings which can be further applied across Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom, and beyond.

The specific objectives of the participatory workshops were to:

1. Co-develop a systems map with stakeholder organisations representing a shared understanding of the physical, social, cultural, economic and political environments that can lead to prevention of VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast; and to
2. Use the systems map to identify and explore interventions and policies with the capacity to prevent VAWG In Belfast, produce actions and consider what is needed to implement these actions.

Research and Development Division (Welsh Government), Medical Research Council, National Institute for Health Research, Natural Environment Research Council, Public Health Agency (Northern Ireland), The Health Foundation and Wellcome.

Research process

Prior to both workshops, stakeholders were identified through a pre-established working group on preventing VAWG, set up by the research team and by snowball sampling via this network (comprised of partner organisations such as The Executive Office, Belfast Healthy Cities, Belfast City Council, EastSide Partnership). These nominated individuals were contacted by a member of the research team in December 2024, with an invitation to attend both workshops.

Day one, 20th January 2025: Identification of factors and interrelationships shaping VAWG in outdoor public spaces and initial development of systems maps

The first day focused on identifying factors and relationships which shape VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast. The morning session started with a presentation to contextualise the research, followed by an introduction to systems thinking, which refers to acknowledging the dynamic interplay between multiple environmental, social, cultural, economic and political factors which shape VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast. Using this perspective, stakeholders were asked to identify factors that could influence the problem.

Following factor identification, the afternoon session started with a presentation to introduce the process of systems mapping, which involves visualising how factors are causally connected, which in turn can help identify leverage points, that is, where interventions may have the greatest and most sustainable effects to prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces. Using this approach, and the factors identified in the morning session, stakeholders designed their own systems maps in small groups, detailing what they perceive might shape VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast.

Day two, 27th January 2025: Refinement of the systems map, and identification of key actions and priorities

The second workshop focused on recapping outputs from workshop 1 and identifying action and priority points for future interventions and policies. The morning session began with the research team presenting a systems map, developed as an aggregation of each group (n = 5) map designed in the previous workshop. The aggregation was developed by the research team between workshop 1 and 2. Each stakeholder was given the opportunity to consider the systems map independently, followed by small group and plenary discussions facilitated by the research team to refine the systems map.

The afternoon moved the focus towards action and priority points for interventions and policies. This session started with a presentation on how to intervene in complex systems, and

stakeholders were then asked to consider action and priority points for future interventions and policies. Stakeholders consequently identified a series of eight different action and priority points, based on the systems map. Stakeholders were then asked to reflect on how best to disseminate and share outputs developed as a result of the workshops. This was followed by a closing presentation which highlighted the next stages of the research project.

Outputs

The following section highlights the outputs of the workshop. Additionally, the Annex has the final list of factors identified by participants in workshop 1 - factors influencing VAWG in outdoor public spaces - and the systems map from each group (n = 5) also designed in workshop 1.

Systems map

The final version of the map is presented in Figure 1. To supplement the map, Table 1 provides a definition of all factors highlighted. Additionally, the final version of the systems map can be found online. The online version also has features (such as zoom in and out) that facilitate the navigation of the diagram.

The final systems map contains 31 factors and 69 connections. The development of the map highlighted five main themes, which were classified (in no particular order) as: (1) 'Physical': infrastructure, design, and use of public space; (2) 'Attitudinal': knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours; (3) 'Political': public policy, governance, and the political landscape; (4) 'Education': awareness, training, and capacity building; and (5) 'Outcomes'. In the next sections, each theme is contextualised, and the four main feedback loops – defined here as the process of cause-and-effect that exists between two or more factors in a cyclic way (loop) – are highlighted for illustration purposes.

Figure 1. Final systems map
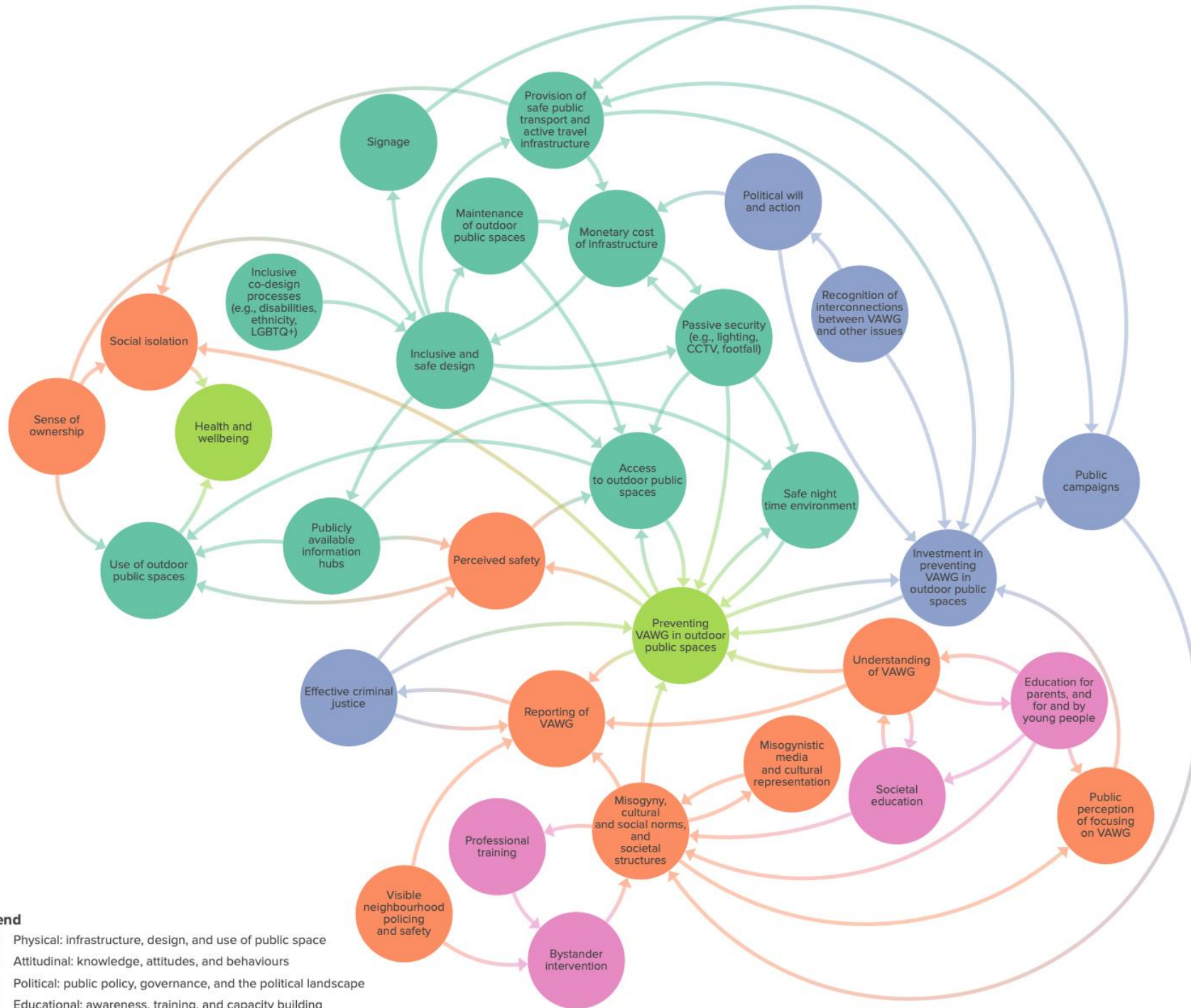
Legend
- Physical: infrastructure, design, and use of public space
- Attitudinal: knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours
- Political: public policy, governance, and the political landscape
- Educational: awareness, training, and capacity building
- Outcomes

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Table 1. Glossary of factors included in final version of systems map

Factor	Definition
Outcomes	
Preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast	The main goal of this work.
Health and wellbeing	Physical, social, psychological, and mental wellbeing.
Physical: infrastructure, design, and use of public space	
Use of outdoor public spaces	Physically being present in outdoor public spaces (for socialising, commuting and recreation, physical activity etc.).
Access to outdoor public spaces	Entrances and exits of outdoor public spaces; proximity to the spaces and connectivity with other spaces and amenities and transport.
Inclusive co-design processes (e.g., disabilities, ethnicity, LGBTQ+)	Involving a diverse range of individuals in the design process of outdoor public spaces, so they are suitable for the whole population (for example, people with disabilities, different ethnicities, LGBTQIA+).
Publicly available information hubs	Having physical spaces that provide information about outdoor public spaces available with relevant details about each space (for example, entry and exit points, whether there is CCTV etc.).
Signage	Having visible directions to entry and exit points signalled and displaying signage about CCTV, security and to information and support points.
Inclusive and safe design	Considering inclusivity and safety when designing spaces.
Maintenance of outdoor public spaces	Refers to the ongoing management, preservation of high quality, and general upkeep of outdoor public areas. Activities of maintenance can include ensuring no litter or graffiti, ensuring lights and CCTV are functioning, and that entries and exits are clear at all times.
Provision of safe public transport and active travel infrastructure	Providing transport routes and options (inclusive of bus, rail, cycling, and walking infrastructure) which are safe.
Monetary cost of infrastructure	The monetary cost of development of physical structures and facilities and their maintenance.
Passive security (e.g., lighting, CCTV, footfall)	The use of design and architectural features and natural surveillance systems.
Safe nighttime environment	Having environments such as streets, pathways, and active transport (e.g., walking, cycling) and public transport areas which are well-lit, for visible wayfinding and natural surveillance after dark.
Attitudinal: knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours	
Misogyny, cultural and social norms, and societal structures	Prejudice, discrimination, or hostility towards women and girls, including cultural and social norms and structures which reinforce gender inequality

	(e.g., acceptance of stereotypical acts of behaviour, such as 'catcalling', unsolicited remarks, gestures and actions in public places).
Visible neighbourhood policing and safety	Active and visible presence of law enforcement and community members to deter criminal behaviour, to ensure safety and foster a sense of security among residents.
Misogynistic media and cultural representation	The ways in which media, entertainment and cultural narratives reinforce gender-based stereotypes, normalise discrimination and perpetuate VAWG.
Understanding of VAWG	General understanding around VAWG and the various forms of violence (e.g., awareness and improved understanding of the different forms of violence).
Perceived safety	Feeling of safety from women and girls.
Reporting of VAWG	Reporting of incidents of violence (i.e., to police, parents, youth workers, teachers, other members of the public etc.).
Public perception of focusing on VAWG	General opinion from the public regarding focusing on VAWG as a problem.
Sense of ownership	Feeling of ownership from women and girls when visiting outdoor public spaces.
Social isolation	Lack of social interaction and meaningful connections experienced by women and girls, which can lead to feelings of loneliness.
Political: public policy, governance, and the political landscape	
Investment in preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces	The allocation of financial, human and institutional resources to strategies and initiatives with the focus to prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces.
Public campaigns	Strategic and organised efforts to raise awareness, change attitudes, and mobilise action against VAWG in outdoor public spaces.
Recognition of interconnections between VAWG and other issues	Acknowledgment that preventing VAWG is connected to other issues such as gender inequality, economic dependence, and physical and psychological health issues.
Political will and action	Commitment and actions taken by political leadership, policymakers and institutions to address and prevent VAWG.
Effective criminal justice	Fair, responsive and accountable legal system that prevents, addresses and prosecutes acts of VAWG. This includes laws that explicitly criminalise VAWG, timely and thorough investigations, survivor support services, and training for law enforcement and judicial officials for sensitive topics.
Educational: awareness, training, and capacity building	
Education for parents and for (and by) young people	Programmes and initiatives aimed at empowering parents and young people with the knowledge, skills and values necessary to prevent and address VAWG. For parents, this includes educating them about gender equality and respectful values. For young people, this involves peer-led and formal education about respectful norms and values and bystander intervention.

|	
Societal education	Widespread initiatives aimed at transforming cultural attitudes and behaviours towards VAWG in outdoor public spaces. This could include public campaigns, school curricula, media outreach and community-based programmes.
Professional training	Development and implementation of educational programmes aimed at equipping staff (in any context e.g. park rangers, law enforcement officers, city planners, public transport staff etc.) with the knowledge and skills necessary to identify, prevent, and respond to VAWG in outdoor public spaces.
Bystander intervention	Active involvement of individuals who witness an incident of violence or harassment in outdoor public spaces, taking steps to intervene and prevent harm. This can include direct actions, such as confronting the perpetrator, offering support to the survivor, or calling for help, as well as indirect actions such as alerting police, or mobilising others to assist.

Outcomes (light green)

Two main outcomes were identified as essential by stakeholders: 1) preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces (overarching aim of this work), and also, 2) health and wellbeing. These two outcomes are closely linked with the other factors identified by stakeholders and the improvement of both (preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces, and health and wellbeing) will enhance the quality of life for women and girls and positively contribute to overall society.

'Physical': infrastructure, design, and use of public space (dark green)

Eleven factors were identified under this theme. Among these factors, a key feedback loop highlighted and discussed with stakeholders is presented in Figure 2 and relates to the way physical factors – such as infrastructure, design and use of public spaces – are each connected and dynamically interact to shape potential solutions to prevent VAWG in outdoor public spaces in Belfast. This feedback loop suggests that having an inclusive co-design approach (such as involving those living with disabilities, of different ethnicities, and those from the LGBTQIA+ community), will be linked with inclusive and safe design of outdoor public spaces. By having inclusive and safe spaces by design, this is linked with maintenance of outdoor public spaces as considerations can be made early in the design process, as opposed to retrofitting. Maintenance of outdoor public spaces is consequently linked with monetary cost of infrastructure, which was also acknowledged and can be linked back to the initial cost of inclusive and safe design of outdoor public spaces. Inclusive and safe design of public spaces was also linked with passive security (such as lighting, CCTV, and footfall through outdoor public spaces), which has a mutually reinforcing feedback loop with monetary cost of infrastructure (i.e., the initial cost to implement the infrastructure, and the recurring costs to maintain security and quality of the infrastructure). Inclusive and safe design, maintenance of outdoor public spaces, and passive security are all additionally directly linked with access to outdoor public spaces, as by making outdoor public spaces more inclusive and safer (whilst considering the maintenance of these features), access to outdoor public spaces is more

achievable. Finally, access to outdoor public spaces consequently has mutually reinforcing feedback with preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces. If VAWG is prevented, then women and girls will be able to have freer access to outdoor public spaces without the threat of violence.

Figure 2. Design feedback loop
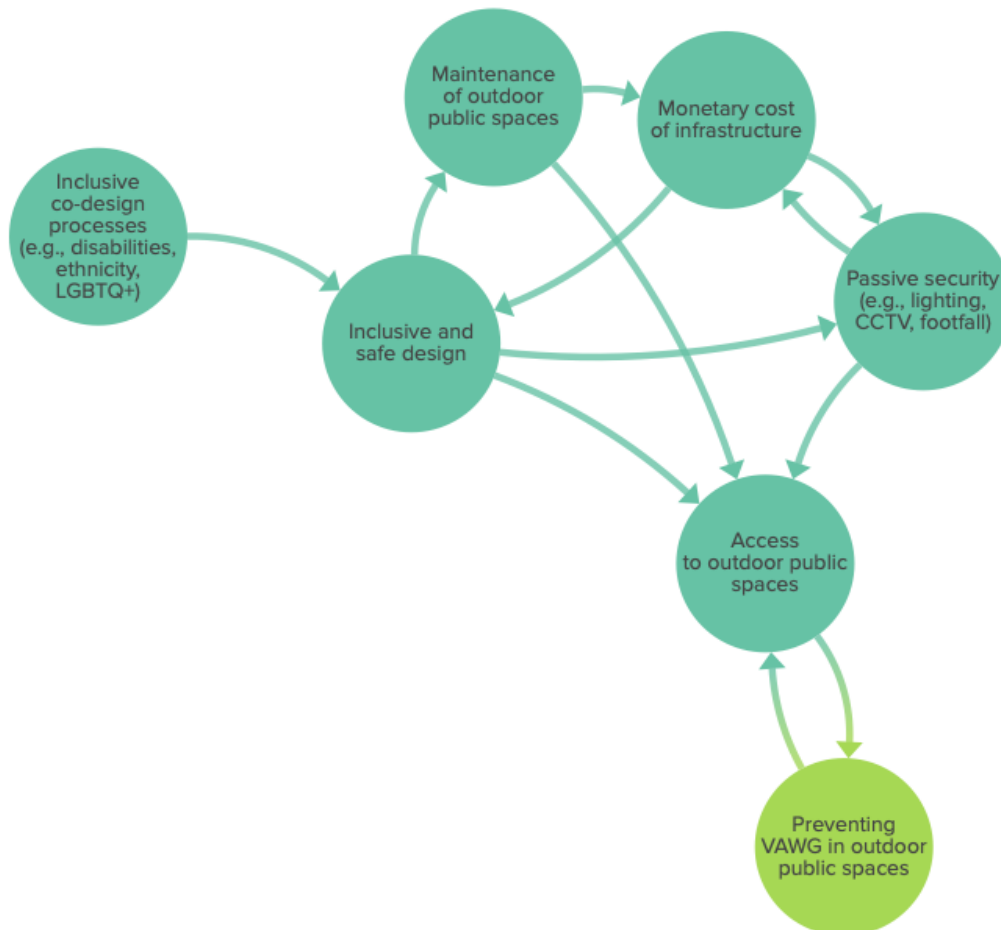
'Attitudinal': knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (orange)

Nine factors were identified under this theme. A key feedback loop discussed amongst stakeholders is presented in Figure 3 and relates to criminal justice and reporting of VAWG. There is a mutually reinforcing feedback loop between effective criminal justice and reporting of VAWG. If reporting of VAWG is improved, then it is hoped that perpetrators will be identified and held accountable, and if perpetrators of VAWG are held accountable, this will restore trust between victims and law enforcement, ultimately improving reporting of incidents in the future. Effective criminal justice was also identified as playing a direct role in preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces, through acting as a deterrent for the repercussions of committing a VAWG offence in outdoor public spaces. Preventing VAWG in outdoor spaces was consequently linked with reporting of VAWG to tackle VAWG as perpetrators need to be identified and held accountable.

Figure 3. Effective criminal justice and reporting feedback loop
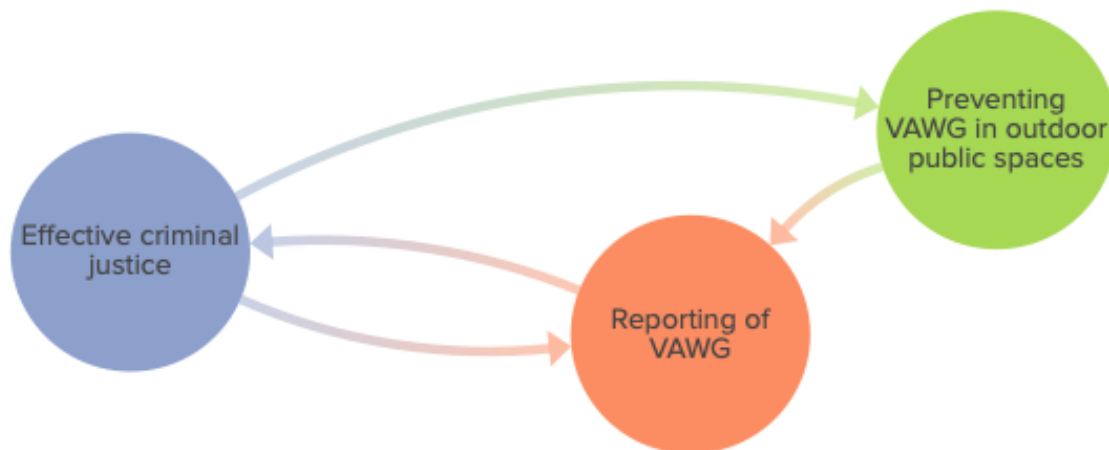
'Political': public policy, governance, and the political landscape (purple)

Five factors were identified under this theme. Amongst factors, a key feedback loop discussed in detail with stakeholders is highlighted in Figure 4. This feedback loop suggests that recognising the interconnections between VAWG and other issues (such as gender inequality, economic dependence, and physical and psychological health issues) is linked with investment in preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces. This acknowledges that addressing multiple issues will not only be cost effective but enhance the lives of women and girls whilst also addressing other issues. In a similar way, the recognition of these interconnections is linked with political will and action, as it is more likely to motivate policymakers to act, with the increased benefits of multi-solving other public health issues. Political will and action consequently reinforce investment in preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces, because in order to gain investment there must be a willingness from policy makers to intervene and act to prevent VAWG. Lastly, there is a mutually reinforcing loop between preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces and investing in prevention. If there is investment, then VAWG in outdoor public spaces may be prevented, consequently linking back on itself. If investment in one area works (i.e., raising awareness through public campaigns), this increases the attractiveness of investing to policymakers as it is cost efficient, which would again be linked with preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces.

**Figure 4.** Political support feedback loop
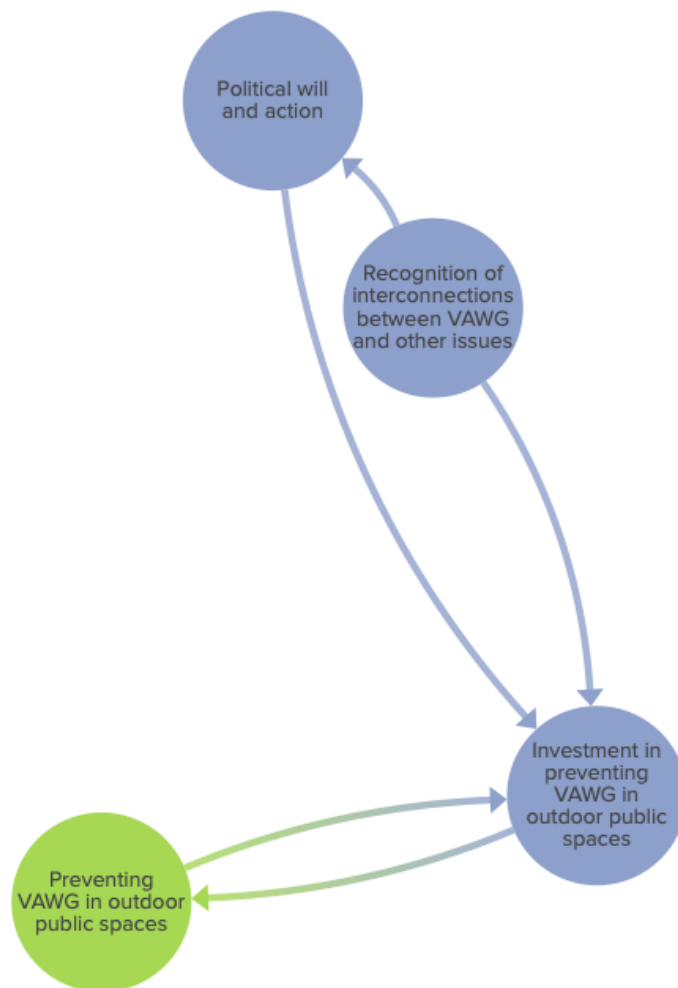
'Education': awareness, training, and capacity building (pink)

Four factors were identified under this theme. Education was highlighted as a key factor for preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces and is illustrated in Figure 5. Firstly, this feedback loop suggests that education for parents, and for (and by) young people has a mutually reinforcing relationship with understanding of VAWG. This occurs through educating parents and young people, this can raise awareness and understanding of VAWG, which will consequently empower young people and parents to educate and empower others. Understanding VAWG was consequently directly linked with preventing VAWG in outdoor public spaces. If there is an improved understanding, this could improve prevention. Education for parents and for (and by) young people was also linked to public perception of focusing on VAWG, as through improving education and awareness of VAWG, the public perception of addressing VAWG will improve. Similarly, education for parents and for (and by) young people was linked with societal education to provide better initiatives and efforts for prevention of VAWG at a broader societal level. Societal education was consequently linked with misogyny, cultural and social norms and structures. If society is more educated, then those within it may

be more likely to recognise and challenge misogynistic cultural norms and structures which oppress women and girls. Misogyny, cultural and social norms and structures also has a mutually reinforcing feedback loop with misogynistic media and cultural representation. If we recognise the ways the media negatively perpetuates and reinforces misogynistic and cultural representation, this also feeds back to recognising and challenging misogynistic cultural and social norms and structures within society. Finally, misogyny, cultural and social norms and structures was directly linked with public perception of focusing on VAWG as by recognising misogyny, cultural and social norms and structures and the ways in which they contribute to VAWG in outdoor public spaces, this will increase the public's awareness of the issue of VAWG and therefore improve public perception of focusing on VAWG.

Figure 5. Education feedback loop
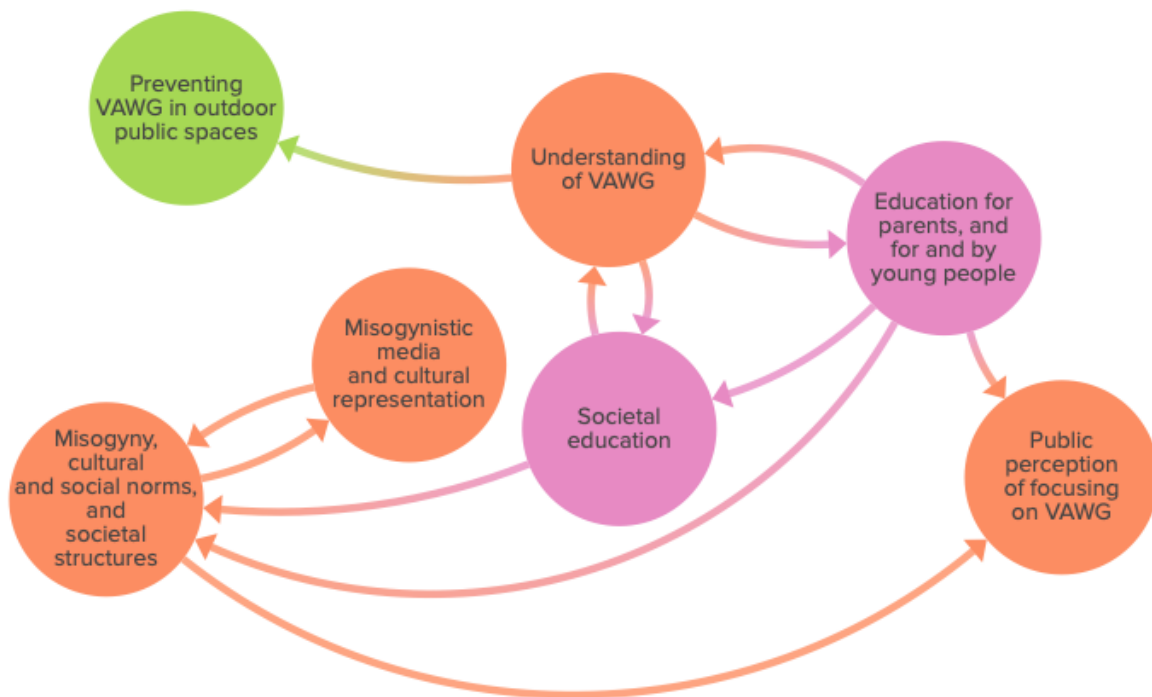
Action points and priorities

Based on the refined systems map, stakeholders identified eight action and priority points for future interventions and policies. The eight action points developed by stakeholders with considerations are presented below (please note that these are a direct representation of the ideas of the stakeholders).

Action point 1: Improving societal education about VAWG in outdoor public spaces

How will the action change the system?	• Use of more inclusive language • Phrases we use (i.e., in reporting, and in general when referring to VAWG) • Co-design approach • Media literacy and fact checking • Awareness of public resources, information, and signposting • Relationship and sex education
What are the challenges and opportunities of this action?	**Challenges:** • Kickback (from public/policy makers etc.) • Investment in the issue and in education **Opportunities:** • Improved prevention • Improved value of public money • Empowering women and girls to know their rights • Increase participation within society

Action point 2: Inclusive and safe design

How will the action change the system?	• To design spaces with front facing and active frontages to allow for passive surveillance • Address dereliction and vacancy • New design and retrofitting / repurposing current designs • Seating areas in visible and used spaces • Activating spaces i.e., make them multi-use • Flexible, inclusive space • Data collection on interventions in existing spaces
What are the challenges and opportunities of this action?	**Challenges:** • Getting the support of the local community • Designing the changes **Opportunities:** • Increasing community connection and cohesion • Perceived safety

Action point 3: Societal education in sport

How will the action change the system?	• Lever sport to deliver change • Educate players, coaches, and influence • Promote inclusive environment through advertising and campaigns • Ethics in sports, promoting code of conduct and expectations • Effective enforcement i.e., match bans, stadium bans, fines, and promote role models and incentives
What are the challenges and opportunities of this action?	**Challenges:** • Economic funding: conditions and requirements **Opportunities:** • Encouraging participation of all genders, specifically women players • Engage wider society

Action point 4: Park design and operation

How will the action change the system?	• Park rangers • Data use, footfall to measure change • Best practice guidance on space use • Co-design with women and girls from community on how their park can link beyond neighbourhood
What are the challenges and opportunities of this action?	**Challenges**: • Resource maintenance **Opportunities**: • Building infrastructure for future proofing

Action point 5: Standards around reporting in relation to VAWG

How will the action change the system?	- Misogynistic media and cultural representation - Public campaigns - Code of conduct journalists would agree to (including language used)
What are the challenges and opportunities of this action?	Challenges: - Reluctance to engage - Money - Pushback (i.e., from policymakers, public) Opportunities: - Reduction of misogyny, cultural and social norms and structures - Public perceptions of focusing on VAWG - Better understanding of VAWG - Improved societal education

Action point 6: Education

How will the action change the system?	- Misogynistic, cultural, and cultural social norms and structures - Societal education - Understanding of VAWG - Public perception of focusing on VAWG - Schools (all ages), community life course, age appropriate
What are the challenges and opportunities of this action?	Challenges: - Backlash (i.e., from policymakers, public) Opportunities: - Improved prevention - Improved value of public money - Empowering women and girls to know their rights - Increase participation within society

Action point 7: Investment in neighbourhood policing

How will the action change the system?	- Increased police officer numbers - Resilient communities - Policy - Perceived safety - Confidence in policy
What are the challenges and opportunities of this action?	**Challenges**: - How to priorities resources **Opportunities**: - Community safety investment - More targeted approach - Increased representation - Front line officers

Action point 8: First principles of design

How will the action change the system?	Policy and agreed guidelines that mandates inclusive and safe design of public spaces through participatory design
What are the challenges and opportunities of this action?	**Challenges**: - The retrofit challenge - Challenge in operationalising if concerns about habitats and biodiversity **Opportunities**: - Building infrastructure for future proofing - Easier to do from start - Parks open and safer at night - Safer third spaces

Next steps in the research

Following these workshops, the eight action and priority points will be taken to a Citizen Panel to elicit lessons and collective informed deliberations for action. The Citizen Panel will involve members of the public, including women and girls, that will 'sense-check' the acceptability, utility, applicability, affordability, and feasibility of possible intervention approaches identified from the participatory workshops outlined in this report.

For any further questions about the work produced in this report, or the research project contact ruth.hunter@qub.ac.uk (Principal Investigator).

Reflections from stakeholders

In each of the workshops, stakeholders had the opportunity to reflect on the overall research project, topic, and workshops. Some of their reflections are presented below.

"This work is important because violence against women and girls, in all its forms, is getting worse. NI is one of the most unsafe societies for women and girls in Europe, and the rise of misogyny is fuelling social attitudes towards women and girls. We need to take this problem seriously, to address the real concerns and to implement useful and evidence-based interventions across many areas" – Anonymous

"It is vital we genuinely and meaningfully grasp the challenges presented by VAWG. Women and girls are living in fear and the lack of progressive actions to address violence in open spaces is significantly impacting their health and wellbeing. This work, led by QUB, is going to shape the future for women and girls in Belfast" – Representative from Belfast Healthy Cities

"I am here today because the workshop would enhance my learning and provide me new skills and tools to help migrant women and girls" – Anonymous

"I think it is important that this is on government and local decision makers agendas as I believe this is a very neglected subject" – Representative from Sustrans

"This work will form an important theme in the review of the Architecture and Built Environment Policy for NI. The workshop provided an excellent opportunity to work and discuss ideas with organisations to address Ending VAWG" – Representative from Department for Communities

"This work is important because we need to provide inclusive, safe public spaces for all women and girls. Older women may face different barriers than younger women and need to be included in planning safer communities" – Representative from Age NI

"This is critical for women and girls. This work is important due to the percentage rates of violence and deaths caused by men against women in NI. There needs to be short-, medium- and long-term delivery strategies to create momentum and meaningful progress. Following participation in this workshop I would welcome further follow ups and links" – Anonymous

"I am here today because I believe that we have to start by talking and raising awareness of vulnerabilities of women and girls, but more important is taking action. This work is important because we need to hear the versions of different stakeholders to take action. Most importantly, I have a daughter and want a future for her where she is not scared of being in public space. Also, design is essential to the safety of women and girls" – Representative from Queen's University Belfast

"This work is important in helping to achieve two of the key outcomes of the Ending VAWG strategic framework: Women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere, working better together" – Representative from The Executive Office

"This work is important because in the conversation about VAWG, the aspects of it that happen outside of here and workplace are either overlooked completely, or overblown and misunderstood, which can lead to unhelpful public reaction. There is a need to refocus on this and talk about it honestly and to take it seriously" – Representative from Women's Resource and Development Agency

"This work is important because women and girls have a right to be able to participate in all aspects of society free from fear of violence" – Anonymous

"This work is important because many LGBTQIA+ women face additional barriers to safety in public spaces. This may be real or perceived forms of discrimination that is homophonic and/or transphobic. As a result, it is critical that there are safe, queer-only spaces for LGBTQIA+ women across this region. HereNI offer a range or peer-support groups to encourage network building and reduce social isolation" – Representative from HereNI

"This work is important as we as humans need to address this inequality that clearly exists for women and girls. VAWG oppresses and impacts on the lives of victims, we need a public response through education, clear education routes and measures in place that protect the needs of women and girls" – Anonymous

"I am here today because I am a representative of an organisation that is seen as a public space and would like to get the perspectives of others to tap into points not considered but needs to be. This work is important because it is a serious active problem within Northern Ireland, where I live and where I am raising my daughter" – Anonymous

"It is important that all areas of the local communities join together to address VAWG. These workshops have been a refreshing proactive way to achieve this. Thank you" – Anonymous

"This workshop has been incredibly informative to strip back the complex layers surrounding this area, as well as an opportunity to learn from others in the room. Recognising the key factors that influence VAWG helps build on change to end this issue" – Representative from Walkie Talkie Girlies

"I am here today as a designer, as we have an important role to play in creating safe, inclusive and usable spaces for women and girls through Northern Ireland – I believe spaces should be designed and changed by using women's experiences and this workshop has really helped emphasise this" – Anonymous

"This work is important because it is helping to unravel and build connections of a complex, multilayered public health issue" – Anonymous

"It's important to address language and education in order to make change we must first understand. We need to collaborate and invest in making change" – Representative from Youth Action, NI

"A very useful way of bringing a wide amount of experience to hear on a complex problem" – Representative from Queen's University Belfast

Afterword

Dr. Callie Persic, Belfast City Council

Violence against women and girls is a problem for everyone. It is systemic and insidious and often underpinned by misogyny, social and cultural norms that shape expectations, behaviours and gender roles. There is recognition that to achieve meaningful change this must be challenged on multiple levels across sectors, organisations and at individual levels.

A Bolder Vison for Belfast sets out how public spaces should be accessible, inclusive, and safe for everyone. However, women and girls in Belfast continue to experience harassment and violence in these areas, limiting their freedom and participation in society. Creating safer public spaces is essential to achieving gender equality and fostering inclusive communities. Focusing on public space is a key entry point into addressing violence against women and girls and as this report demonstrates, solutions are found in collaborative approaches.

Placemaking plays a vital role in creating safe, more inclusive public spaces that contributes to ending violence against women and girls and designing spaces that are safe, inclusive, accessible and welcoming is good for us all. Perceptions of safety shape behaviours and when coupled with negative experiences, the lives of women and girls can suddenly become smaller as journeys become restructured or opportunities are not taken to avoid threatening areas, dark spaces or lonely streets.

Solutions are also found through co-design and engagement that ultimately results in improved value for money, wider social, economic and health and well-being benefits as well as a greater sense of autonomy. Well-lit routes, open sightlines and accessible transport options not only improve safety but encourage greater participation in public life, fostering a sense of belonging, ownership and encourages women and girls to move freely without fear of harassment or violence. The form and function of public spaces is important and by prioritising the diverse needs and lived experiences of women and girls in the design, management of public spaces, placemaking can challenge the structural inequalities that make certain environments feel unsafe or unwelcoming. It is not insurmountable but will take purposeful action to embed new approaches with clear design guidelines.

Alongside a concerted focus on public spaces other aspects such as preventative approaches and awareness raising including public campaigns, training, community dialogue can help challenge harmful gender norms and encourage collective responsibility in preventing and ending violence against women and girls.

This research project by Queen's University Belfast comes at an important time and is aligned with current policy and public awareness about violence against women and girls in outdoor public spaces. The factors and consequences which we suspected to shape violence against women and girls in outdoor public spaces, were developed through cross sector stakeholder engagement workshops. Through our discussions it

was clear that there are interconnected layers that cut across social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental factors, often in surprising ways. This goes beyond theoretical analysis and dives into actions and changes that need to take place because ending violence against women and girls in outdoor public spaces requires more than physical interventions—it demands a cultural shift in how public space is created, used and shared.

Afterword

The Executive Office Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Team

We are grateful to the team at QUB for setting their expert eyes on the problem of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in public spaces in Belfast and facilitating a really useful systems mapping exercise. We know that VAWG in public spaces affects the ability of women and girls to participate fully and to thrive and can negatively impact their health and wellbeing. The systems mapping workshops enabled all of us to dig deeper into the multifaceted, interacting factors enabling and driving VAWG in public spaces. Together we developed a shared understanding of the interventions and policies that could make a difference to prevent VAWG happening. This type of evidence-based policy development is essential for us to know how to proceed in developing interventions that work, to ensure that our public spaces are safe for women and girls.

This research project has a direct link to the Prevention theme, and Outcome 3 of the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework, that 'women and girls are safe and feel safe everywhere'. To see this change we need organisations and institutions across government and society to embed the prevention of violence against women and girls in all that they do. The results of the systems mapping process has prioritised clear pathways to change for further discussion with stakeholders. We look forward to being part of the next steps of this important research as it moves into the co-design and co-development of interventions that will ensure that women feel safe and are safe wherever they live, work, play and socialise in the city of Belfast.
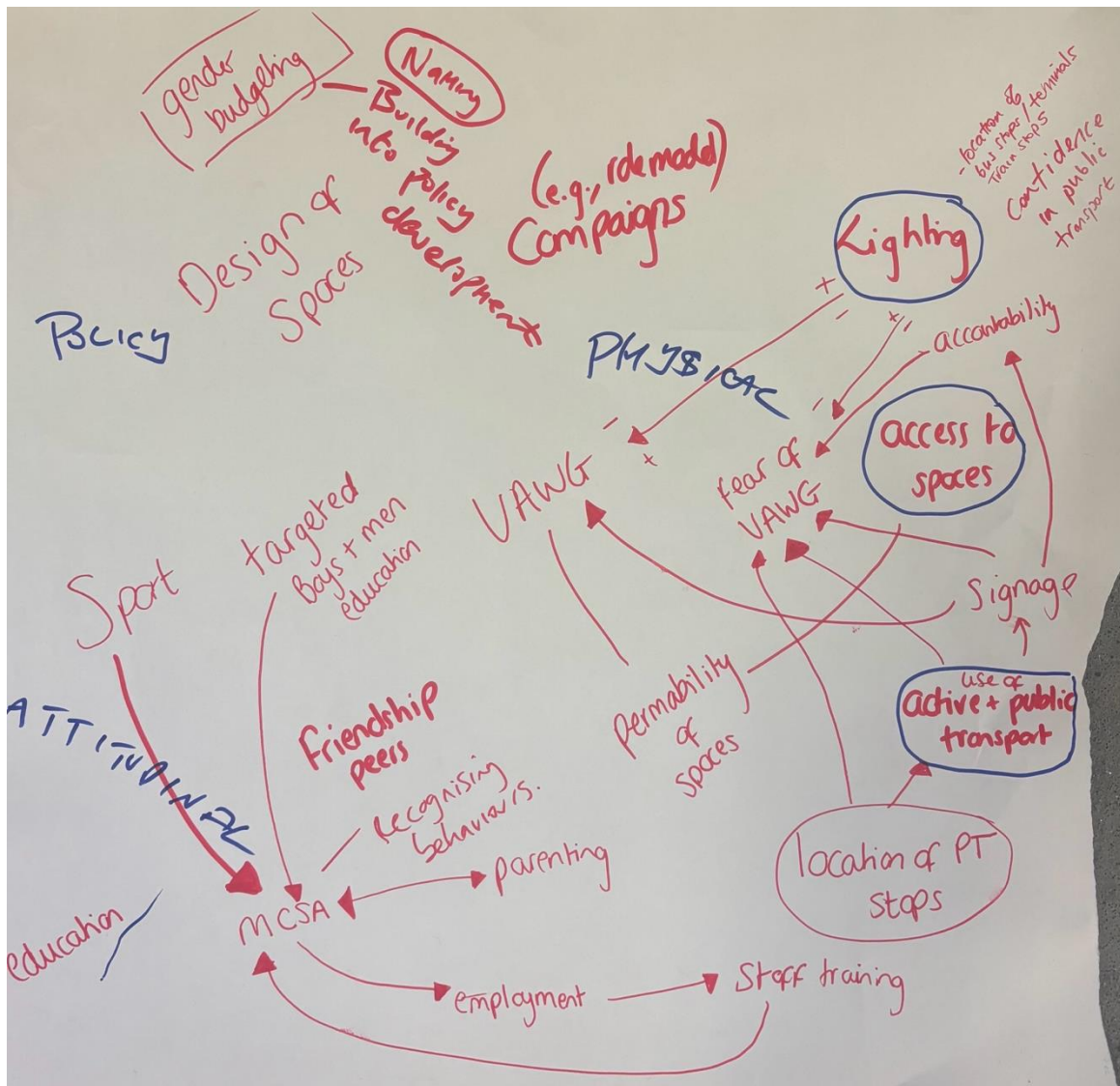
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Annex

Annex 1: Full list of factors identified by stakeholders in the first workshop

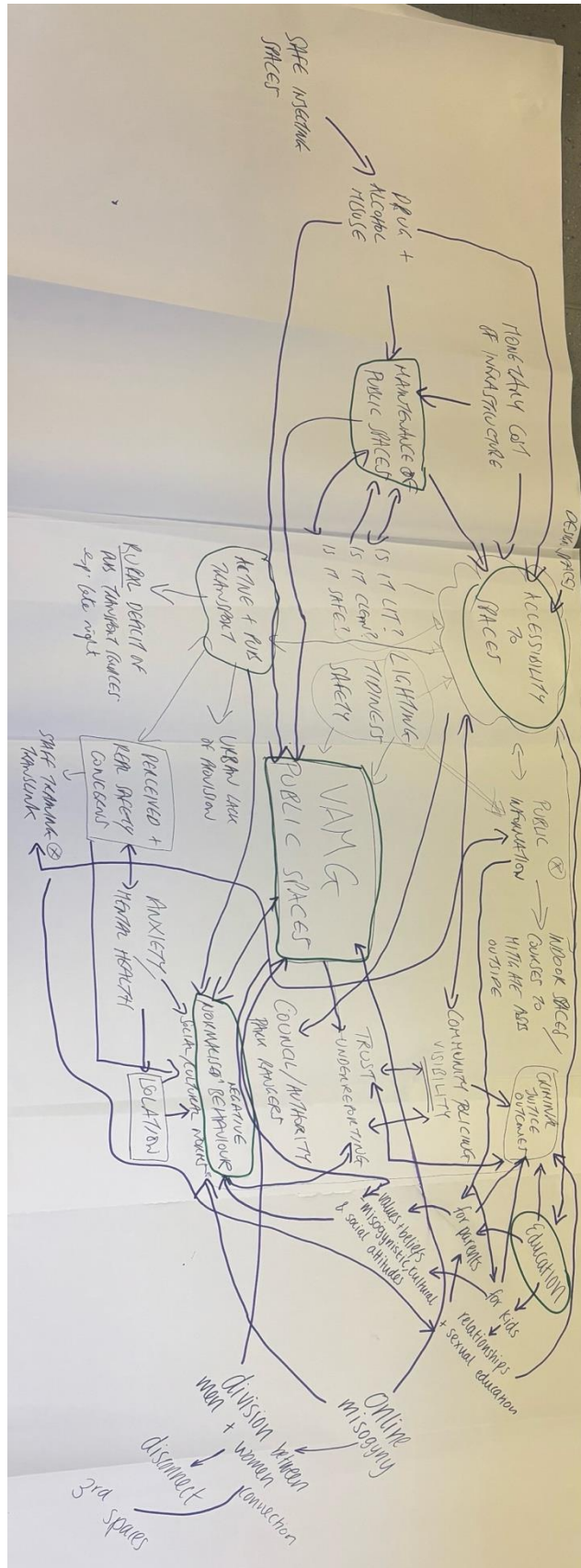| |
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| Accessibility to spaces |
| Active and public transport |
| Community policing |
| Criminal justice outcomes |
| Drug and alcohol misuse |
| Education for parents |
| Education for young people |
| Enforcement of law / consequences for perpetrators |
| Health and wellbeing |
| Isolation |
| Lighting |
| Maintenance of public spaces |
| Misogynistic cultural and social attitudes |
| Monetary cost of infrastructure |
| Nighttime economy |
| Online Misogyny |
| Perceived safety |
| Presence of third space i.e., having a physical outdoor place to go |
| Public presence, footfall |
| Publicly available hub for information |
| Safety considerations for design i.e., safe spaces, phone reception dead spots |
| Security control |
| Sense of ownership |
| Social and cultural norms |
| Staff training i.e., Bystander interventions |
| Underreporting |
| Use of public space |

A hand-drawn systems map / mind map. Legible labels include:

- SAFE INJECTING SPACES
- DRUG + ALCOHOL MISUSE
- MONETARY COST OF INFRASTRUCTURE
- MAINTENANCE OF PUBLIC SPACES
- ACCESSIBILITY TO SPACES
- IS IT LIT? / IS IT CLEAN? / IS IT SAFE?
- TIDINESS / LIGHTING / SAFETY
- ACTIVE + BUS TRANSPORT
- RURAL DEARTH OF BUS TRANSPORT ROUTES e.g. late night
- URBAN lack of provision
- PUBLIC SPACES
- VAWG
- PERCEIVED + REAL SAFETY CONCERNS
- SAFE TRAINING / TRANSLINK
- ANXIETY / MENTAL HEALTH
- NORMALISED BEHAVIOUR / SOCIAL/CULTURAL NORMS
- COUNCIL/AUTHORITY PARK RANGERS
- NEGATIVE
- ISOLATION
- TRUST / UNDERREPORTING
- PUBLIC INFORMATION / GUIDES TO WITH THE ARTS OUTSIDE
- INDOOR SPACES
- COMMUNITY JUSTICE OUTREACH
- COMMUNITY BELONGING / VISIBILITY
- for parents
- for kids
- relationships + sexual education
- EDUCATION
- values, beliefs, misogynistic/cultural & sexual attitudes
- online misogyny
- division between man + woman / connection
- disconnect
- 3rd spaces
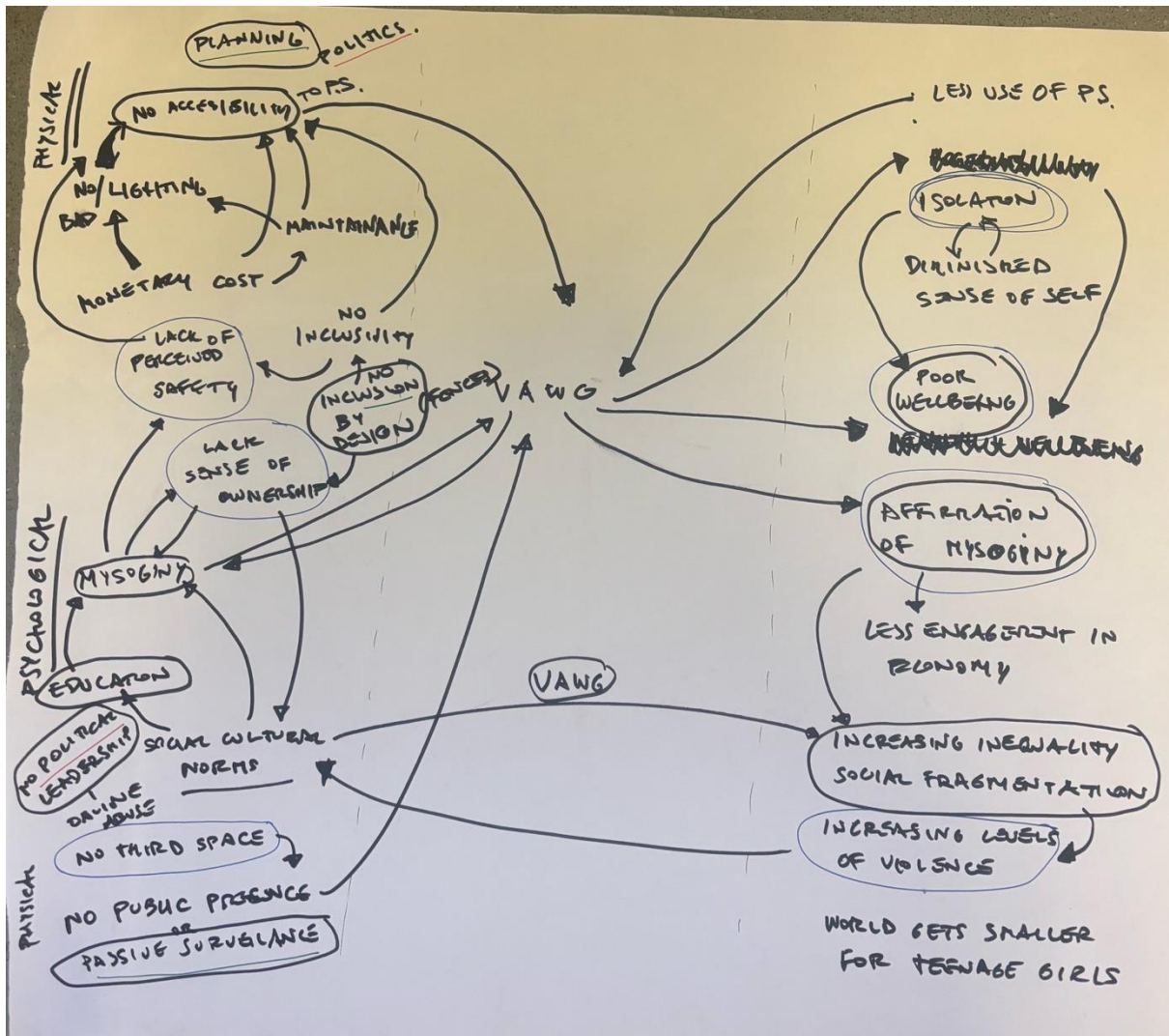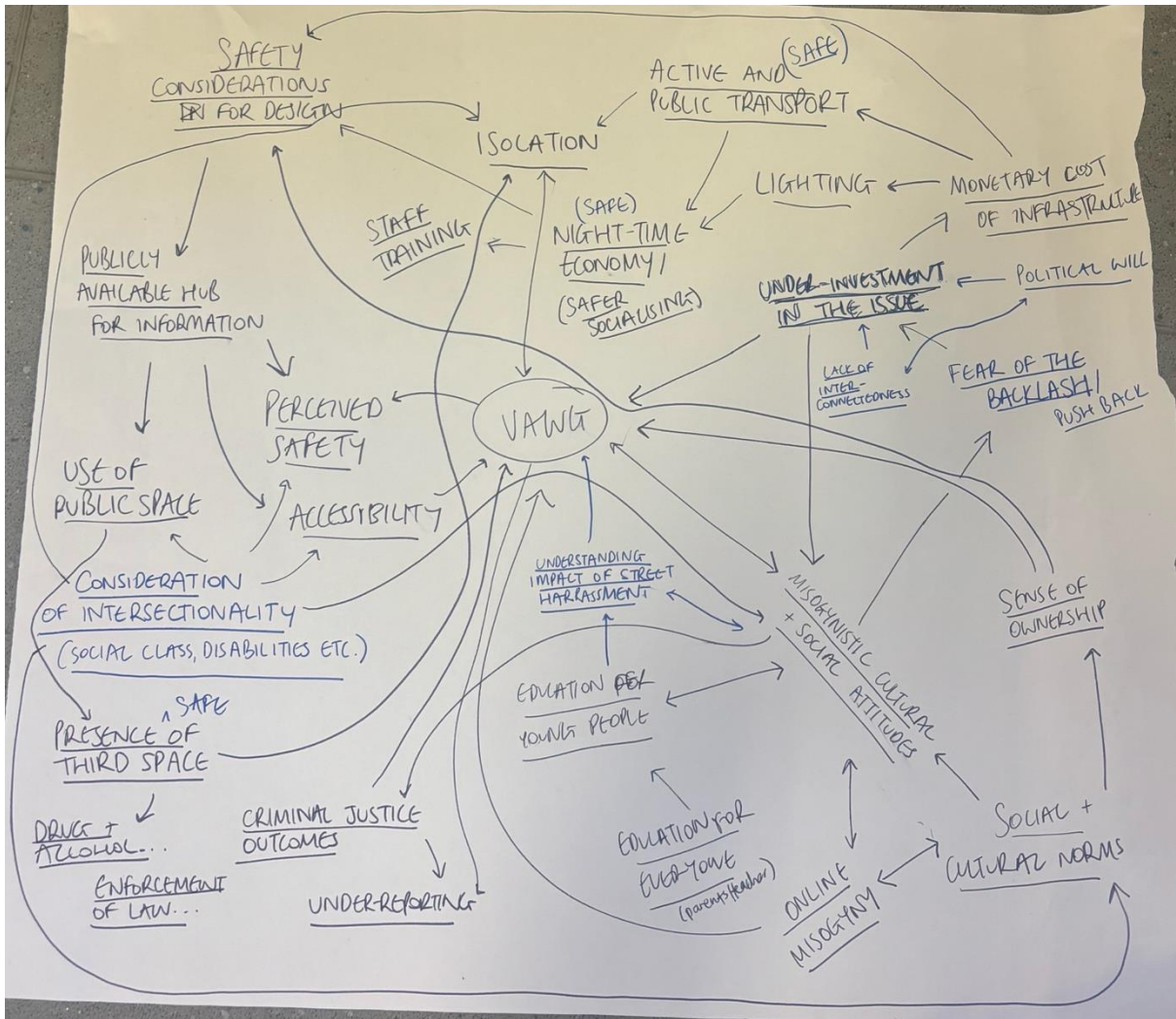
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