‘It’s just what happens’

Girls’ and young women’s views and experiences of violence in Northern Ireland

Siobhán McAlister, Gail Neill, Dirk Schubotz and Michelle Templeton



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ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS

The Executive Office

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Contents

Summary	4
1. Background and context	10
2. Understandings and attitudes	16
3. Learning about violence	22
4. Experiencing violence	28
5. Violence in the local context: NI culture and conflict	44
6. Identifying barriers to reporting violence	50
7. Preventing violence against girls and women	61
8. Narrative accounts of violence	69

Summary

Background and Methods

- Commissioned by the Ending Violence Against Women and Girl's Directorate of The Executive Office, this research aimed to:
  - elicit girls/young women's understandings of violence, their experiences of violence, its causes and consequences, and views on supports and services;
  - collect girls/ young women's views on how violence against women and girls might be prevented;
  - collect the personal testimonies of girls/ young women who have experienced/ are experiencing violence.

- 268 girls/young women across N. Ireland engaged in the research through completing an online survey, taking part in a focus group discussion and/ or engaging in an one-to-one interview.

- Links to the survey were distributed to girls/ young women via youth and community organisations, child and family services, victims services etc. – 200 young women aged 12-17 years completed the online survey.

- Focus group participants were recruited through youth, community and girls groups across N. Ireland. Ten focus groups comprising 39 young women (12-17 years) and four focus groups with 19 young women (17-25 years) were carried out between August and September 2022.

- Six young women aged 12-17 and four aged 18-25 took part in an one-to-one interview in which they shared personal experiences of the impacts of violence, barriers to and experiences of disclosure and/or experiences with services and supports.

- The report is divided into eight inter-related sections. A summary of key findings from Sections 2-7 are presented below. Section 8 provides narrative accounts of four girls/ young women who experienced various forms of violence.

- The report presents potentially distressing material, including detail and description of sexual assault, rape, child abuse, domestic violence, self-harm, and sexism.

Attitudes and Understandings of Violence

- Both the survey and focus group data demonstrated a broad understanding of violence and specific forms of violence, including violence that girls/ young women are most likely to experience. Those most commonly cited were physical, domestic and mental violence. Ability to recognise violence and unacceptable behaviours appeared to develop with age.

- Space for reflection and group discussion acted as a means of consciousness-raising within which girls/ young women identified other forms of behaviours that constitute violence. For example, while cat-calling rarely appeared in initial definitions of violence, once raised it was unanimous agreed that this was a major form of violence experienced by girls and women.

- While sexual violence was rarely the starting point within focus group discussions of violence, particularly among younger age groups, it was generally understood as a form of violence girls and women experience. It is likely that this reflects cultures of shame and embarrassment around sex and sexuality, rather than a lack of knowledge. This was supported by the survey data whereby a high proportion of young women identified sexual violence as a form of violence.

- Social media was identified as a useful platform for learning about particular forms of violence, at the same time it exposed girls/ young women to misogyny, objectification and high profile cases within with reporting violence was shown to be ineffective.

- Overall, survey and focus group data demonstrate that while girls/ young women are aware of various forms of violence there continues to be a hierarchy whereby physical forms of violence are more commonly identified. Within focus groups these were deemed more 'serious', of more concern or more alarming than the everyday forms of violence many went on to say they personally experienced.

Learning about Violence

- Girls/ young women report receiving little formal learning or explicit education about violence. Yet they identified three main sites of informal learning – home, school, the media – whereby persistent messages of their vulnerability and responsibility are reiterated.

- From an early age girls receive specific messages about their gender – the behaviours and expectations associated with being young women. These gender stereotypes were used to mock, dismiss or limit them personally and/ or the position of women in society. Disrespect in this way could be considered at one end of a violence continuum which positions girls and women as 'lesser than', creating a climate in which violence against women is explained, facilitated and excused.

- While young women recognised and criticised many of these messages they were so pervasive as to impact their own behaviours (e.g. around safety and avoiding violence) and to inform their understanding of why violence happens, who is responsible and who is believed.

- The lack of information received in schools combined with messages of female responsibility (for the actions of others) impacted girl's/ young women's ability to call out unwanted behaviours, to recognise them and to have confidence in saying 'no'.

- Overall, girls/ young women described the layering of messages that positioned them as responsible for their own actions and the actions of others, thus ignoring and excusing the behaviour of men and boys and blaming girls and women should they experience violence.

Experiencing Violence

- Over one-third (37%) of survey respondents (aged 12-17 years) reported having experienced one form of violence and another 36% had experienced more than one. This suggests experiences of violence are widespread among girls/ young women.

- In the survey, only 8% of same-sex attracted females had never experienced any of the listed violent behaviours compared to one quarter of opposite-sex attracted respondents.

- In focus groups, the two most prevalent forms of violence experienced were cat-calling and street harassment, and online misogyny and abuse.

- Age and gender combine to make girls/ young women vulnerable to particular forms of violence – not being able to recognise 'red flags' and understand experiences as violence; having limited experiences and understanding of intimate relationships; a sense that younger women/ girls cannot or will not respond or report hence increasing their vulnerability.

Cat-calling and street harassment

- Catcalling and street harassment was experienced persistently by girls/ young women across all geographic locations from around the age of 10-11 years onwards. This occurred in many public places, mainly when alone or with female peer groups, and was carried out by older men as well as younger boys.

- In addition to cat-calls, participants noted the extent to which boys and men 'touched' or 'grabbed' them in public and without consent. They explained this sense of 'entitlement' to comment on and touch women's bodies as an engrained unconscious practice.

- Cat-calling and street harassment led to girls/ young women feeling embarrassed, self-conscious, insecure, unsafe and/ or hyper-vigilant when in public.

- Because these experiences took place in public and there were often no repercussions, girls/ young women felt the need to implement their own strategies to 'keep safe' and minimise the impact of unwanted attention and behaviours. This included: not responding; not drawing attention; not being out on their own; and regulating their movements.

Online misogyny and abuse

- From an early age frequent unsolicited messages and sexual images were received by girls/ young women. They considered this a normal part of online life.

- While many messages/ images were immediately recognised as suspicious and ignored or deleted, there were also more subtle and manipulative ways in which girls/ young women were targeted online which were more difficult to recognise.

- Girls/ young women spoke of the impact of a negative online environment which was disrespectful to women and the role of influencers in perpetuating and spreading contempt for or prejudice against women.

- Discussions demonstrate how offline and online worlds interconnect reinforcing negative gender messages, objectification and a general lack of respect for women. Given that consequences are delayed, minimal or short-term young women felt they had no recourse other than to simply ignore or tolerate.

Domestic violence

- A number of mechanisms conceal girls/ young women's experiences of domestic violence. These include: not recognising experiences as violence; becoming numb to the pain; experiences being explained as part of family life. These contextualise some of the barriers for children and young people to disclose and seek support.

- Watching violence or not being the recipient of physical violence in the home could make girls/ young women reticent to define their experiences as domestic violence.

- The emotional pains of family violence, including protecting others and the burden of keeping family secrets, often eclipsed the physical pains girls/ young women may have experienced.

- Girls/ young women adopted strategies of self-support when living with domestic violence. These included: sharing experiences and emotions with siblings; finding ways to be out of the home; seeking support from generic youth and community services while not disclosing violence in the home.

- Given delays in processing experiences of domestic violence and the long-term impacts support may be needed as children develop, and into adulthood.

Sexual violence

- Lack of experience of sex/ relationships and lack of understanding of violence were identified as impacting on girls/ young women's ability to recognise sexual violence and abusive relationships.

- Blame was a consistent theme among those who had experienced sexual violence - the blame put on them or that they were made to feel by others. Some had internalised this blame.

- The impacts of sexual violence were highly individual and context specific. However, a consistent theme was the impact on girl's/ young women's mental health. Feelings of guilt – for what had happened, for reporting, for not reporting; anger – at the lack of response from family, friends, the police; sadness – at the pain felt, the trust broken, the impacts on others.

- For some, it had taken years before they could begin to process, acknowledge and talk about their experiences of sexual violence.

- Despite adhering to repeated messages of how to 'keep themselves safe' (e.g. staying with friends) young women still experienced sexual violence.

Violence in the Local Context

- While less persistent than in the past, some girls/ young women continue to experience sectarian violence. The potential for sectarian violence is another means through which girl's/ young women's use of public space is regulated.

- Gender combines with ethno-national identity to influence the particular types of sectarian violence girls/ young women can experience.

- There was knowledge among many of the girls/ young women in focus groups of the existence and activities of paramilitary-style groups in their communities. That paramilitary violence is normalised and neutralised should not be taken as an indication that it does not impact girls/ young women. These are recognised methods of 'getting on' in communities affected by violence.

- It was reported that the main ways in which girls/ young women experience paramilitary-style violence is through families and intimate relationships – watching and witnessing violence, witnessing the impacts of violence, being 'born into' families involved in armed groups, being with partners connected with paramilitary-style groups.

- Some felt that the existence of these groups was another mechanism through which violence against women was covered up and /or not report.

- In discussing the local context and the legacy of conflict, some identified a culture of secrecy that facilitated violence in N. Ireland. The culture of secrecy in reporting violence from so-called paramilitary groups was also identified in families whereby speaking of violence in the home was still taboo, reporting violence to the police was often frowned upon and violence in institutions had been covered-up. In these respects, local structures and institutions could facilitate a culture of violence.

- Some girls/ young women identified a wider culture in N. Ireland that impacted on sustained sexism and violence towards women and girls. Linked to notions of a continuum of violence this was seen in the position and treatment of women in society - in the home and in politics, in laws and policies, and in public space.

- Some recognised that violence in the past (during the Conflict) had been dealt with through habitation or denial and were concerned this had led to a culture whereby violence was not acknowledged or responded to. As such violence requires de-normalising and disrupting.

Barriers to Reporting Violence

- The top three ranked barriers to girls/ women reporting violence in the survey were: worried they might not be believed; worried it might make the situation worse; not feeling it was serious enough to report.

- In focus groups and interviews girls/ young women identified a combination of factors that could impact their ability and willingness to report violence and seek support. Age intensified some of the fears traditionally associated with disclosing and reporting violence such as embarrassment, shame and fear of not being believed.

- The main reasons why everyday violence (e.g. street and online abuse/ harassment) was not reported was because it happened so often as to be 'normal', was not considered serious enough, reporting to the police would have no impact.

- A major barrier to reporting violence was delays in understanding and processing violence. Age was used to explain why they may not understand their experience as violence and once understood it was felt it may be too late to seek support.

- Fear of negatively impacting the lives of others was an additional barrier to girls/ young women reporting violence, particular concerns about separating families or getting others in trouble.

- Due to perceptions that there is a lack of trust in children and young people's accounts, not being believed was identified as a major barrier to reporting.

- The specificity of the N. Ireland context and how age, gender and ethno-national identity intersect can act as barriers to girls/ young women reporting violence to the police.

- Specific barriers to reporting sexual violence were identified, including: the perceived need for physical evidence; the burden on girls/ young women to prove victimisation; low conviction rates; understanding of public narratives of blame; and intrusive justice processes. Not recognising sexual violence was also identified as a particular barrier for younger women.

- Drawing attention to themselves, being talked about and embarrassment were age-related dissuaders to reporting all forms of violence.

Preventing Violence Against Girls and Women

- Survey respondents felt the most effective way to tackle violence against girls and women would be better police and justice responses (69% 'very effective'). This was followed by tougher measures against social media sites (52% 'very effective').

- Qualitative data provided a more nuanced understanding of girls/ young women's views on tackling violence. For instance, punishment was never suggested in isolation to other responses, and educative rather than punitive responses were deemed the best ways to prevent violence in the first place. Where the need for more punitive responses were identified was in discussions of sexual violence.

- Early messages that girls/ young women were vulnerable contributed to a sense that they needed to take personal responsibly to prevent violence. Often this equated to dealing with or minimising violence and its potential, rather than preventing it however.

- Girls/ young women identified learning about violence against women and girls as an important step in prevention. This should happen at a young age for boys and girls, in families, schools and youth provision.

- There is a need for targeted work with boys/ young men to remove the onus on girls/ young women to identify and prevent unacceptable and violent behaviour. The emphasis should be on helping boys and young men to recognise the impacts of their attitudes and behaviours rather than blame and stigmatisation.

- Effective relationship education was identified as a means of preventing and responding to violence against girls and women. This needs to be regular, inclusive of all relationships and to begin from a young age.

- Girls/ young women defined meaningful relationship education as involving young people in discussion, projects and tasks, drawing on real life scenarios and taking place in environments where they could be active in their learning.

- Overall, the data demonstrates a view that preventing violence against girls and women requires broad and systemic change - to attitudes, cultures, policies, institutions and laws.

1. Background and context

1.1 Research Aims

This research was commissioned by the Ending Violence Against Women and Girl's Directorate of The Executive Office to inform the development of the Northern Ireland Strategy to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls. It aimed to:

- elicit young women's understandings of violence, their experiences of violence, its causes and consequences, and views on supports and services;
- collect young women's views on how violence against women and girls might be prevented;
- collect the personal testimonies of girls/ young women who have experienced/ are experiencing violence.

The initial aim was to engage with young women aged 12-17 years. In recognising the views and experiences of older young women, 18-25 years, may be different to both younger girls and older women, a small sub-sample of this was group was included.

1.2 Research Design

In order to collect the views of a range of girls and young women, and through methods that would allow them to contribute in a manner of their choosing, various techniques of data collection were devised: an anonymous survey; focus groups; one-to-one interviews.

The team engaged with a wide range of organisations in an effort to disseminate information about the research and recruit girls and young women. This included: the victims sector, the women's sector, health and social care, education, family services, youth and community services, and children's services. Specific organisations working with or advocating for particular groups were also contacted, including: LGBTQ youth; children with care experiences; newcomer children; children and young people with disabilities. There were many positive responses with organisations forwarding links to the survey and requests to take part in interviews or focus groups to those they work with. Some organisations felt unable to help beyond sharing information due to their own governance and/ or ethical procedures. Others reported back that the girls and young women they spoke with simply did not wish to take part. A number of youth and community organisations helped to recruit and support girls and young women to take part in focus groups and/or interviews, providing a safe and supportive space for girls and young women to talk, and support during and after the research as needed.

Data collection took place between July and September 2022. Further detail on the methods of data collection are provided below.

1.2.1 Youth survey

A short online survey was designed for girls aged 12-17 years to provide a snapshot of their views

and experiences of violence. A link to the survey was distributed opportunistically to girls and young women mainly through youth and community groups, family and support services, and latterly through some schools. The survey questions sought to ascertain:

- Young women's understanding of what behaviours constitute violence against women and girls;
- The extent to which young women and girls themselves had experienced violence;
- Their willingness to intervene when they witness certain behaviours that can be regarded as violence against women or girls;
- The level of acceptability of different types of violence against women and girls;
- Barriers to help-seeking behaviour and
- Young women's perception of what would be effective interventions to tackle violence against women and girls.

Most were closed question with pre-defined responses to select from.

Some of the questions replicated those in the recent NI Young Life and Times (YLT) survey (2022) as a means of capturing the views and experiences of a different youth population. These included questions on the perception of what constitutes violence against women and girls, how acceptable young women thought certain behaviours were that would be regarded as violence against women and girls and what their personal violence experience was, although the YLT question was worded slightly differently.

While 253 young women logged into the survey, 200 decided to complete it. Of these:

- 62% of respondents were either 16 or 17 years of age. 38% were 12-15 years of age. The mean age of respondents was 16 years.
- 98% of respondents still lived at home with either both parents, one parent, or one parent some of the time and the other some of the time.
- 11% of respondents stated they had a disability or long-term health condition.
- 56% said their family-financial background was average; 14% said their families were not or not at all well off, whilst 25% stated their families were well off or very well off.
- Almost all respondents had lived in N. Ireland all of their lives. Those who had not, had only lived in other parts of the UK or Ireland, with the exception of two respondents.
- 97% described their ethnic background as white.
- 63% of respondents had only ever been sexually attracted to males, 5% had only been attracted to females; 28% had been sexually attracted to both males and females, whilst 4% said they had never been sexually attracted to anyone.

200 girls aged 12-17 completed an online survey.

1.2.2 Focus groups

A number of discussion tasks were designed to explore understandings of violence; perceptions on how girls/ young women their age experience violence (and the age-based and gendered nature of this); barriers and enablers to disclosure; learning about violence and support services; preventing violence against girls and women. The cultural context of violence was also explored, in particular if they felt there was anything about the particular circumstances of N. Ireland that impacted the nature and extent of violence against women and girls in this jurisdiction. While some of the focus group topics mirror those in the survey, the aim was

to a) begin from girls'/ young women's starting point – to baseline their knowledge and understanding and to then follow up with probes and prompts if necessary; b) to provide deeper understanding of some of the views and issues that might be raised in the survey.

68 girls and young women across Northern Ireland took part in focus groups and interviews.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, focus groups were intentionally small, made up of those who already knew each other and were accessed via youth, community and support services. Most were accessed via generic youth groups, with a smaller number accessed via women's centres and issue-based groups (e.g. those who work with young people with experiences of care). Efforts were made to ensure representation of young women from different areas (groups were located in Co. Antrim, Co. Armagh, Co. Down and Co. Derry) and from the two main ethno-national communities in N. Ireland. All focus groups were carried out in youth and community centres.

Ten focus groups comprising of 39 young women (12-17 years) were carried out between August and September 2022. An additional four focus with 19 young women (17-25 years) were carried out in September. While the aim was not to discuss personal experiences in the group setting, given the small and close nature of the groups, many chose to do so.

Other than age, no background information was collected from participants as it would not have been useful for analytical purposes. The groups were, however, often diverse including girls/ young women of different ethnic backgrounds, gender and sexual identities, and parenting status. Despite differences in age, geographical location, community background, care status (background information we were aware of), there were many similarities in the views and experiences expressed across the groups. Where there were notable differences these have been drawn out in the analysis.

1.2.3 One-to-one interviews

Interviews were designed to collect the personal testimonies of girls and young women who had experienced violence in any form, including as witnesses. Rather than asking young women to recount violent incidents, participants were encouraged to reflect on their own experiences in order to discuss: the impacts immediately and over time; their experiences of disclosing (or not); their experiences with support services; their views on how violence against girls and women could be prevented.

As anticipated, it proved difficult to engage girls/ young women in individual interviews. All but three of the ten young women (n=6, 12-17 years, n=4 18-25 years) who took part in an interview self-nominated following their involvement in a focus group. We believe the focus group allowed the young women to build rapport and trust with us and to get a better sense of what might be involved in an interview.

1.3 Research Ethics

The research plans, data collection instruments, information sheets and consent forms were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee in the Social Sciences, Education and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast. A summary of some of the ethical considerations and mechanisms put in place to minimise harm are outlined below.

1.3.1 Recruitment for interviews and focus groups

In order that young women would have supports if needed, they were accessed and recruited through organisations they were in current contact with. This may have impacted the profile of the sample (i.e. only those engaged with services), but was deemed essential given the nature and the sensitivity of the research. This method enabled workers to discuss with young women the expectations of the research in order to inform decisions about taking part.

This research adds to existing research in N. Ireland, strengthening our knowledge of young women's views and experiences of violence.

While snowball sampling might have drawn in young women not involved with services, many of those who did take part were engaged with generic youth and community services. In other words, they were not in contact with these services due to experiencing violence. While services supporting victims/survivors were contacted as part of this research, some had already collected and collated the views and experiences of girls and young women they were supporting and presented this to TEO as part of their consultation (Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, 2022). The current research adds to this and other existing research, strengthening our knowledge of girl's/ young women's views and experiences.

1.3.2 Consent procedures

Information sheets and consent forms were distributed to workers to share with potential participants. Time was taken before focus groups and interviews to talk through these, answer any questions and remind girls/ young women of the right to withdraw at any time. The researcher/s read each element of the consent form reminding participants they could agree or disagree with any part of it. It was particularly important to note that the information provided in focus groups/interviews may be used (anonymously) by TEO as part of their wider work on the Tackling Violence Against Women and Girl's Strategy. Contact details were only collected for those who wished to self-nominate for an interview.

For those under the age of 16 parental/guardian consent was also required. Again, this was negotiated through youth/community workers, with any forms returned to the research team prior to data collection. Active consent was also required from the young women.

1.3.3 Well-being of participants

In order to ensure that support was available if required, participants were recruited through youth, community and other support organisations. This sometimes involved multiple conversations with workers/organisations to discuss how best to support girls/ young women to take part in the research. Any specific needs or issues were often communicated to the research team in advance. As part of the research protocol all data collection for those under 16 took place in a youth/community centre where a worker would be available during (if requested by participants) and after data collection. On occasions where the research team were concerned about the well-being of a young person, or particularly sensitive topics were discussed, the researcher debriefed the worker. When this involved an individual, debriefing only took place with the young person's consent.

Participants were reminded that in focus groups the aim was not to talk about personal

experiences. As expected, however, many chose to do so, and the researcher took care in allowing young women to share while reminding them of the limits of confidentiality in a group setting. In many cases sharing led to consciousness-raising whereby young women learned they had experiences similar to others, and in instances where they individualised blame, group members would regularly challenge this.

While many tasks in focus groups were depersonalised, discussion could nonetheless be difficult and breaks were built into the meetings. An atmosphere was also created whereby participants knew they could come and go as they wished – returning at point of the discussion, or withdrawing without explanation. In addition to refreshments, stress balls and sensory 'fidget toys' were also placed on tables. These can aid as a distraction when talking about difficult issues and were used particularly by interview participants. Interviews, while often short, were fairly unstructured allowing girls/ young women to take the lead in what they wanted to share. One young woman decided to take part in an interview as part of a process of beginning to talk about her experiences and build her confidence in talking to new people. Two others said they did so because they wanted other young women to understand that what they experienced was not normal. All interviewees whose accounts are provided as narratives in Section 8 of this report, were sent these to review, with an option to withdraw them in their current form. None chose to remove their account.

All participants were provided with leaflets of support at the end of focus groups and interviews, along with the research teams contact details should they wish to discuss any aspect of the research further.

1.4 Presentation of Data

This report presents the views and experiences of 268 girls/ young women who took part the research under five themes. Extracts from interviews and focus groups are presented as illustrative and to retain the voices of participants in our analysis of the information they shared. In most instances, labels are attributed to these extracts, and where relevant the specifies of demographic or background characteristics drawn out.

With permission, the abridged stories of four young women are presented. These were written by the research team and sent to the young women to review and change if they wished. Contact was made with their youth/key/support worker in advance of this in order that they could be available to offer support if needed. These young women were reminded that they could opt-out of having their story shared in this way. The purpose of including personal testimonies in this way is two-fold. Firstly, to illustrate some of themes emerging across accounts in detail; secondly, to allow space for young women to construct their own story and attribute meaning.

Due to the relatively small number of young women completing the survey, there was very little scope to break down socio-demographic background variables for a more detailed analysis of the girls' and young women's attitudes and experiences. However, some recoding was undertaken.

- Two new age group variables were calculated. The first variable merged the very small numbers of 12-14 year olds into one category (16% of all participants), but left 15 (22%), 16 (24%) and 17 year olds (38%) as separate categories. The second variable divided the sample into under 16s (38%) and over 16s (62%).
- The 5-point Likert scale variable on family-financial background (very well-off - well-off – average well-off – not well-off and not at all well-off) was recoded into a 3-point Likert scale variable (well-off – average well-off – not well-off)
- The sexual attraction variable which in the survey allowed for a range of options from

only opposite-sex attraction to only same-sex attraction was recoded into a binary variable, Any respondent who reported any same-sex attraction ever to another girl or women, even just once, was recoded into the 'same-sex attracted' group, whereas those who had only ever been attracted to someone of the opposite sex, i.e. in this case males, was re-coded into the 'opposite-sex attracted' group.

In the presentation of the survey data, general findings and any differences across socio-demographic characteristics are presented, alongside a comparison of some of the YLT survey data. As only a relatively small number of young women responded to the survey, there are some obvious limitations with regard to interrogating results further and in greater depth. However, reassuringly, where comparisons with the much larger 2022 YLT survey are possible, these show similar outcomes. For example, the large majority of young women recognise different forms of violence but there is greater uncertainty in relation to everyday violence. It is noteworthy, however, that there are some differences in the information elicited through the surveys and the focus group discussions. In the survey, respondents were provided with some definitions, prompts and generally a list of options to choose from. Whereas in focus groups we started from their understanding (see Section 1.2.2). It is for these reasons that some of the data may (appear to) differ. This does not signify a contradiction but is a result of looking at the issue and asking questions in different ways. Indeed, it is clear in many instances how the qualitative data supplements the quantitative data.

Content Warning:

This report necessarily engages with potentially distressing material, including detail and description of sexual assault, rape, child abuse, domestic violence, self-harm, and sexism.

2. Understandings and attitudes

2.1 Baselining Young Women's Understandings of Violence

As a starting point to focus groups, girls/ young women were invited to reflect on the meaning of violence – words, actions, thoughts, feelings they associated with it. Most began by noting types of violence and generally given the space to reflect and talk, displayed quite a wide understanding of violence and the various locations in which girls and women experience violence. This included: physical, sexual and emotional violence; violence in public, private and online/virtual spaces. A few, (but not many), specifically referred to coercion, exploitation, financial violence, trafficking and hate crime. These types of examples were discussed more often among the 18-25 year old age groups. Interestingly, across all groups there was little discussion of bullying - a form of violence often associated with young people, and particularly young women. Many young women associated the term violence with abuse and harm.

Some groups had broader understanding than others, with a few restricting their discussion to physical violence until prompted further. Overall, the first type of violence identified across the groups was physical violence, followed by domestic violence and 'mental violence'. Understandings of domestic violence were, however, varied with some having heard the term but not necessarily understanding its meaning, while others had an evident experiential understanding. The first form of violence identified by two groups with experiences of care, for example, was domestic violence, particularly the emotional aspects of domestic violence. There was also more reference in these groups, and the older age groups, to sibling violence.

Reference to sexual violence often came later, towards the end of the initial explorative task, or within later discussions when they started to consider forms of violence that girls/ women were more likely to experience than boys/ men. This may reflect reticence in naming or talking about issues relating to sex rather than a lack of understanding. It is also in contrast to the older age groups who generally were quicker and more confident in naming domestic and sexual abuse as forms of violence.

Cat-calling and street harassment, while a main focus of many later discussions, did not feature prominently in the initial task. This might suggest that it is only through reflection and sharing that girls and young women begin to identity this as a form of violence, hence demonstrating the importance of safe spaces for consciousness-raising. Indeed at the end of one focus group two young women reflected:

> **YW3:** I feel like most people when they think of violence it's only physical or even verbal but the

> other things like cat-calling and stuff or things like that, controlling over money or whatever, it's seen as a less severe issue so they're not really thought about as it's actually doing much harm. **YW2:** Before this I wouldn't have thought of that [cat-calling] as like abuse, and that it was just, it's just what happens. (FG8)

Many also discussed the concept of mental or emotional violence and abuse. This included 'name calling … guilt-tripping … manipulating' (FG11), being 'worn down and convinced to do something you don't want to' (FG8), partners 'trying to control your life' (FG15), and 'walking on eggs shells' (FG14). Further examples of emotional abuse discussed were gaslighting, love-bombing, sexism and misogyny. A significant number spoke specifically of gaslighting as a form of 'mental violence', defining it as: 'if somebody does something and then they be like "ah no, I didn't do that, you're crazy, you're making this all up in your head"' (FG2). Many young women had learned about gaslighting from online sources, primarily through videos on social media. Likewise, two groups explained the concept of 'love-bombing', also informed by their engagement with social media:

> 'Love bombing is where, for like say, for the first couple of weeks you get loads and loads of attention and care and then you suddenly draw it all back and then you do it again and then you draw it back so the other person is walking on eggshells and doesn't know what's coming next.' (FG14)

Many also spoke of how the constant pressure for girls and women to look a particular way fuelled issues with body image, self-identity and mental well-being. The compounding of media messages, the views of boys and self-pressure resulted for some in self-directed violence (see further below).

Overall, through shared discussion there was an awareness of various forms of violence. There did, however, appear to be broader understanding among the older groups, or at least a willingness or ability to express this. Some recognised themselves that their understanding had developed as they had grown older:

> '… even if you're not being respected you might not realise because you don't have any other experiences or even if you've never had attention for guys you think "oh I don't deserve", but you don't realise what you actually deserve. You just think well this must be what it's like' (FG14).

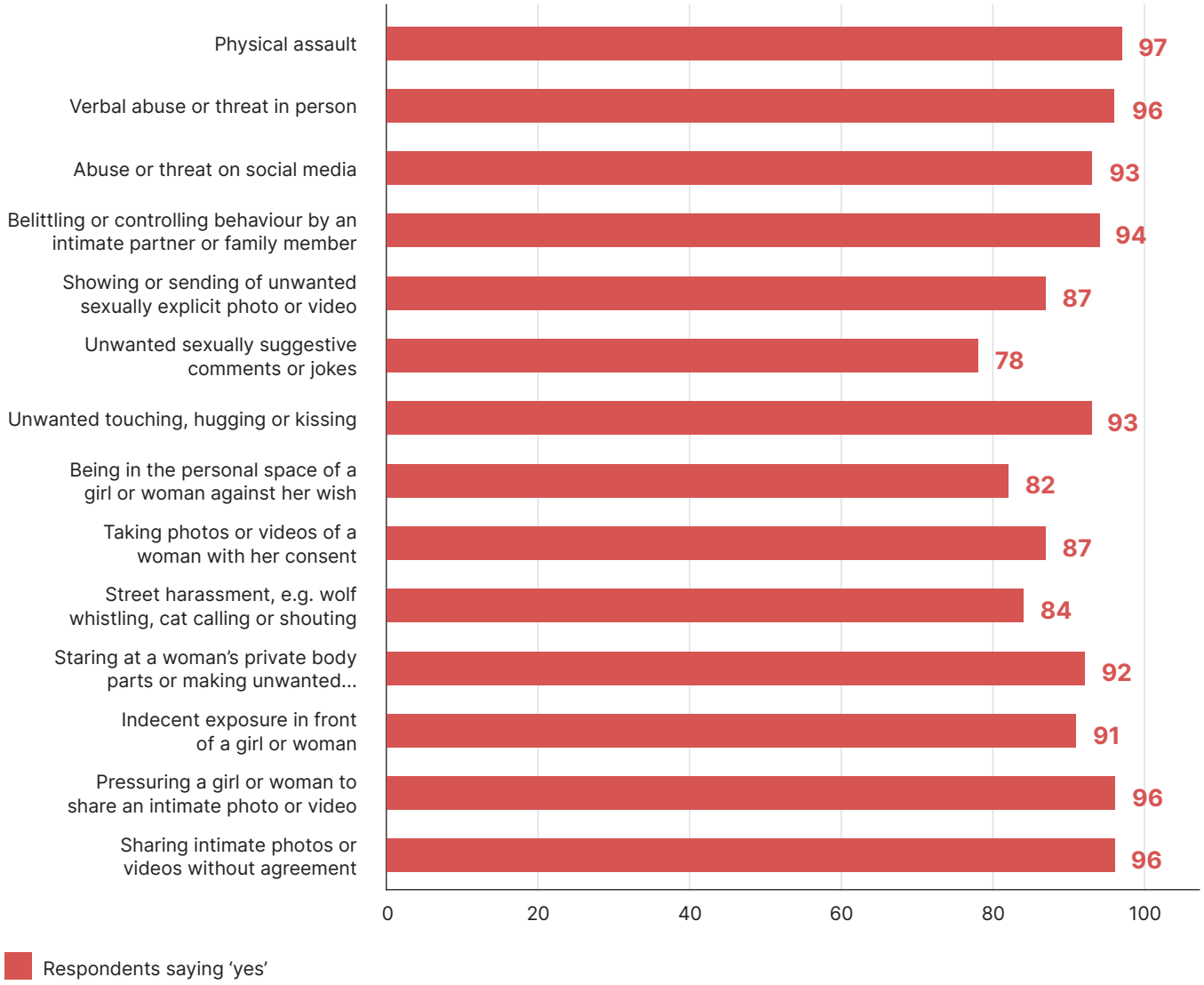
This issue is discussed more fully below in examining barriers to disclosing and seeking support.

More generally, across the groups, there was a clear hierarchy within which physical violence was deemed more 'serious', of more concern or more alarming than the everyday forms of violence, many went on to say they personally experienced (see Section 4).

2.2 Identifying Violence Against Women and Girls

When presented with various forms of violence in the survey, the vast proportion of respondents considered the behaviours listed as violence against women and girls (see Figure 1). Interestingly, some similar patterns to those identified in focus groups can be seen. For instance, physical violence, such as punching or kicking, was recognised by the largest proportion of respondents as violence (97%). In fact, most behaviours listed were regarded as violence by over 9 in 10 respondents. Unwanted sexually suggestive comments or jokes directed at a woman, or a girl were least likely to be recognised as violent behaviour (78% saying 'yes'), followed by being in the personal space of a woman or girl (82%) and street harassment (84%); nonetheless still a vast majority did recognise these as forms of violence.

Figure 1: Proportion of respondents saying that consider the following behaviours as violence against women and girls (%)



An examination of differences in views between age groups would support the qualitative data. Younger respondents, especially 12-14 year olds, for instance, were somewhat more likely to respond 'don't know' when asked if they considered certain types of behaviours as violence. For example, 14% of 12-14 year olds answered 'don't know' when they were asked if they considered belittling or controlling behaviour as a type of violence. This also translated in a difference in views when comparing under-16s with those aged 16 or 17. Nine percent of under-16s said they did not know whether they should consider belittling or controlling behaviour as violence compared to just 2% of those aged 16 or over. Also, the proportion of those under 16 years of age who answered 'don't know' when asked if being in the personal space of a woman or girl should be considered a form of violence was more than twice that of those aged over 16 years (19% and 8% respectively). Similar differences emerged between the under and over 16-year-olds in relation to the question of taking photos of a woman or girl without her consent should be considered an act of violence (13% and 8% respectively saying 'don't know'). In all other questions, the responses varied very little by age group. In any case, it must be noted that none of these differences were statistically significant.

2.3 Attitudes to Violence

Survey respondents were asked how they thought they might respond in situations where they witness violent or disrespectful behaviour towards other women or girls, such as street harassment, offensive jokes and unwanted kissing or hugging. The purpose of this question was to elicit bystander behaviour. Table 1 shows that respondents were more likely to feel that they would want to do something in what might be perceived to be more severe forms of violent behaviour, such as telling a rape joke – 69% said they would say something to show disapproval – or witnessing unwanted touching or kissing – 65% saying they would do or say something.

Reflective of their own responses to street harassment (e.g. cat-calling/wolf-whistling) as discussed in Section 4, these would largely be ignored, with only about one in five respondents (21%) saying they would do or say something and a further 11% saying they might, depending on circumstances. The qualitative data provides further understanding as to why this is likely the case.

Respondents who reported that they had a disability were much more likely than those without a disability to report that they would say something to show their disapproval to cat-calling of wolf-whistling. In fact, nearly half (47%) said they would compared to just 17% of those with no disability. This difference was statistically significant. Younger respondents (i.e. the 12-14 year olds) were most likely to report that they would say something to show their disapproval if someone experienced unwanted touching, hugging or kissing (71%). While no other statistical differences by age group were identified, the proportion of those who said they would say something to show their disapproval in relation to cat-calling or wolf-whistling was also larger among the youngest respondent group (25%). That no other significant differences were found, suggests there are only small, nuanced differences in how young women from different backgrounds would act as a bystander.

Table 1: What do you think/ feel about the three behaviours below, and what would you do if you were in a situation where this occurs? (%)

	It wouldn't bother me	I'd feel a bit uncomfortable, but would not say or do anything	I'd like to say or do something, but wouldn't know how to	I'd say or do something to show I didn't approve	It depends on who I am with and who this happens to	Don't know
Someone was experiencing cat-calling or wolf whistling	5	24	38	21	11	1
Where someone told a rape joke about women	2	9	14	69	5	2
Where someone was experiencing unwanted touching, hugging or kissing	1	4	24	65	5	1

Table 2 shows the general level of acceptance among respondents for different types of violent behaviour. As reported above in Table 1, Table 2 also shows a higher level of acceptability of street harassment compared to other violent behaviours which were generally not found acceptable at all. The most interesting finding in Table 2 is perhaps that 11% of respondents felt that controlling partner behaviour, such as preventing them from going out with friends, was sometimes acceptable. This could indicate that young women and girls may be particularly prone to experiencing (or perpetrating) inter-personal violence or coercive control.

Table 2: How acceptable or unacceptable do you personally think the following behaviours are? (%)

	Always or sometimes acceptable	Never acceptable	Don't know
Cat calling / wolf whistling / shouting at someone in the street	12	81	7
Sharing intimate photos/videos of others without agreement	1	97	2
Trying to control your partner e.g. Preventing them from going out with friends	11	85	4
Posting a 'joke' or making nasty comments of a sexual nature on social media	3	92	5
Pressurising someone to share an intimate photo of themselves	1	98	1
Touching, hugging or kissing someone in a way that is unwanted	3	93	5

Generally speaking, the level of acceptance for these behaviours, decreased with age, even though not all differences were statistically significant. The biggest differences existed in relation to behaviours that might be regarded as the most 'low-level' violent behaviours, i.e. behaviours that tended to be verbal articulations, such as verbal street harassment or telling sexist jokes. For example, one statistically significant difference was that 61% of 12-14 year olds said that they found cat-calling and wolf-whistling never acceptable, but this figure was 79% for 15 and 16 year olds and 91% for 17 year olds. Also, the proportion of under 16-year olds who found posting a joke or making a nasty comment of a sexual nature on social media never acceptable, was 88% compared to 94% of over 16-year olds. The difference was often not that young women found these things acceptable, but rather that they did 'not know'. This is supported by the qualitative data which suggests that young women started to experience some of these forms of violence in their early teens, and that as they got older they felt better able to recognise various forms of violence (see Section 4). One other example for this would be the level of acceptance of unwanted touching, hugging or kissing, which 87% of under-16 year olds found never acceptable, compared to 96% of 16+ year olds. Again, the don't know answers indicated the difference – 9% among those under 16 years of age and just 2% of the 16+ year olds.

Interestingly, same-sex attracted young women were, statistically, more likely to say than opposite-sex attracted young women that they found the posting of nasty jokes online 'sometimes acceptable' (9% and 1% respectively).

3. Learning about violence

3.1 Overview

This section draws on interview and focus group data to examine what girls/ young women learn about violence, and where this learning takes place. The analysis reveals that while young women generally reported receiving little formal and explicit education about violence against women and girls there were some powerful, persistent, and consistent messages they did receive which were significant in shaping their understanding. Both explicitly communicated and implicit in their interactions with others, young women recounted the many ways in which their vulnerability and responsibility were reiterated, informing their knowledge and understanding of violence. The discussions here help contextualise analysis of young women's experiences of violence (see Section 4) and why they, or their peers, may not report violence (see Section 6).

3.2 Persistent Messages

The key messages young women receive in homes, schools, from the media and in their interactions with others are presented under four themes below.

3.2.1 'Get back in the kitchen': gender stereotypes and disrespect

From an early age and from a range of sources young women reported receiving specific messages about their gender - the behaviours and expectations associated with being young women. They recounted how these stereotypes, which positioned them as inferior to men, were often passed off as 'jokes', and heard so often from brothers or boys in schools that they would just 'let them go over their head'. Such gender stereotypes were used to mock, dismiss or limit them personally and/or the position of women in society. Disrespect in this way could be considered at one end of a violence continuum which positions girls and women as 'lesser than' (see also Amy's story, Section 8.5):

> **YW3:** Old traditions like housewives or like men are superior and women listen to men, and they don't work and their only purpose is children.
> ...
> **YW2:** There'll be jokes like "oh get back in the kitchen".
> **I:** And how does it make you feel when you hear those sorts of things, or does it have any impact?
> **YW3:** Because you hear it so often it just goes over your head.
> **YW2:** Yeah, I think now it's been made out because there is a movement of make the change, anything that's being said can now just be taken as a joke even if it's meant some harm, society has created it in a way that you just take it as a joke, you just brush it over your head. (FG8)

While online platforms were reported as a useful site of learning about violence (sometimes specifically sought out, at other times simply appearing in their 'feeds'), many considered them also to be a places where violence and sexism were exposed and reproduced. As such, young women understood the sheer volume of gender stereotypes, disrespect and sexism communicated online to be indicative of the views of men. Seeing public posts of a sexist or misogynistic nature receiving the attention and endorsement ('likes' and 'reposts') of their friends indicated how widespread negative views of girls and women were among those of their own age. This left them querying if the comments of a few were reflective of many more:

> 'It's like there's people who I know that would put up things that would offend other people and then there's like...there's like a culture and kind of if you agree with something you kind of repost it or you put it on your social media so that your followers can see it, so it's like boys our age or men see these things and then they repost it and then their friend see it and they agree with it. And then girls are kind of seeing it and thinking is this what the world is? (FG11)

While young women were not always directly on the receiving end of these threats, slurs or comments, it nonetheless reinforced negative messages and instilled a perception that these views may be held more widely:

> **YW1**: It's just like I dunno, it's just like going online just reminds you all the time that men are still the same way as they always were, nothing's really changed. And that this is what they really think because they might not say it to your face.
> **YW3**: Or even if a man says something to another guy about like "ah, I just done this to her" they'd be like "ah, congratulations". And praise him for it. (FG11)

Given the pervasiveness of social media in the lives of young people, it appears that this has become one of the main sites where young women learn about views and attitudes towards women and girls. Messages present here are, however, an extension of those in the offline world (see Section 4.3).

While online platforms were reported as a useful site of learning about violence ... many considered them also to be places where violence and sexism were exposed and reproduced.

3.2.2 'Girls don't fight back': messages of vulnerability and protection

Reflective of the gendered stereotypes they heard, young women learned that they were vulnerable to violence. Those across focus groups provided examples of how this was reiterated in school, reminding them of their need to be vigilant when in public and to take personal responsibility to ensure they were not a target. Girls/ young women were aware that similar messages were not directed at their male peers:

> 'I know a while ago there was a wild lot of people were getting drugged in like clubs and all cause actually in our school they were like in our school "be careful when you go out"...' (FG4)

Messages of vulnerability were also received in the home. While young women understood many of the protections put in place by parents to be done out of concern, they were frustrated by what they

considered as double standards surrounding how sons and daughters were treated:

> 'I feel like I've literally, I wouldn't argue with my dad about it but I feel like I've had conversations with my daddy being like "listen, you wouldn't be saying stuff like that, you wouldn't be so concerned if you had a son instead of a daughter, so why is it that you're more likely to be annoyed about what I'm wearing than you are if you had a son?" But I understand where he's coming from because he's trying to protect me but at the same time, it's hypocritical that you wouldn't be doing it to your son either.' (FG2)

Young women were aware that, unlike boys who were taught to stand up for and defend themselves, that girls were often taught the opposite - to be quiet, not draw attention to themselves, not fight back, or cause a scene:

> 'men are taught, whenever somebody wrongs them they're taught to fight but whenever women are taught like if somebody wrongs them they're like "be quiet, it'll all go over, it'll all blow over, you'll be okay eventually. Like just don't talk about it, don't speak about it because then you'll get somebody else in trouble and you don't want to ruin their life".' (FG2)

How some of these messages become internalised and play out in some young women's own accounts of why violence is not reported is evidenced in Section 6.

Other unhelpful gendered messages girls received almost sought to justify the negative treatment from boys and men as reflective of their interest in them. Here one young woman recounts experiences from childhood where parents and other adults excused the mean treatment from boys:

> 'I was like taught when I was growing up, I think everyone was told this, whenever I was growing up and somebody was being mean to me my mummy would tell me, well not specifically my mummy but people my age would tell me like "oh, they must like you, they must fancy you". So, it's like you grow up thinking oh, if he's mean to me he must like me. Or if he does something bad to me he must fancy me or something like that but it's just not the truth. If someone likes me or fancies me they'll go out of their way to be nice to me. I don't think they'll be rude or cruel to me.' (FG2)

Again, reflective of these gendered messages girls felt that not being taught about violence actually impacted their ability to call out unwanted behaviours, to recognise them and to have confidence in saying 'no'. Young women were concerned that this might be understood as rude or ungrateful:

> 'We're also not taught a lot about it. ... everybody just assumes that you know how to say no but also everybody, you feel guilty when you say no to somebody almost as if you've done something wrong and everybody's like "aww yeah well, he's just trying to be nice, he didn't have that intention".' (FG 2)

While young women recognised these gendered messages, recoiled at them and were frustrated by them, their power was nonetheless illustrated in their own accounts which saw some of them internalised or repeated. They may be rejected in principle, but they were often experienced as a reality of their lives. This was most clearly illustrated in girl's/young women's discussion of their freedom of movement and feelings of safety in public space. Young women understand that there may be safety in numbers, or if accompanied by a boyfriend or a male friend that they are less likely to receive negative comments or unwanted attention:

> 'I think the reason you depend on a boyfriend or something as well is the logic I think that goes

through my head is well, other men will respect my boyfriend before they respect me.' (FG12)

3.2.3 You are responsible for the actions of others

In recalling the information received at school, young women often avidly highlighted what might be considered an unofficial curriculum of learning. This focused on their need to curtail their own behaviour and to dress in a particular way in order not to 'distract' male teachers and students:

> **YW1**: Sorry, can I say something about my school? So in PE we're not allowed to wear leggings. So we're allowed to wear our school leggings but any sort of black leggings we cannot wear them in case they distract male students or teachers.
> **YW2**: My teacher once told me in third year … he said to my class that we were not allowed to wear leggings because it was very distracting towards male people, male teachers and male students because they can see…but why would they be looking? (FG2)

In school and at home young women heard messages that linked what they wore to the behaviours and actions of others. While some understood this to be said out of concern, it served to reinforce a narrative that wearing certain clothes may bring them unwanted attention:

> 'Because my mummy and my family are really protective over me and it's not that they care what I'm wearing, they care more about how I'm being treated. So they would be more like "oh, don't be wearing that just in case", just to protect me but at the same time I understand where they're coming from but … it's not my fault that if I'm wearing something explicit it's not my fault that someone said something to me, it's their fault because they're objectifying somebody, it's my body, why should I be ashamed of it?' (FG2)

Young women understood the irony of the messages they received, but nonetheless spoke of their power in responsibilising young women while ignoring and excusing the behaviour of men and boys. As illustrated in Sections 4 and 6 these messages were repeated to young women who had been victims of sexual violence and were a strong dissuader in reporting sexual violence.

Overall, young women felt that the information they received around safety and violence placed too much emphasis on how they could keep themselves safe. They felt that these messages are not helpful for boys and young men either, implying that they have no control and are powerless over their own actions. As such they felt that more needed to be done to bring boys and young men into these conversations, and from an earlier age, rather than placing the responsibility on women only (see also Section 7):

> **YW5**: But also why do females have to create solutions to men's problems?
> **YW2**: No but it's the same with dress codes. It's something that's been said before but it literally just hit my brain the other day. It's always even in professional settings you're told what to wear cos they're like this … and they're like "boys can't hack it", and it's like no, you're just teaching boys that they don't have control. You're perpetuating that by saying a boy cannot control himself when he can. He absolutely can and it's not about what you're wearing. (FG12)

3.2.4 You'll not be believed

As illustrated so far, young women learn (explicitly and implicitly) that they are less powerful and important than men, that they are vulnerable and are responsible for the actions of others. Related to this, and as a consequence of it, is the powerful message that they will most likely not be believed should they report violence, especially in instances of sexual violence.

While mainstream media can be a useful means of learning about violence it can and does reinforce messages of risk, vulnerability and culpability. Young women recounted graphic documentaries, true life films and stories they had heard or read about in the media that focus on rape, and how those who come forward are treated. The repetition of the messages with these (which of course often reflect reality), act as powerful reminders of their vulnerability; the blame often directed towards women; the lack of justice for those women who come forward and a sense that without substantial evidence or proof that they will not be believed. Indeed, these messages were repeated in families and among peer groups:

> **YW3:** I feel like some adults would say it as well, not just boys, like the older generation.
> **YW1:** If they hear something about it they're like "ah, well she was looking for it" or something.
> **YW2:** If it were to happen in school and you were wearing just like a low top the teachers would probably be like well, you should have covered up or something. (FG11)

Their own and the experiences of others act as powerful sites of learning about violence and how it and the victim are treated – learning that they will not be believed, there will not be enough evidence or that investigations are highly intrusive and traumatic. In such instances young women would rather endure the consequences of not reporting than be treated suspiciously.

3.3 Reflections on Learning in Schools

Overall, young women reported learning little in school specifically about violence. This was as true of those amongst the youngest in the sample, as it was of those who were among the oldest. While many had received some information in school about healthy relationships, more generally the sense was that they did not receive good quality information, guidance, or advice regarding relationships, sex, and violence against women and girls:

> **I:** Do you remember hearing anything in school about relationships or violence?
> **YW3:** Relationship wise we were always told if you were in a relationship to use protection and if anything goes wrong tell your parents. That's all we were told.
> **YW4:** We got taught how to put a condom on and that was it. I think there was a tiny bit of consent, but it was drugs and alcohol – don't do it. They played that video about the cup of tea for consent. (FG14)

Those who did recall inputs in school reflected on how these were limited, were only covered with some students (i.e. not directed at boys), were sporadic in nature and were often not included at all in years in which there were important examinations. They regularly reported that how the information was received did not allow for discussion or questioning resulting in 'surface level learning' (FG2). The exclusion of LGBTQ relationships and in some schools, contraception and abortion, was also reported by many young women who often understood this to be reflective of the religious ethos of the school:

> 'I was in high school for a long time and I was never really taught too many things, especially we were taught bits and pieces about alcohol but not a big pile but one thing that wasn't talked to us about was sexual abuse, like sexual violence, it wasn't talked about, especially in my school, I went to a very Catholic school and a primary school, it was never talked about to us, we were never told what it was or what to do if it did happen or how to prevent it from happening, we never got shared that. I had to learn about it myself at home and through the internet. We weren't really told very much.' (FG10)

Limited formal learning at school left young women feeling that they simply did not receive enough information and that they had to learn elsewhere – from friends, in the media, online, from family, or through their own experiences. Further, as a result of the lack of targeted work with boys/ young men in schools, some young women explained how it becomes woman's responsibility to educate them:

> '...like women automatically have to take on those educational roles of telling men when they're wrong or telling them like about stuff and it's just like even the pressure of that. It's like I shouldn't have to tell you that ...' (FG12)

Many of the issues raised here in relation to the omissions in learning are returned to in Section 7 when young women consider how violence against women and girls might be prevented.

4. Experiencing violence

4.1 Overview

In focus groups, participants considered the types of violence girls and young women were most likely to experience. Consistently across all groups they identified sexual violence, emotional violence, and online violence. Often reflecting back on their own experiences, older young women spoke explicitly about the relationship between age and vulnerability to violence. This vulnerability existed, they felt, because girls – '... can't spot red flags because they've got less experiences' (FG14). Another group suggested that younger girls were more susceptible to exploitation or grooming because they may 'want to be seen as older than they are', are 'naturally curious' and may be more easily manipulated by 'older men fluffing their ego' (FG12). There was no judgement or blame in these discussions as many of the older young women reflected on their own experiences of violence when younger.

Most of the personal experiences discussed within focus groups revolved around sexual harassment in public places whereby those of all ages and locations identified this as something that was experienced 'all the time', although to a lesser degree as they got older. This of course does not mean that young women's experiences were limited to these forms of violence (as demonstrated through interviews and one focus group in which four young women disclosed experiences of sexual violence), but that these were the experiences most often talked about in a group context. Indeed, the fact that over one-third (37%) of survey respondents (aged 12-17 years) reported having experienced one form of violence and another 36% had experienced more than one, suggests experiences of violence are widespread among girls[1] (see Figure 2).

In the survey data, the youngest age group of respondents, (i.e. 12-14 year olds) were least likely to report they had personally experienced more than one of these violent behaviours (14%), and most likely to say that they had experienced none (35%). However, a comparison between under 16-year-olds with over 16-year-olds showed no significant differences in this respect. There were no differences by family financial background or between disabled and non-disabled respondents, however same-sex attracted respondents reported higher levels of violence experience.

[1] In comparison, the 2022 YLT survey showed that 96% of female 16-year-olds had experienced at least one form of violence. In YLT a slightly longer list of violent behaviours was included which could contribute to the difference in findings.

Figure 2: Have you ever personally experienced any violent behaviours (%)

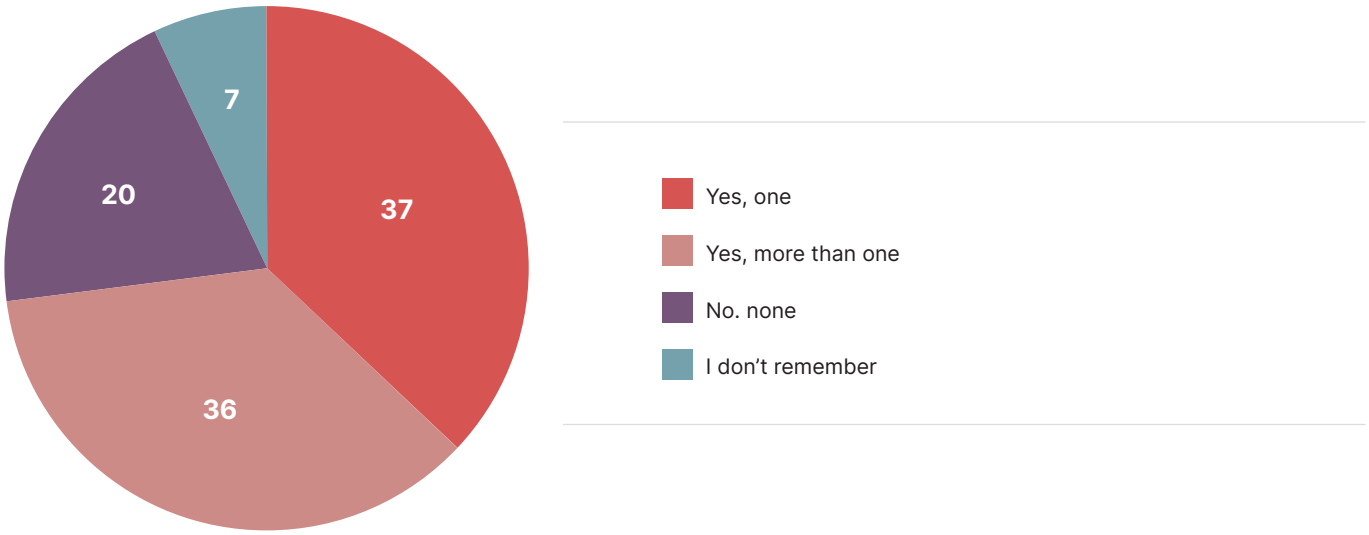
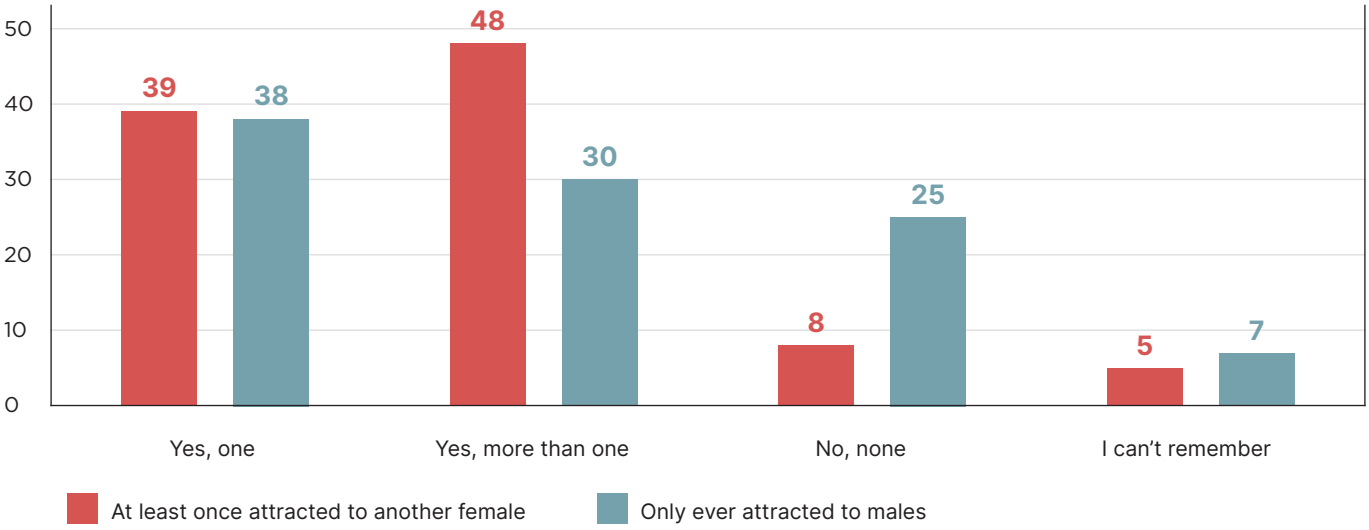


Figure 3 shows that only 8% of same-sex attracted females had never experienced any of the listed violent behaviours compared to one quarter of opposite-sex attracted respondents. This compares well with the 2022 YLT survey which also showed that heterosexual respondents were statistically less likely to report having been at the receiving end of different forms of violence.

Figure 3: Have you ever personally experienced any of these (violent) behaviours? By sexual attraction (%)



Focus group and interview data also demonstrates that some young women experience multiple forms of violence. Experiences of violence may increase with age, or behaviours and may be better understood and thus defined as violence as young women get older. The sections below outline young women's experiences of four forms of violence. While presented separately, many experienced multiple forms of violence, and there are recurrent themes across all. This is particularly the case in accounts and analysis of domestic violence and sexual violence.

4.2 Cat-calling, Street Harassment and Everyday Violence: 'It's almost normalised, like something girls should be thankful for'

The pervasiveness of young women's experiences of everyday violence was evident in discussions of where violence happened – at concerts and bars, on the street, at work, in schools, in parks, on public transport. Basically 'Anywhere. Everywhere. Everywhere you go' (FG15). Much of the discussion focused on public places and spaces and while younger women in particular regularly spoke of 'drunk men' and 'creepy old men' as the main protagonists, it often transpired that boys and young men (mostly in groups) were equally culpable. While not excusing the behaviour of boys and men, young women tried to make sense of it. In doing so, some expressed concern at the sense of entitlement men appeared to exhibit in relation to women's bodies. For others, the only way they could make sense of the pervasiveness of these actions was to view them as engrained unconscious practices:

> **YW2:** But there's also the spreading of legs.
> **YW1:** … if you're on the bus or something and you're having to move yourself out of the way.
> **YW5:** Or if they run their arm round you. I think it's nearly unconscious too, they don't realise that that's unwanted.
> …
> **YW2:** Or they look you up and down and they point.
> **YW3:** I think it's more common now than ever because they just, I don't even think they realise they're doing it half the time. (FG12)

Speaking of their experiences of cat-calling participants explained that it started from when they were young (from about age 10/11) and happened regularly when they were on their own or with their female peer groups often in public places such as car parks, parks, shopping precincts, on the street and on public transport: 'It can happen anywhere. In the street, in the park … in towns' (IV3). It was so commonplace that young women remarked 'I don't know anyone who hasn't experienced it' (FG6).

> "It can happen anywhere. In the street, in the park … in towns."

'Cat calling' played out in a range of ways including car lights being flashed, horns being sounded and groups of boys or men shouting or whistling at them. Other forms of harassment and intimidation included being watched, stared at, spoken to when on their own or followed:

> 'It could be if you're on a bus or waiting for a bus or something, a man could be staring at you, winking at you and just making you feel weird about yourself.' (FG1)

> 'Beeping or shouting out the window or breaking their necks to turn back.' (FG5)

> 'It's when there's people, a line of cars and they've all got their lights on and you can't see up to who it is and that's why it creeps you out a bit.' (FG6)

Some reflected how younger girls were particular targets because of their perceived vulnerability - 'especially as I am a young 14-year-old girl, it would, from someone else's perspective be very easy to take advantage of me' (IV2). Older young women attested to this. While they still experienced harassment in public spaces, this happened less frequently.

Many young women described over- and unwanted familiarity whereby boys/men would physically

touch or 'grab' them in pubs, at concerts, parties or on the streets:

> 'Just say you're out walking about, you're out with a group of your friends like wee boys might come over and try to grab you and touch you and pull you away from them. And even if you're on your own they might come over and try to touch you and grab you.' (IV1)

It was the unwanted nature of any of this male attention that made it 'creepy' and 'weird'. Not knowing the individual, not asking for attention, and not knowing their intentions. As explained by one group:

> **YW4**: … even sometimes when they shout "you're sexy" or something, it makes you feel insecure because some random person is shouting something at you.
> …
> **YW3**: Because you don't know who they are and someone's just shouting like something like that.
> **YW2**: And you don't know what's going through their head. (FG1)

Such experiences could make young women feel wary when they saw boys and men on the street (particularly if they were alone), it also restricted their movements.

The frequency with which young women spoke of being touched or grabbed at concerts or in bars is concerning. Many had experienced this personally and believed that boys/ men felt it was acceptable behaviour or they simply did not care how it made girls/ women feel. Some of the impacts are clearly illustrated in the following exchange:

> **YW2**: Well if you're out, even if you're out at a concert or something and you're feeling good about yourself and that happens or something, you just feel like shit.
> **YW3**: You feel violated. … It makes you feel like it's your fault and it's not.
> **YW2**: It makes you feel dirty.
> **YW3**: There's people that say "ah but you were asking for it cos of your outfit".
> **YW1**: Yeah.
> **I**: Who says those sorts of things or where do you hear them?
> **YW2**: Boys. (FG11)

4.2.1 Impacts and responses

Reiterating this, others spoke of feeling embarrassed, self-conscious, insecure, and unsafe. When alone some reported being 'on edge', 'hyper aware' and 'really vigilant' (see Amy's story, Section 8.5). Such experiences could make young women feel wary when they saw boys and men on the street (particularly if they were alone), it also restricted their movements. They spoke of areas they would not frequent alone or at particular times of the day, or that they would only go to (e.g. the park or town centre) if they had a boy with them, as they were less likely to experience negative treatment on these occasions. Older young women appeared more self-aware of these personal safety strategies. For younger women they tended to be discussed when asked specifically about them, perhaps again signifying their normality. There was a sense of frustration and self-annoyance among some older young women who otherwise defined themselves as strong, independent women:

> **YW3**: I suppose on like a night out, any of them situations. I think as a woman
> you feel more vulnerable regardless as well.
> **YW5**: I don't want to feel like this but I do. I don't

> go into town without my boyfriend.
> **All**: Agreement. (FG12)

In the main, young women identified these experiences as gendered because they mostly happened to women (particularly young women), they were often sexual in nature or focused on the body. There was a perception among many, that boys/ men felt entitled to 'touch', 'grab', 'grope' girls and women in public places, and that because many young women felt unable to respond, this enhanced their confidence to do so. In considering why these behaviours happened, there was a general belief that it was because there were no repercussions. Even in schools, some reported, boys escaping punishment for sexist behaviours which were either explained away as 'boys being boys' or perceived to be so common that they were not noticed by staff as being unacceptable: '... like wolf-whistling and all that stuff, just in school and nobody did anything that was just normal' (IV8). A small number of young women articulated all of these behaviours as an exercise of male power, forms of objectification and misogyny.

While several young women (particularly as they got older or were in a group), reported they had or would 'shout back', mostly they dealt with these everyday instances of violence through ignoring them, not making eye contact or walking faster, as they felt powerless to respond in any other way: 'I would just put my head down and feel shameful and walk home' (FG2). When alone, particularly when younger and even when with peers, there was an understanding that responding could bring more attention and the potential for more violence:

> '... you would just have to either ignore or distance yourself from them because usually ignoring is the best way to get it to stop which is unfortunate seeing as you can't just go up to them and tell them to stop and they'll stop.' (FG3)

Demonstrating the internalisation of gendered messages, the only other ways some felt this sort of violence could be prevented would be by young women 'covering up' in order not to attract attention. Despite this, in reflecting on their own experiences, they understood that what they wore or where they went was not the issue, and it could effectively happen 'to anyone at anytime' (FG1).

In the hierarchy of violence, young women felt that despite feeling self-conscious, insecure, embarrassed, and fearful that because 'it happens to everyone', is not 'as big a deal' as other forms of violence or would be seen as 'wasting resources', their experiences were not worth acknowledging or reporting (see Section 6).

4.3 Online Misogyny and Abuse: 'It's ... normal because it happens so often'

The other main form of violence participants felt girls/ young women were particularly likely to experience, more so than older women and boys, was online abuse. The reasons were again that this tended be sexual or misogynistic in nature, and because 'almost every young girl these days has some presence on social media' (FG3). Participants defined online violence as: misogyny; receipt of graphic images and texts; requests for naked images; unsolicited 'friend requests'; blackmail; constant pressures and expectations relating to female bodies. While it was raised in passing (and only by a few participants), cyberbullying was not discussed in any detail. However, some of the behaviours they mentioned – name calling, ridiculing etc. may in fact constitute this. It is possible that the extent and explicit nature of the 'random' messages and requests they receive overshadows conversations and experiences of peer-to-peer online abuse, which in most cases may be less frequent.

4.3.1 Dick pics, friend requests and grooming

Young women spoke of the frequency with which they received unsolicited messages and sexual

images, and often produced their phones to provide examples. From their perspective this was a normal part of online life for girls/ young women. The following exchange is illustrative:

> **YW3:** You always get wee creepy men on Facebook or Instagram.
> **YW5:** You can report their account.
> **YW2:** I got asked if I wanted a sugar daddy.
> **YW3:** I had this request on messenger and he sent me his dick and I was like "what the hell!", so I had to show it to *** [youth worker] and she was like"delete that and block him" and I did.
> ...
> **I:** Do you think that happens a lot or is it quite rare?
> **YW3:** No, it happens loads, all the time.
> **YW4:** You should see my message requests now and you wanna see all the creepy men in them. (FG5)

Young women spoke of the frequency with which they received unsolicited messages and sexual images... From their perspective this was a normal part of online life.

While young women often downplayed this harassment because of the obvious nature of it, they were also able to recount instances of more targeted and subtle 'befriending', the intentions of which were not immediately obvious. Some spoke of pressure to share images and the potential to be manipulated and blackmailed if they did not: 'People get close to you and pretend to be your mate and the next thing you know is – "oh I like you, will you send us, will you do that"' (FG8). The everyday occurrence of 'random' requests and receipt of images could escalate into grooming, whereby one young woman told of how what she thought started as a friendship escalated into threats, manipulation, the sharing of her images and police involvement (see Sarah's story, Section 8.2). Others recounted the methods strangers employed to manipulate young women – using names that were similar to those on their friend lists, giving them attention and praise. While not defined as such, it was evident that some experiences constituted harassment and stalking:

> 'I have this one person that will not leave me alone, like I'll block him and he'll make fake accounts and use names of people I know to try to obviously drag me in.' (FG13)

While older young women reported that they received fewer random friend requests and unsolicited images as they got older (but still not none), they recounted the early age at which this started and the impact:

> **YW4:** On social media – unwanted nude pics.
> **YW2:** Yeah, getting random dick pics.
> **YW4:** I was 13 when I got my first one sent to me.
> **YW1:** Same.
> **YW5:** And you're just like "why, why do I want this?"
> **YW4:** I was so scared, like I didn't know what to do. I went into my sister and I was like, "what do I do?" (FG12)

Older young women felt that as they had matured, they were less suspectable to risks from random strangers online. Age and experience had made them smart to manipulative requests, online scams, and in their words 'fake adoration'. Younger women, they felt, 'can't spot red flags because they've got less experiences' (FG14), and this was the very reason why they were targeted.

In addition to advances by strangers online, young women also spoke of a pressure from those known to them to share images. While there was an awareness that these could be screenshot and shared, and the consequences if this happened, many understood why a girl may still feel pressured to do so and recounted examples of this happening in their schools. Others spoke more personally of feeling such pressures, particularly when younger, with one young woman sharing her own experience. While noting on the one hand that she had shared images consensually with another young person, she later spoke of 'feeling pressured' to do so:

> **YW4:** I used to feel pressured into doing it but now I'm like "no, you can go and" –
> **YW3:** Like I used to feel pressured into doing it as well and then I grew up in a way.
> **I:** When did that change?
> **YW4:** Last year.
> **YW3:** For me, I was about fourteen, fifteen because I was caught by the police and it scared the shit out of me! It scared the absolute shit out of me and said I'd never do that again. (FG13)

4.3.2 Sexism, objectification, and misogyny: connecting online and offline experiences

While not necessarily identifying it as online misogyny, those across a number of groups spoke of online 'influencers' promoting contempt for or prejudice against women. There was much discussion, for example, of Andrew Tate in the younger groups, and description of the nature of his posts and messages which they felt demonstrated a lack of respect for women and promoted double standards. Young women explained that his messaging was based on the notion that masculinity needed to be reclaimed and traditional gendered roles returned. Some expressed concern that because of his position, boys and young men may look up to him, hence fuelling and legitimising sexism and the negative treatment of women and girls:

> '... he's encouraging young men that violence against young women and controlling behaviour against them is okay. And it's an acceptable thing to do.' (FG2)

> **YW3:** Wee boys growing up think that's normal and they respect that.
> **YW4:** He's setting all those wee lads an example like they can do what they want. (FG5)

This was further exemplified by the very public nature of his messages, the size of his following and the time that it took for social media platforms to respond.

Linked to this online climate of sexism and objectification of female bodies, some young women spoke of the unrealistic expectations they felt as a result of pervasive messages about appearance, lifestyle and stereotypical gendered expectations in online forums:

> '... like the social media as well, constantly seeing all the influencers and beauty people with their perfect body and their clear skin ... and they have the perfect face and make up and have the perfect eyebrows and have the perfect hair. It's just always taking a toll on everybody's mental health, not just mine.' (IV1)

While girls were able to identify this online, their accounts also demonstrated that they experienced pressure relating to body image offline too, with messaging about female bodies and sexuality filtering into the expectations of boys and young men. Continuing to reflect on her own experience, the young woman above explained:

> '... if you're just like stick skinny and you don't have a bum or you don't have boobs they don't want you, they call you anorexic and like they

> don't want nothing to do with you. If you have a bum or if you have big boobs they wanna be all over you …' (IV1)

Yet, striving for a perfection that does not exist and having a full gaze and critique on her body was felt acutely:

> 'It's not even if you don't have it, if you do have it they'd be saying stuff to you, even if you didn't have like a big chest but you had like a big bum they'd still say stuff to you, or if you didn't have a big bum but you had a big chest they would still say stuff, and then if you didn't have anything they'd be like "eww, you're ugly, you're anorexic, would you eat or something". And then if you're fat, like "you need to stop eating, why are you eating so much, cut down, you shouldn't be eating that".' (IV1)

The weight of these expectations for this young woman had a profound impact which she explained as follows:

> '… so I would like stop eating and just starve myself 24/7. … I was really, really depressed, like I fell into a deep depression and like I just didn't wanna go out …' (IV1)

Again, some of the online sexism was also reflected in their in-person interactions through gender-based slurs and ridicule. Speaking of 'everyday sexism' one group reflected:

> **YW3:** Old traditions like housewives or like men are superior and women listen to men and they don't work and their only purpose is children.
> **I:** So there's still a bit of that about. Kind of like expectations of women. Does that translate to girls? Do girls hear any of those kinds of messages or is that just for older women?
> **YW3:** No, I think girls do too.
> **YW5:** Yeah.
> **I:** What kinds of things?
> **YW2:** There'll be jokes like "oh get back in the kitchen".
> **I:** And how does it make you feel when you hear those sorts of things, or does it have any impact?
> **YW3:** Because you hear it so often it just goes over your head.
> **YW2:** … anything that's being said can now just be taken as a joke even if it's meant some harm, society has created it in a way that you just take it as a joke, you just brush it over your head. (FG8)

Young women's discussions demonstrate how offline and online worlds interconnect reinforcing negative gender messages, objectification and lack of respect for women. Given the often flippant and 'jokey' way in which much of this was communicated, young women felt they had no recourse other than to simply ignore it or play along. That these were the only possible responses was further evidenced by instances in which behaviour had been reported or identified, but the consequences had been minimal. Indeed, one young woman provided an example whereby in her school the focus of 'punishment' was on the less serious behaviour (swearing) which effectively meant there were not repercussions or learning:

> 'I remember in school, at one point the boys made a list, a scale of like fat bitch to skinny c word and put girls in our year on it and someone got hold of it and handed it into the head teacher and she just gave them detention for swearing but that was it and nothing else was ever said, didn't say anything about how our friends were placed on that list. And there was no consequence, no one mentioned it again, just that he was writing down those kind of words. That's all he got for it. … it literally made everyone feel like the teachers didn't care whatsoever how the boys in our year were clearly perceiving the girls.' (FG14)

Likewise, in the online world it was also felt little could be done to prevent or respond to everyday

violence. In this context, somewhat like street harassment/ cat-calling, it was the anonymity of the behaviour which made it difficult to report, meaning that it would go unpunished and ultimately be allowed to flourish:

> 'A lot of time people think online it doesn't matter as much, the anonymity thing or they feel like there's nothing they can do about it, especially if that person is across the world you feel like there's nothing you can do about it.' (FG3)

The advice therefore, was simply to 'block', 'delete' or ignore' (see Section 7.2).

4.4 Domestic Violence

This section draws on young women's accounts to surface experiences of domestic violence and its impacts. In focus groups, but primarily interviews, some spoke of: witnessing parent on parent violence; experiencing violence from their sibling/s (physical, emotional and/or sexual); experiencing physical and/or emotional violence by their parents. Others talked of violence within intimate partner relationships, but mostly as part of broader discussions of experiencing violence or with specific reference to sexual violence – the latter is discussed in detail in Section 4.5.

The analysis below presents key themes that emerged across the young women's accounts while retaining their individual voices and experiences. Rachel's story (see Section 8.3) further illuminates experiences and impacts of domestic violence, alongside barriers to disclosing and disclosure experiences.

4.4.1 Not recognising and numbing violence

For those who experienced family violence, a consistent theme was not understanding or recognising their experiences as violence or indeed as different to those of others. Growing up with violence from a young age, not remembering a time when it had not existed, made it difficult to identify. It was often though conversation and interaction with others that girls/ young women began to identify their situation as different, not 'normal'. The following extracts demonstrate that the normalcy of violence, acts as a barrier to recognising it, and if it is not recognised there is nothing to disclose:

> 'I had been brought up thinking that it was completely normal because nobody had ever told me otherwise that your parents weren't meant to hit you … I just accepted it as something normal and because I thought it was normal, I never told anyone.' (IV2)

> '… when I was living with my like family, my older brother … sexually assaulted me and my sister and we didn't realise it was sexual assault and all and I kind of didn't just really think about it and it started affecting me, I was thinking about it and stuff and was like that's not right … ' (IV6)

While young women spoke of feeling fear, being anxious, sensing something was not right and having a desire to be out of the house, they did not have the language to talk about it or other experiences to compare it against. One young woman, for instance, spoke of being so used to violence that it was her normal. Violence was so much part of her life that she had not recognised the severity of the situation:

> '… I remember being young and always kind of being like "ah yeah", so say the worst thing ever had happened, I'd be like "it's kind of bad but it's alright". I remember always being like that. … I was very emotionally vulnerable at the time and wasn't aware of how bad things were. I was brought up with it so I didn't know that was as bad as it could get, I was always expecting something else to happen so I was just like "aye this has happened, worst thing ever but I'm still

here, it's alright". And I think that kind of shows you how people might not know what level, how bad something is that's happening.' (IV8)

It was only through engagement with others or as they got older that those who experienced violence in the home began to recognise it. Similar to the young woman above, others spoke of becoming 'numb' to the pain and familiarity of violence:

'I would have a conversation and maybe mention my situation and people are like "oh my god", and I'm like "I didn't realise that was that bad" and it just shows you that you get numb to it and it's just very scary to realise that.' (IV10)

Indeed, a number of the young women who decided to share their experiences through interviews explained that they were doing so because they wanted other young women to recognise what violence is – 'I just think people need to have a better understanding of what it actually is.' (IV6)

Young women who witnessed violence between parents or who primarily experienced emotional abuse were in some respects reticent to define this as domestic violence, comparing it to direct experiences of physical violence. Yet they chose to talk about these experiences when discussing their personal experiences of violence. In the following extract, one young woman still grapples with defining her home life as abusive despite detailing a persistent environment of male aggression when growing up:

'I feel like I've experienced it [violence] in like different ways. So like maybe in the home. So … like I wouldn't necessarily say my parents are abusive but there's stuff that sticks out to me, I've never been hit and they're not abusive but a kind of form of violence in the home would be words. Let me see. Like stuff my mum would say. Like my dad used to have a really bad temper and it would be like this almost really hot flash of like shouting or something like that, and it would…yeah, so my dad and my brothers both had the same hot temper where they just shout or yell and it's really scary. Especially when I was smaller. When I was smaller I could never really do anything back. … I just remember sitting in the hall and just crying because I hadn't necessarily been hurt but I was like, I felt like I'd been battered or something.' (IV7)

"When I was smaller I could never really do anything back. … I just remember sitting in the hall and just crying because I hadn't necessarily been hurt but I was like, I felt like I'd been battered or something."

This young woman's account is presented in more detail in Amy's story (see Section 8.5).

4.4.2 Diminishing and responsibilising

Adding to the sense of normalcy, some young women spoke of how violence in the home would be downplayed, explained away or justified by parents. In a number of instances girls/ young women were led to believe that what they experienced was simply part of family life – 'the old tradition of hitting your weans' (IV2) - or that they were too sensitive and that their own parents and grandparents had experienced worse:

'They come from an older generation where it's probably let off with a lot more … For them it was suck it up, before them god knows what it was.' (IV8)

The notion that this generation of young people are introspective, overly-sensitive and not resilient was employed in one young woman's family when she would raise concerns about her mental health and well-being as a consequence of family violence:

> 'I think I didn't know and I did know [what was happening at home]. We were always told to be hush-hush about it kind of thing, like don't tell your friends kind of thing. I just think it's a generational thing because it's called Gen-Z now but all the Gen-X and Millennials and stuff always shame us for wanting to get help and stuff ….' (IV10)

Another was told that the hostile environment in her home, the aggression expressed by her father and brothers was in response to her behaviour:

> '… I always got called like hot tempered or provocative, like I provoked the arguments or I was argumentative, provocative, hot tempered like I'd get called those things so I almost felt like it was my fault, so I don't think I could have [reported/disclosed it].' (IV7)

What these methods and messages do is normalise and silence violence. Framed in this way, the young woman is the problem - taking things too seriously, not recognising certain behaviours as just part of family life.

4.4.3 Keeping the family secret

As violence began to be sensed or recognised, young women were tasked with keeping the family secret – an additional burden to the impacts already experienced. Some were explicitly told 'to be hush hush' (IV10), others sensed that they could/ should not talk about their experiences as what was happening in the family was not talked about outside the family. When bruises were noticed, some knew from a young age to cover up or to make excuses. Additionally, when

> "We were always told to be hush-hush about it kind of thing, like don't tell your friends kind of thing."

the situation was confronted or exposed, there was denial within some families about what was happening. Hence making it even more difficult for girls/ young women to speak about it with others.

Two young women spoke in detail about keeping the family secret. One had witnessed violence between her parents for many years and was told repeatedly not to talk about it with anyone other than them:

> 'I was told to keep it to myself. I was told not to speak to anyone about it. I was told if I want to talk about it, I have to talk about it with either of them two and that's it. And my mum told me that. So I didn't really speak to anyone about it. … at the time I was told to keep my mouth shut, which I did.' (IV4)

Given that the situation was not generally talked about, she was told it did not involve her and was between her parents, and that things went back to normal the next day, this young woman never spoke about it until her father was later removed from the family home. Her feelings of powerlessness were palpable in her recollections:

> 'The next day, I would be, they would be fine, act as if nothing happened. Bring me down to the living room and tell me, "Last night, you don't speak to your sister about it. You don't speak to your granda about it. You leave it at that. If you want to talk about it you talk about it to us, that's it. You don't tell anybody in school.

> You tell no one." And that was that and after that it was just fine, and then the next few weeks it happened again. ...I always wanted to talk to my sister about it. Me and my sister have never been close but my sister, she would have sort of, because she was older, she could have done something about it. Because I was younger, I couldn't really say anything or do anything, for my sister would have took charge, but I just didn't say anything'. (IV4)

While this young woman no longer experienced violence in her family home, and had to some extent started to speak of her experiences, another young woman, now 19 years of age, continued to carry the family secret. She explained that as she had gotten older the nature of violence she experienced from her father had changed:

> '... as I've gotten older it's definitely more on the emotional side than on the physical side. It's not that it doesn't happen it's just not as often like the physical abuse kind of thing'. (IV10)

While this young woman had linked-in with youth services who provided a wide range of supports and opportunities, particularly enabling her to be out of the house, reading between the lines she had not and would not talk openly about or disclose as she was still living in the family home, as were her siblings. This young woman lived in hope that her mother would 'someday soon' leave, that 'maybe in the future' she would be able to talk openly about her experiences, and/or that the situation will change – be discovered, reported, just 'finally get sorted':

> 'It's very disheartening because there's been so many times in my life that I have kind of given up because like something would happen like a row or something and then you think "oh, this is finally it, something is going to happen here" but then no, it just goes back to normal ...' (IV10).

4.4.4 The impacts of violence in the home

Young women who spoke of their experiences of domestic violence sometimes struggled to identify the impacts while living through it or in its aftermath. Some spoke of physical marks and scars while others spoke of being numb to the pain. Indeed, two young women noted that it was only now, a number of years after they no longer live under the threat of violence, that they were processing their experiences. This demonstrates the delayed impacts of violence and the need for long-term supports as children develop. Generally, however, these young women shared their sense of fear, anxiety and/ or of constantly living on edge, frightened to speak and not knowing when the situation could turn violent:

> 'I did feel very trapped and not listened to, I couldn't speak up otherwise I would have been hit.' (IV2)

For the young woman whose home life was characterised by male aggression, she was 'always anticipating it getting worse and them hitting me' (IV7), she felt like she had become small, 'almost like I was cowering away' (IV7).

Some also struggled with reconciling their feelings of both fear and love towards an abusive parent/ family member as they tried to understand and rationalise their behaviour: 'I do have a problem of seeing the good in people if it's not there, so sometimes even though he doesn't deserve it I'm like what if he's just mentally ill ...' (IV10). Another young woman spoke of her feelings of loss when her father left/ was removed from the family home - the pain of being torn between his actions towards her mother and her own relationship with him as 'a Daddy's girl' (IV4). The pains of violence, therefore, went beyond violent events or episodes.

This is well illustrated in the account of the aforementioned young woman whereby the impacts

of violent events/incidents themselves, their wider consequences and the longer-term impacts were all discussed. In order to capture and comprehend the nature and abiding impact of violence in the home, extracts from this young woman's account are presented at length.

Recalling her feelings during violent episodes she reflected:

> 'Before the actual incident itself happened with actual physical violence in the home [when her father left/ was removed] it was a lot of mental violence between the two of them. Constant fighting, shouting at each other … so it was just me witnessing it all the time, constantly. It made me feel anxious, it made me feel overwhelmed …
> It probably started whenever I was about twelve. The first time I think I remember being in bed, I remember hearing shouting and next thing you know, my dad's foot was through the bedroom door, and I looked out and I was like, "what's going on?" I was just told to stay out of it, and I had to sit and watch them argue.... It was hard to watch and obviously because I was so young, I'm sitting crying and telling them to stop and because I'm so young they're just telling me to go to bed, don't worry about it, it's nothing to do with you and I was like, okay'. (IV4)

Yet the impacts went beyond these incidents and have been long-lasting:

> '… one of his side effects from the domestic violence was alcoholism. My dad struggled a lot with being an alcoholic which also tore the family apart. So it was hard on me as well. It would have played a lot on my mind. It would have made me anxious; it would have made me think I don't like being around drunk people … So I would say from their domestic violence, the actual split up with physical violence, from then my mental health, I have been diagnosed with anxiety and depression from both of them, and I would say that they play a big part.' (IV4)

Despite having been offered support from Women's Aid after her father left/ was removed from the house, she felt unable to accept this as she had internalised what she had always been told, that this was between her Mum and Dad and not about her:

> 'What didn't help me was the fact that I felt because it didn't personally happen to me, that I shouldn't be upset about it, so it was all in my head, so when people are asking me questions I was like, 'Well, I don't know,' because … it wasn't me that it happened to. And what they were saying, it was more like sort of what this is now, like how does that make you feel and what was the result, how's your mental health and because I was younger at the time I didn't really understand. I just knew my mum and dad were fighting, that's all I knew. Like I didn't know what domestic violence meant, so'. (IV4)

This young woman recognised more fully now the impacts on her well-being, but felt it was too late to seek support, and that she was not deserving of it after all this time.

Other young women who experienced family violence spoke of the long-term impacts, particularly on their relationships with others and on their mental health. One defined herself as 'mentally stunted' comparing what she could and could not do to others her age. She attributed this directly to her family life, and an environment in which she was put down, called names and felt insecure. This, she felt, had impacted her social skills, confidence and ability to be independent:

> '… like I wouldn't want to invite them [school friends] over unless it was a certain day of the week. And stuff like that. Again, just like my mental age or whatever you would call it is definitely way younger than it should be because

> I'm not a proper young adult, not a 20 year old. I think that's a bit scary, especially when I go into work and stuff.' (IV10)

The experiences shared by these young women provides an understanding of the ways in which violence within families becomes hidden – normalised, downplayed, dismissed or internalised as their fault or not their violence to speak of. These insights help us understand the very real barriers for children and young people to disclose and seek support. The tension between almost willing the situation to be discovered, while also trying to covering it up was in itself a burden.

While living with violence in the home, however, girls/ young women found their own ways to cope, to look after themselves or to escape, at least intermittently. Two young women found support in their siblings who lived through the same situations, and three spoke of finding ways to spend time outside the home. The young woman who lived at home where violence was still present had found support from youth programmes. Involvement in these meant she could receive support for her mental health, and be provided with opportunities for personal and social development and confidence building without having to disclose the basis of her 'problems'. Finally, in their advice to other young women, there was an understanding that they may have to find ways to look after themselves until things change:

> 'Just find your people and your friends and get out of the house as much as possible and just keep on fighting, I guess.' (IV10)

4.5 Sexual Violence

As outlined in Sections 4.1 and 4.2 girls/ young women experienced sexual harassment and abuse in various places, both online and offline. It is difficult, therefore, to separate out experiences as all are violent in nature and impact, and it is imperative not to create a hierarchy of harm. As one young woman noted any form of touch 'can feel really violent' (IV7). Recognising cross-over with previous sections and that some girls/ young women experienced multiple forms of sexual violence, this section draws primarily on data from young women who had personal experience of sexual violence in the form of sexual assault, rape, and child sexual abuse. This includes by partners, family members, and acquaintances. Some themes are similar to those identified in Section 4.4.

4.5.1 Knowing but not knowing

Two young women spoke of sexual violence within family or intimate partner relationships, noting that they had not fully understood or recognised the abuse they were experiencing. As noted above, one of these young women had been sexually abused by her brother between the ages of six and eleven: 'I thought it was weird but I didn't know exactly. I thought it was normal' (IV6). While not fully understanding experiences could prevent or delay disclosing, for this young woman, her concern like others who experienced family violence (see Section 4.4) was the potential impact on the family and family relationship – 'I didn't want to get my brother into trouble' (IV6). When her younger sister reported the abuse to the police, this young woman continued to carry the family secret, along with the additional burden of her mother's denial and now feeling that she had let her sister down.

Another young woman had been abused in her first relationship when she was 14 years of age. Excited to be in a romantic relationship because this was expected at her age and among her peer group, she had nothing to compare her experiences against and had not recognised the signs of what she now identified as coercive control and sexual assault. She explained:

> 'I didn't know. Because obviously you know of it, you know about it, but I don't think you realise it's

> happening until it's over. So, I think I wasn't really knowledgeable on it.' (IV4)

Speaking of two occasions when she was forced to perform oral sex she explained that because her other friends were sexually active, and her boyfriend had more sexual experience than her, she thought that despite feeling uncomfortable 'this is normal, people do this … this happens' (IV4). This young woman's account is presented in more detail through Olivia's story (see Section 8.4).

4.5.2 Blame

Four young women (now aged between 23-25 years) within one focus group shared personal experiences of sexual violence. This included attempted rape by a friend's father when aged 13; sexual assault when asleep; rape when 16 and homeless; severe sexual harassment in the workplace. Their discussions around these experiences focused heavily on the blame put on them or that they were made to feel by others, and on the futility of reporting. While some had reported to the police, others had not done so because they had not been believed by those close to them, they were embarrassed or as one young woman explained, because 'I just felt disgusting' (FG15).

One young woman who awoke to being sexually assaulted in a hotel room felt that the nature of the questions asked by the police, concerning what she had been wearing, were accusatory. Her experience with the police had been so negative that she vowed 'if it [sexual assault] happened again I'd know not to go to the cops, I'd deal with it myself.' Another recounted that her brother had explicitly blamed her when she told him that she had been sexually harassed, saying it was her fault because of her 'too short skirts' (FG15). Some of the frustrations among the group are illustrated in the following exchange:

> **YW1**: What were you wearing? … You should have been more careful. Like who are you talking to? Fuck.
> **YW4**: You should be allowed to go out and have a drink and enjoy yourself.
> **YW2**: Not having to watch your back for fuckin' fellas touching you … (FG15)

Another young woman spoke of her experiences of sexual assault. While understanding that she was not to blame, her account nonetheless demonstrates the power of the types of rape myths identified by the young women above and repeated across focus groups and interviews. This young woman had gone to a house party with friends and while unable to remember the detail of what had happened, knew that she had not been able to consent to any sexual activity. Her lack of memory of the evening, and the event, was repeated through her account:

> 'I woke up the next morning and I didn't remember anything and had to kind of fill in the blanks. … I woke up the next morning and had no memory. Woke up and I was fully dressed but I didn't have my pants on and then put two and two together and my friends told me that basically I got really drunk and ended up in his bedroom. I've no memory of it whatsoever. … how it ended, was one of my best friends was there, she wasn't drinking and she basically went in the room and interrupted it and [she] was like [I am] in no state and took me home.' (IV9)

This young woman had an understanding of the perceived risks of sexual violence, and assumptions surrounding what makes women vulnerable to it. While recognising on the one hand that these are myths, she nonetheless pointed to what she had done 'right'. While stating that she had 'got really drunk' she explained that she thought she was doing so in a 'safe environment' as 'everyone at the party I've known since I was thirteen'. She had also 'never, ever expressed romantic interests' towards the person who had

assaulted her. Yet her feelings of guilt, and the unspoken but implied blame by some of friends who wanted her to 'just get over it' so that the friendship group could return to how they previously were, weighed heavy. In explaining the various reasons why she had not reported her experience to the police, this young woman spoke of the impact it would have on her parents, and thus on herself:

> 'I tell my parents everything, like absolutely everything. … But just this one thing, I just couldn't because I'd hate to like, they've done such a good job raising me, like protecting me from anything like that before and they've always taught me to be safe and stuff. … I just feel like, as I'm letting them down or something because I let myself get in that scenario, you know what I mean?' (IV9)

While starting her account by comparing her experience to others, suggesting that it was not as bad, the lasting impact was clear in her closing statement:

> '… it makes me really annoyed because like, because I was so drunk. I know you can't ever be at fault but like, I don't know, like, I wish there was something I could have done.' (IV9)

4.5.3 The impacts of sexual violence

A range of impacts were discussed, generally, these were specific to the individual. For the young woman who could not remember what had happened to her, for instance, the ongoing uncertainty was always there. She also spoke of the impacts on her friendship group whereby not only was she, but also some of her friends were no longer invited to parties. Again, the sense of guilt was palpable: 'I feel guilty because like I'm now, by me not going to those parties, my friends feel weird going to their parties and it's made this weird dynamic …' (IV9)

Two young women had told their subsequent or current partners about their experiences. One, who was in an abusive relationship, was made to feel 'disgusting'. The other spoke of her boyfriend's hurt and self-blame as they were broken up at the time – this added another dimension to the young woman's pain (IV9). Another said she would not tell her current partner about being raped, despite having a very good relationship, in case it impacted on his view of her:

> '… I'm scared to tell him. And I don't know why, I'm not afraid of him, in no way whatsoever am I afraid of him. He's all about consent, he's lovely in that way, like he knows what I'm like if I don't want touched, he'll not touch me. But I still wouldn't tell him. I feel like it would be different. I feel like he'd be, "That's disgusting. Like, you're dirty, you're gross"." (IV4)

Another spoke of the impact on her relationships, the time it took her to build trust and her reticence to 'do anything sexual' (IV6).

Perhaps the most consistent theme was the impact on the young women's mental health. Feelings of guilt – for what had happened, for reporting, for not reporting; anger – at the lack of response from family, friends, the police; sadness – at the pain felt, the trust broken, the impacts on others. Speaking of her mental health, the young woman who was abused by her brother explained that after coping initially through drug use, she then 'just felt really sad all the time' (IV6).

For some, years after their experience, they were beginning to talk about it as a means of processing and acknowledging the pain. Taking part in the research was identified by one young woman as part of her journey in acknowledging what had happened to her. Such testimonies illuminate another reason why young women may not immediately report sexual violence – because they have not/ cannot acknowledge it.

5. Violence in the local context: N. Ireland culture and conflict

5.1 Overview

In focus groups girls/ young women were asked to consider if there may be anything specific to N. Ireland, particularly in relation to the history of conflict, that impacts on violence against girls and women today. Three inter-related themes emerged and are discussed in detail below. Apart from sectarian violence, some felt the experiences of girls and women in N. Ireland, and the reasons for this, were no different to elsewhere. As articulated by one young woman:

> ' ... it's [VAWG] happening more and more everywhere, I don't think it's just specifically because we've had the Troubles etc. that it's happening because of that, it was happening before, current, during and after so it's nothing new, as such.' (FG6)

Upon further discussion, however, this young woman, like others, went on to confirm experiences of sectarianism and the existence of paramilitary-style groups in her community. As one young woman explained of the particularities of violence in N. Ireland – 'there's a lot more targeted violence' (FG10). These discussions demonstrate the normalisation of some forms of violence and the value of a safe space for girls/ young women to explore the meaning and implications of 'everyday violence' in the local context.

5.2 Sectarianism

Girls/ young women across almost every group identified sectarianism as a form of violence specific to N. Ireland. While some suggested this was not as pervasive as it was in the past, others provided personal accounts of sectarian abuse and some noted concern from parents about their safety on this basis. This added to the other ways in which parents and young women themselves regulated their movements, compounding restrictions on young women's use of space.

Two particularly salient points emerge from discussions of sectarianism. Firstly, by default, sectarianism is often associated with young men, with the experiences of girls/ young women either not being explicitly sought, or not prioritised in analysis. It is clear from this research, however, that young women have similar *and* different experiences to young men. Secondly, through the accounts of some it is evident how gender and ethno-national identity combine in specific ways in experiencing violence. Two young women in one group, for example, spoke of an incident in which they had received sectarian abuse from younger boys – 'Getting screamed at by boys and they were much younger than us' (FG11). Gender is a crucial factor here as younger boys would be unlikely to insult older boys on the basis of perceived religion.

Two other young women's experiences of sectarianism surface how threats of sexual violence can be used in any disagreement. These demonstrate the use of male power through the threat of sexual violence to silence and subvert girls and women:

> 'I was in an argument with a boy before and he was a Protestant and it was mostly a mixed group chat, like the Protestants were arguing with the Catholics and there was this Protestant and every time he got offended he was like "I'll find yous and rape yous all"' (FG2)

> 'I remember once it was on social media, I was just a child and I shouldn't have commented on it but I didn't say anything bad either, it was something about … and I tagged my friend and said "this is disgusting". And the next thing you know we were all added into his group chat by all these like Protestant men and they said to me – you deserve to be locked up and raped, you fenian cunt.' (FG12)

Young women across twelve focus groups were aware of the existence of so-called paramilitaries in their communities.

5.3 Paramilitary Violence

While only two groups raised the issue of paramilitary violence in response a question on the specificities of violence in N. Ireland, there was knowledge of the existence of paramilitary-style groups in the towns or communities in all but three groups. It is likely, therefore, that the existence of these groups is understood but not considered noteworthy until asked specifically. It is also possible that many have not considered the impacts of paramilitaries on girls and women, or associate violence against women and girls as something distinct. Some of these issues, alongside reflections on and accounts of paramilitary-style violence, are discussed below.

5.3.1 Experiencing community violence

Young women across twelve focus groups were aware of the existence of so-called paramilitaries in their communities – some more so than others. In some areas they were pervasive - 'There's paramilitaries everywhere' (FG2) - or there was a sense they were much more visible than previously:

> '… the paramilitaries are getting ten times worse here … they're stopping you every day and it's just casually out on the street as well, they're not being secret about it anymore …' (FG12)

That armed/ criminal groups reside in, police and perpetrate violence within the communities in which young women live, and that they have knowledge and varying experiences of this, is evidence of the normalcy of violence in N. Ireland. Indeed, it was clear from conversations with young women that paramilitary presence had been normalised, it was for the most part an unremarkable part of the lives of some, always present but not always visible/ remarked upon:

> 'I don't think you really notice it sometimes because it's just like, not normal, but it's made normal now until someone brings it up and they're like "aye such and such, did you hear about him and the paramilitaries doing this" and you're like "oh my goodness, what the hell?"' (FG8)

There was also a sense that only those who come to the attention of these groups are affected by their presence. And while nothing can be done

about their existence, life simply has to continue. The following exchange, quoted at length, illustrates how violence, which may be considered shocking in other contexts, is here considered typical:

> **I:** … what's it like for young women living in a community where you know there's paramilitaries.
> **YW1:** Scary.
> **YW2:** I'm not so scared than I am, I don't feel scared than I do feel more -
> **YW3:** Weirded out.
> **YW2:** It's not even that. I don't know how to explain it, I don't feel scared, I just feel more, like oh yeah, I just accept it more. I'm more accepting towards it. It's not that I support paramilitaries but I'm more accepting towards it because -
> **YW1:** What are we gonna do?
> **YW2:** What am I gonna do? Go up to someone in a paramilitary and be like "oh yeah, you should leave!" … no matter where I go there's always some sort of talk about paramilitaries …
> ….
> **YW3:** I think I'm more accepting towards it because I feel like if I heard, and I'm not gonna say as if I've ever had a bomb scare or anything like that, but I think if someone told me there was a bomb scare near me I just think I'd be like "oh well".
> **YW2:** There was a bomb in *** [area] a few days ago.
> **YW1:** I had a bomb scare once down in **** [second area] like outside my granny's cul-de-sac and then the people that live in the cul-de-sac out their back, there was a bomb scare in their back and everything was cordoned off and I was just like "ah well, it's just a bomb scare". (FG2)

There were tensions and contradictions in the narratives of these young women, whereby the first initially describes living in a community with a paramilitary presence as 'scary' but moves on to neutralise it – 'what are you gonna do?', 'it's just a bomb scare'. Likewise, the third young woman presents herself as almost immune to hearing about violence, but later went on to say that she sometimes 'gets worried' for young people who come to the attention of paramilitaries. So it may not be that there is no impact as such, but that that neutralising is a means of getting by in communities in which there is a persistent threat of violence.

Some struggled to consider the impact of living in communities in the shadow of paramilitaries, perhaps because they had not considered it before, or because they had felt it was typically something that impacted boys and men. That for some, they only hear about it 'when something happens', when 'it's needed', when 'someone has done something in the community and then the paramilitaries do what they do … Like they find out about it and they go sort it' (FG6), kept it at a distance, and the focus remained on the direct victim (usually a young man). But for others, an understanding that 'the paramilitaries know everything about everyone's family' (FG5) and that they cannot talk freely as 'you wouldn't know who you were with' (FG10) created a sense of suspicion, unease or fear.

Others, however, noted how girls/ young women in their communities were directly intimidated by paramilitaries, and/or could be drawn into rioting. In discussing how young men in their community were impacted by paramilitaries, for example, attention in two groups turned to rioting, whereby there was the gradual realisation that young women were affected because '… girls go to riots too, don't they?' (FG14). Others spoke of gendered risks that young women might experience as a consequence of boyfriends involvement with gangs, and how a young woman may not only experience the secondary effects of violence against her partner, but potentially become a victim herself. As detailed in Section 5.3.2 one young woman spoke personally of this type of experience.

Finally, and similar to some of the discussions below, some young women talked of seeing and feeling the impacts of violence on friends and

neighbours in their community. The constant targeting of one of her friends' families, seeing and feeling her distress as she was in constant fear that her father would be arrested or killed, had left a lasting impression on one young woman.

Where girls/ young women identified the impacts of paramilitary violence most frequently was through families and intimate relationships.

5.3.2 Experiencing violence in families and relationships

Where girls/ young women identified the impacts of paramilitary violence most frequently was through families and intimate relationships. Reflecting on the experiences of their female friends growing up, two young women felt that girls who experience paramilitary violence are 'girls who are born into it', otherwise 'girls don't really get pulled into it unless it's like your boyfriend or something.' (FG11). One group talked in detail about the various ways in which girls/ young women could witness paramilitary-related violence. Their articulation of 'watching violence' as a form of violence is insightful, and clearly based on personal experience. In the words of one young woman:

> 'We watch it, so we're watching the violence that happens so we're also part of the violence that goes on.' (FG5)

In the following exchange, the young women illustrate the layering of violence – in the actions of paramilitaries who are part of their communities, but sometimes also their families, and in the policing of paramilitaries. The degree and toll of witnessing is palpable, yet as young people and those perceived as not directly experiencing violence, they feel this is not recognised or responded to:

> **YW1:** They [young women] could watch the paramilitaries abusing their family. Or if you're related to people that are in paramilitaries you watch violence that they do, so you'd be afraid of the violence that your family -
> ...
> **YW4:** They're meant to be there to help people but they do it in front of like kids, so if you were just to sit in your own street the paramilitaries could come at any time and they harm your family or you could watch the people that are in your family that are in paramilitaries go and do stuff to other people. .... See if you're related to people that are in paramilitaries that gets a name for yourself, "oh your daddy does this, your uncle does this, your uncle or daddy is a tout" – it's just stuff like that.
> **I:** We often hear about paramilitaries and how it impacts boys and young men in communities, how does it impact girls?
> **YW4:** Because we also get impacted by it too, it doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl, you can still get harmed by them.
> **YW2:** We watch it, so we're watching the violence that happens so we're also part of the violence that goes on.
> ....
> **YW4:** Like the *** [name of paramilitary-style group] and all. If something was to happen, you watch the violence, the police come to your house and ask you about the violence and then it just happens over and over again and you're like, "I'm watching violence" but hen it just be's the older people that gets help for it so it doesn't be the younger ones because apparently it doesn't affect them with the violence. (FG5)

Another young woman recounted that as a child her family had 'to move from house to house' because of rumours that her father was an informant or linked to a Loyalist paramilitary group. While her father was the target, the impact on the family as a whole was apparent: 'he was attacked and we were burnt out of our house' (FG14). Another reported that she too was exiled, in this instance because of the behaviour of her ex-partner. While not disclosing the details of the event, she did talk about the disruption to her life. Indeed, we see from her experience the ripple effect on families and potentially on the next generation of children. She explained:

> 'Aye, they [paramilitaries] put me out of my house in *** [area], it was by my uncle but he had to do it because his commander said, know what I mean. And I had a child and then I was heavily pregnant with my second one, I done that house up immaculate, everything was painted, papered, everything and then see when I moved into that [new] house I just had no heart in it doing it up and all.' (FG13)

A further young woman in this group disclosed her experiences of intimate partner violence. Her account reveals the particular difficulties of disclosing and seeking support when young women's partners are connected with paramilitary-style groups. Indeed, young women in other focus groups noted that because of paramilitaries there is 'a lot of protection' (FG6) for those involved in violence, leading to violence against women being covered up and not reported. This young woman's account demonstrates how coercive control by paramilitaries was used when the control of a partner in the home was threatened. Again, the wider consequences for all in the family are evident:

> '... cos my oldest's [child's] daddy is like all that [abusive], because I was going to the police and then Social Services got involved because I went to the police and everything else, because he found that out and it was ruining his new relationship, I lived in *** [town] and his UDA, it his cousin or uncle or something and they were keeping a watch on me and they literally had a leaflet posted in through my door of what time I left the house at, when I went out in the car, who was in the car, how many people was in the car and then about a week after there was a bullet and then the police came knocking at my door with a death threat and I had to get told to leave and then when I left, just the House Executive put me in a B&B in the middle of nowhere, do you know *** [town quite far away]? Literally in a B&B there with a new born baby, my oldest, I have three but this is whenever he was a baby, and he [partner at the time] was able to live his life happily.' (FG13)

5.4 A Continuum of Violence

The culture of secrecy alluded to above in reporting violence experienced at the hands of so-called paramilitary groups, extended to other forms of violence. It permeated families whereby speaking of violence in the home was still felt to be taboo in N. Ireland, and reporting violence to the police was often frowned upon (see Section 6). Some also spoke of historical abuse in institutions such as the church. Combined, this was evidence to some, that local structures and institutions facilitated a culture of violence.

Related to this, some also spoke of the wider culture of N. Ireland impacting on and sustaining sexism and violence towards women and girls. Linked to notions of a continuum of violence this was seen in the position and treatment of women in society - in the home and in politics, in laws and policies, and in public space (See Amy's story, Section 8.5). As articulated by one young woman:

> '... I think we're really unique to the rest of the world just in general because I think we even still do have really traditional values in the home

> … Even surrounding contraception and stuff, contraception didn't come here until the 70s and 80s and even now with abortion rights, we're still so in the past. …' (FG12)

Some young women specifically linked the position of women in society, sexist attitudes and behaviours to the Conflict, whereby it was men who 'had the power':

> **I:** So you think part of that is specific to Northern Ireland [sexism and homophobia]?
> **YW1:** Yeah.
> **I:** What makes you think that?
> **YW2:** It's worse here.
> **YW1:** Especially the men putting the girls down because they just think they had the power then and it still is continuing to happen now.
> **I:** So when you say then, are you talking about, like during the Troubles?
> **YW1:** Yeah, during the Troubles it was always the men fighting the battles and they're always saying "go back to the kitchen" or whenever you're older you're gonna be working in the kitchen, you're gonna be cleaning (FG9)

A group of older young women made similar points but felt that the history of violence, pain and trauma had (perhaps inadvertently) led to violence being excused or explained away. Within families and communities in the past, violence was simply dealt with, and the expectation was that children and young people today should also be able to deal with it. That they may be experiencing the transgenerational outworkings of conflict-related harm, and the residual effects of the Conflict could become a narrative to explain, rather than respond to, violence:

> … I think it's an excuse too in terms of "ah they went through so much so you just have to put up with it". We diminish what violence actually means and the impact of it. Like in youth work we talk about ACE; Adverse Childhood Experiences and transgenerational trauma, and that's put across as "oh that happened them so it's okay this happened you". It's not'. (FG12)

Indeed, some felt that in all these ways, violence had become normalised – part of the fabric of families, communities and the society more generally. This was most clearly exemplified in the ways in which violent language had entered everyday speech. Yet not only does violent speech go unchallenged, as was the case with sexist speech, but this is also the case with some violent behaviours:

> **YW5:** It is really different [in N. Ireland]. And even just violence in general. We make a joke out of it, like how many times -
> **YW4:** Knee-capped and all.
> **YW5:** Literally.
> **YW4:** "You're getting knee-capped"
> **YW5:** Do you know what I mean? You're saying something as a joke, we have such a warped view on what violence is. Whenever other people in the world, like whenever the Americans see it they're like – "oh my god!" But here it's like it's okay. Whenever I go to England and am working with my friends over in England and we talk about stuff that happened when I was a kid they're like "are you genuinely okay?" (FG12)

Violence has, according to some, become an everyday narrative in N. Ireland and requires disrupting. As outlined in Section 7, this requires challenging informal and formal learning, but also legal, policy and institutional change.

6. Identifying barriers to reporting violence

6.1 Overview

Survey respondents were asked what might stop women or girls from coming forward to report if they have experienced violent behaviour. Several possible barriers to help-seeking behaviour were given with an additional open response option where girls/ young women could note additional barriers. Almost all respondents who used the open response option stated that 'all' of the mentioned barriers could be a reason why victims may not come forward to report violence, if they experience it. Rank-ordered, with the most frequently mentioned barrier ranked first, the reasons were:

1. Worried they would not be believed
2. Concerned it might make the situation worse
3. Not feeling that it is serious enough to report
4. Not sure it would make any difference
5. Unsure who to speak to
6. Worried they have done something wrong

Slightly different to the survey question, in focus groups participants were asked to reflect on reasons why it may be difficult for a girl their age to disclose or report violence. The aim was to capture both age and gender related barriers to reporting. While asked for perceptions, given that the survey reveals that almost three-quarters (73%) of young women who participated, reported having experienced at least one form of violence, it is likely that their views often reflected their own experiences.

The issues that emerged in focus group discussions and individual interviews were not dissimilar to those identified in the survey responses, girls/ young women provided more detail on the meaning and reality of these, and identified additional barriers. Many also drew on personal experiences of violence that they had not reported in explaining why this was the case. Others who had reported/ disclosed violence reflected on their experiences of this.

Discussing the broad reasons why girls/ young women their age may not report experiences of violence or seek support, a number of consistent themes emerged. While discussed here in isolation, much like in the survey, participants identified the combination of factors that could impact young women's ability and willingness to report violence and seek support. The particular influence of age was noteworthy in that it could be seen to intensify some of the fears traditionally associated with disclosing and reporting violence. Further, while consistent barriers were identified to reporting all forms of violence for girls and young women, participants also discussed the specific barriers to reporting online and everyday violence, and sexual violence.

A number of the issues identified with regards to reporting domestic and sexual violence were discussed in Section 4, and are illustrated through further examples is this Section. It is also instructive that a number of the messages that young women

learn about violence, personal responsibility and blame (see Section 3), emerge here in their reflections on barriers to disclosing/ reporting sexual violence.

6.2 Reporting Everyday Violence: Trivial, Normal and Ineffectual

For those experiences of violence talked about openly within the focus group setting – street based and online harassment and abuse – young women explained why they had not reported these. As was evident from their accounts, they often did not define these experiences as 'serious enough' to report to the police or even to speak of, or they felt others would not view them as such. In particular, young women felt it was futile to report to the police as the perpetrators were usually anonymous and the behaviour was so routine as to be normal – 'You never think to report cat-calling, it's just so normalised' (FG11). Girls/ young women across a number of groups also noted that they would be viewed as troublesome and potentially attention seeking for calling it out:

> **YW5:** I dunno, I feel like if someone said 'this happened to me, someone drove past me in the street and shouted something out to me' people would just say, 'wise up, it always happens anyway, there's nothing you can do'.
> **YW2:** Yeah, I feel like it's normalised in a sense, cat-calling, when stuff like that happens it's not seen as much of an issue. (FG8)

Likewise, reporting unsolicited friend requests, request for images, and receipt of images was also deemed futile. The regularity with which these were received meant they had not only been normalised but young women had learned their own methods to deal with them. While perhaps shocked at the beginning, familiarity and learning from others had taught them how to deal with these - block, delete, ignore. As discussed further below, reporting online harms could escalate the situation, and for young women also acted as a barrier to reporting (see Section 6.4).

"I feel like it's normalised in a sense, cat-calling, when stuff like that happens it's not seen as much of an issue."

A minority spoke of having told parents or youth workers about online or street based harassment/ abuse, with the advice generally being given to ignore it, avoid certain places or to put security functions on their social media accounts. In other words, to find ways of dealing with it and/ or protecting themselves (see also Section 7.2.1).

> 'Well my mum was there when I got the one [message offering to pay her to send images of herself] yesterday and I was like "look at this". And she was like "are you actually for real?" And I goes "yeah, I get these all the time". And she was like "that's disgusting". And then I blocked it'. (FG5)

The anonymity and fleetingness of such experiences, both online and offline, also led young women to feel there was nothing to report and that nothing could be done even if they did:

> 'If someone shouts something to you, you can't really do anything about it because you don't know them, if it was some random person in the street you don't know them … nothing could be done about it because you don't actually know who it was so you wouldn't want to tell someone in case … because you don't know, because people might think you were bringing it up for attention.' (FG1)

> '...[online] it's usually people from way far, far away ... Yeah, it's not as if they're really gonna come over here and look for us.' (FG9)

Those instances of online harassment or abuse that had been reported tended to relate to the sharing of their own images and grooming, whereby this was discovered by an adult or the young person disclosed (see Sarah's story, Section 8.2). Responses to disclosure/ reporting were mixed. One young woman spoke of how frightening her interaction with the police had been when it was reported that she had shared images of herself with another young person. This young woman had reported subsequent harassment from the same young person but felt little had been done:

> 'So I started to block him and then obviously the fake accounts came and then I realised who it was so I took it to the police and because there was already a different investigation going on by me and him he was given an order where he was not allowed social media at all because of it but yet he's still on it and the police don't seem to give a shit.' (FG13)

Some also reported that boys in their schools who had shared images of girls with other male students simply 'got a slap on the hand' (FG11). Reporting could, therefore, bring more attention to themselves and involving the police was perceived as pointless as they would never be able to locate the person responsible. Indeed, on a number of occasions, young women spoke of the unrealistic messages received regarding online safety – to tell a parent or teacher, take themselves off social media or to simply report to the police. This is illustrated in the following exchange whereby the young women note the lack of focus on the harasser:

> **YW2:** You feel helpless against it, I think. You wouldn't know what to do because if you're just getting sent photos online it's not like, you can go to someone and talk to them about how you're uncomfortable, but it's not like the police, "yeah someone sent me this online". "Do you know who it was?" "No". "We can't help you then".
> **YW3:** No, and very often they'll say well ... they can help you and then they'll come back and they'll be like "nah, no honestly, I just think you should delete all men off your Snapchat, I think you should take a break from social media, I think you should take time for yourself". Everybody just acts like it's your fault because you have social media. But why aren't the men who are sending these photos, these unwanted disgusting photos, why can they not get some sort of punishment for that? (FG2)

6.3 Delays in Recognising, Processing and Speaking of Violence

A consistent theme throughout the research was that because of their age, girls/ young women may not recognise violence. It is unsurprising, therefore, that this was identified as a major barrier to reporting and help seeking. As demonstrated clearly in Section 4, while recognising that things may not be 'right' or feeling 'uncomfortable' this did not always equate to fully understanding their experiences. And indeed, when they did come to understand them more fully, there were various additional barriers to reporting (see Sections 4.4 and 4.5).

Not understanding violence could also lead young women to feel they were to blame, or to accept the blame others had placed on them for their behaviour (see Section 4). One young woman, for instance, had not recognised that she was in an emotionally abusive relationship, being constantly made fearful about the well-being of her partner. She had not disclosed her experiences because it had taken her time to recognise them but also because she was concerned she would be judged for how she had treated her partner. The level of manipulation and the impact of it was evident in her account:

YW: [she] would send me paragraphs every night when I went to sleep and she'd just be like – thank you, we're perfect. And I'm sorry, I have to do this for my mental health, like I'm sorry I have to leave you and then she would leave me on delivered for days at a time and convince me that she was dead to the point where I had to go up to her house for a few times … She would say to take care of her wee sister and to take care of her friends and she would just be like tell me that you love me and she was sorry for doing all this on me and sorry for dragging me through everything and then she would lie and say that she was drunk or something and then just completely ignore me when I woke up to them. …she actually genuinely said that she was going to kill herself or that she would say that she already took a bunch of pills and she was just saying goodbye. Not once was it ever true.
I: And during that time did you feel that you were able to talk to anybody about that?
YW: No, because everybody would have just said that I wasn't supporting her. Because obviously during quarantine nobody could go and see if she was okay … Whenever she was going through that I felt like I was just a horrible person for not believing her right away and I was in the wrong (IV5)

The time that it can take to recognise experiences as violence can lead young women to believe that they cannot now define them as such and seek support. This was the case for a young woman who had been sexually assaulted at a party. While not remembering the incident, she noted earlier in her account that she knew something was not right but had pushed it out of her mind, but that it had kept resurfacing:

> 'And at the start I was the one that would be like, "oh like it's a bit of fun", … like I just kind of laughed it off but then only like in the weeks after it, I looked back at it and I just couldn't stop thinking about it because I didn't know what had happened… I didn't have like any memory of it whatsoever'. (IV8)

Asked if she had or would report her experience she spoke of a range of reasons why she would not do so, one of which had been her initial reaction and the time that had now passed:

> 'I just don't want to like cause that much drama, especially because like the day after I was just laughing it off and I was like, it doesn't matter, and it didn't actually impact me until down the line. It just feels almost like silly now … (IV8)

Delays in recognising, processing and speaking of violence were discussed widely amongst girls/ young women in focus groups. Some noted that reporting and seeking support could take time as girls/ young women, because of their age, may not understand their experiences. Also that actually speaking of what had happened to them, especially if of a sexual nature, could be difficult as they may not have the language or may feel embarrassed or ashamed. Reflecting on her experiences one young woman said: 'You don't know what it is. … I didn't know how to tell my daddy' (FG13).

Embarrassment in particular was linked with age, but feelings of shame were more widely associated with the messages girls and young women learn about personal responsibility and victim blaming. Speaking of her friends experience but using it to reflect on her own, one young woman who experienced violence in the home reflected:

> 'I think it takes a lot of guts to be able to tell someone what has happened you because you could be ashamed, embarrassed, it could be someone that you're close to. I know a friend of mine had a thing where it was her best friend's dad had done stuff on her, that was a very serious thing that she didn't talk about for at

> least a week to her mum but she knew that she had to because it was really serious stuff that happened. That's all I can say on that. … But it was her dad. It was her best friend's dad that did stuff on her but that was all resolved. But it took her a while to talk about it. I know for anybody my age or younger, especially younger it's a lot harder to just say what has happened you.' (IV8)

Added to this, young women also recognised that verbalising their experiences could be traumatising:

> 'Some people may feel like if they tell someone about it they're admitting it and it's becoming a reality and it's like them'uns realising this is really happening to me …' (FG8)

Some of these issues are returned to below in the discussions of reporting sexual violence.

6.4 The Snowball Effect: Ruining Others Lives

Many participants noted that young women could be concerned that if they disclosed, the matter would be escalated and the situation be 'made worse'. This included teachers or youth workers having to pass information on to parents, the police and/or social services. The 'worse' that they feared was parental disappointment, anger or punishment, and others finding out leading to them being talked about or getting a reputation ('being scared of the name they might get called' – FG5). The latter was a powerful dissuader for young women who spoke of teachers sharing information in staff rooms, rumours circulating among peers in schools and friendship groups.

Some also spoke of reporting online abuse and the personal and peer impact of having their 'phones removed as a consequence. This was raised in a number of discussions perhaps demonstrating the lack of adult understanding of the risks for young people of reporting online violence/ abuse. The issues raised are exemplified in the except below:

> **YW3:** Young kids report it, they get the school involved and report it then but once the school involves the police then they're like -
> **YW1:** That's the thing is people report it and then the police get involved and then anyone who is even like remotely involved will get their phone taken off them, so it's kind of like if you do this then everyone around you has to have their phone taken off them and everyone around you is gonna hate you cos when you're 14 your phone is your whole life.
> **I:** So those are really important messages, if you think everybody is being punished?
> **All:** Yeah.
> **YW1:** And then you're the one that becomes hated. (FG11)

In cases of violence in the home or in partnerships, it was suggested there could be concern that reporting would escalate the situation - make the violence worse or lead to the family being broken up. Indeed, many young women felt a major barrier to reporting family violence is a concern that it would inevitably lead to families being separated:

> 'It could be a family member and you could get took off your family if you say something like "he hit me, my mummy hit me" … And if you do say something like that, if you have other sisters or brothers you could all get separated as well.' (FG7)

These types of beliefs were commonplace. While they may demonstrate a lack of understanding of child protection processes, they nonetheless shine a light on the real fears of young people, and the potential consequences of engrained misinformation. Indeed, interviews with young women who experience(d) violence in the home attest to this being a factor in their reticence to

disclose. But as demonstrated in Rachel's story (see Section 8.3), despite her anticipated fears of family separation this was not the reality of her reporting experience. Sharing some of these reporting experiences, therefore, may be useful educative tools in disrupting common held beliefs.

As well as being physically stopped from phoning the police by a parent ('I've tried calling the police two or three times but the phone was taken away' – IV10), another young woman intimated that she could not disclose violence in the home due to fear that it would lead to the family being broken up. Waiting until she was 18 herself to seek support, she spoke of her disappointment in recognising that she still could not disclose because of the impact it could have on her family. She identified lack of confidentiality as a barrier to help seeking and support:

> '... the confidentiality thing, I wouldn't say I'm disappointed but I was a bit like naïve I guess, like not thinking about that factor. You always see on TV shows ... that you just talk about abuse but that's not the case in certain situations because of confidentiality. ... I just can't talk about everything in the way that I thought I'd be able to which is what I really was hoping for.' (IV10)

Not reporting violence in order to protect others or out of concern about the impact on the lives of those who had harmed them was also discussed by two young women who had experienced sexual violence. One, who had been sexually abused by her brother said that she had denied this when her sister had initially reported it 'because obviously it was my older brother and I didn't want him to get into trouble' (IV6). The pains of protecting others and hiding harms were revealed in Section 4.

Another young woman, who had been sexually assaulted at a party, spoke of a number of reasons why she would not report this. Among these was the impact it could have on her friendship group, and the pain it would cause for her parents (See Section 4.5). Added to this, she noted the potential impact on the young man's life. Her struggle with doing what was right for her and what she more broadly felt was right (reporting in order that it did not happen to others), is evident in the following extract:

> "I don't want to get him in trouble because I still know him, and like if I ever said anything, I know that people would know it was me."

> '... this sounds awful, I don't want to get him in trouble because I still know him, and like if I ever said anything, I know that people would know it was me.... like I don't really want to do anything that would ever get him involved or like, I don't know, it just doesn't appeal to me, it just feels like I'm kicking up a fuss or something and like, I just wouldn't want to do that, I don't think. Which is awful because I feel, like part of me is like, if it happened at that time, it would probably happen again. Like, that's, I don't know. I don't feel like there's anything I can do in terms of him. I feel like there's probably stuff I can do here [youth group], coming here each week and talking ... I feel like for me, I'm getting so much out of it but just, on the actual reporting side of it or getting him involved, I just would be so reluctant to do anything like that.' (IV9)

6.5 Not Being Believed

There was a strong sense that girls and young women may not be taken seriously or believed if they were to report violence. This feeling emerged

across groups of all ages, and was also pertinent in the accounts of those who took part in interviews. Focus groups with older young women (18-25 years) reflected that this was a particular issue for younger girls. Not knowing who they could trust to listen or take them seriously meant they 'held things in'. Some were clear that this was specific to being young:

> 'I think wee girls are better at holding things like that [experiences of violence] in, people our age, whereas if it happened to an older person they know that they can actually really trust an older person but you don't know at this stage if you can trust a person.' (FG5)

They also linked feeling that they may not be believed to age, particularly if there was no evidence and it was their word against that of an adult. Perceptions that there was a lack of trust in children's and young people's accounts were widespread and are reflected in the following discussion:

> **YW1**: If an adult isn't with you it makes it less believable to them.
> **YW3**: Or like if somebody wasn't with you they'll not believe you because they didn't see it with their own two eyes.
> ...
> **I**: So it's about not being believed. So do you think there's things about being young make it particularly difficult to report?
> **YW1**: Yeah.
> **YW3**: Yeah, cos they might think you're making up stories.
> **YW1**: For attention and that you're just being dramatic (FG13)

These views reflect the intersections of power inequalities in society whereby age and gender combine to cast doubt over the validity of their claims. As such they had knowledge that their views would be subject to more scrutiny, would be contested or discredited because of their age. The following discussion is illustrative:

> **YW3**: Verbal and mental [violence] because in a way, it could be argued there's no evidence. It's just like hearsay, they said this and they said that but there's nothing there to prove it so they may not feel like they'll be believed.
> **I**: Do you think girls are more likely to feel they won't be believed than adults?
> **YW2**: Yeah ...Maybe some women can feel because they are younger they don't have as much of a say and stuff.
> **YW3**: And like if adults get involved it's their word against mine. (FG8)

Among those who spoke of their personal experiences of violence, fear of not being believed was among the reasons they identified for not reporting or delaying reporting. When two young women had disclosed to the police, they noted that adult family members had tried to cover-up abuse, stating that the young women (and/or their siblings) were lying. Importantly, as demonstrated in Rachel's story (see Section 8.3) and in the accounts of other young women, while family members may not always have believed disclosures, they had been taken seriously and responded to by the police. Interestingly, however, one young woman also reflected on responses to children/ young people when they do report, and how being reminded how serious their allegations are can imply they are not believed, or can make them feel more fearful of the consequences:

> 'When you say about something like that [reporting violence] they're like they stand there and they put the emphasis on like how serious what you're saying is and stuff like that, but at the end of the day you've had to build up the confidence to come forward. Obviously it is really serious but at the same time, if someone's been a victim of that I don't really think that's a thing they need to hear ... , it's a

hard one because if someone's lying that can ruin someone's life … it's almost like there's more consequences even though you're a victim.' (FG11)

6.6 Lack of Trust in the Police

A number of factors combined to act as barriers to reporting violence to the police. As noted previously, some felt that reporting would or had been ineffectual given a lack of evidence or an identifiable perpetrator. Lack of evidence, and women being made to feel that their testimony alone was not enough, was a particularly dominant theme in discussing barriers to reporting sexual violence and is expanded upon below (Section 6.7). These factors did, however, coalescence in discussing barriers to reporting all forms of violence. As a result some felt that reporting to the police would not change the situation:

'a lot of people are discouraged from going to the police because they think it's not gonna do anything.' (FG3)

Added to this, there was a palpable distrust of the police in some discussions, clearly informed by historical relations in their communities and families. There was a belief among some, for example, that the police do not care about their community and could not be trusted. When this is the perception (and perhaps also the experience), combined with the concerns noted above, what then would be the point in reporting? The following exchange was illustrative of some discussions in predominantly Catholic/ Nationalist areas:

I: Do you think girls are likely to phone the police?
All: No.
YW2: Not really, no.
YW1: Cos you don't think the police would believe you, they don't really spend time in areas like ours.
YW3: Yeah, you never see the police. The only times you would see police in areas would be like in our area would be if there was a bomb at the side of someone's house or if there would be a stolen car but apart from that, they're never in our area.
YW2: They only actually do it to get people into jail, they don't really do it to protect people.
YW3: Yeah, they're never protecting people in our area.
…
YW1: They don't get any benefit from it [reporting to the police].
…
YW2: Yeah, I think in our community the police couldn't care less about us.
YW1: There's like the stigma [of the police in their area].
YW2: But sometimes the police be's, they have a bit of sectarianism in them. (FG9)

Discussions like this are a reminder of the specificity of the local (N. Ireland) context and of how age, gender and ethno-national identity can intersect to act as barriers to reporting and help-seeking. In the case of policing, therefore, there is a need to build confidence in young women that they will be listened to and taken seriously, but continued work is required to build confidence in policing more generally. Linked to this are broader criminal justice issues whereby young women feel the burden is on them to prove they were victimised. This was expressed most strongly in discussing sexual violence.

6.7 Barriers to Reporting Sexual Violence

In discussing barriers to reporting violence, conversations in most groups turned to the particular difficulties in reporting sexual violence. While similar barriers to those noted above were raised, these were felt to be intensified in experiences of rape and sexual assault. For girls/ young women in particular, it was noted that unlike

adult women, they might not recognise behaviours as sexual violence as they had little to compare them against or they had not been taught their meaning. They identified this as a potential issue in adult to child relationships and in intimate partner relationships:

> 'Girls might think it's normal because they're not old enough, they don't understand it, men grabbing them and all like if something was happening in their family or something they might be like "oh, I grew up with this", it might be normal.' (FG1)

> **YW3:** ... maybe sometimes for young women it could happen to them and then they don't realise it's actually sexual violence and they just think even if they're in a relationship and like "oh, this is what I'm meant to be doing" and then they get older and they realise what it actually is and they're like, "I should have told someone", maybe it's too late now to tell.
> **YW2:** And some people don't realise like with sexual violence if you said yes at the start it's okay to say no at any point and if they carry on that's not okay.
> **YW3:** Or if you say no and you keep saying no and because they keep asking you then you finally say yes and they think it's alright cos you ended up saying yes (FG8)

Some of these issues are illuminated in Olivia's story (see Section 8.4).

Across the majority of groups was the belief that a barrier to reporting was girls knowledge of low conviction rates. As outlined in Section 3, girls/ young women hear about this consistently in the media, and from those they know. The consequence, as noted by the young woman below, is that women stop reporting:

> 'I've seen so many cases and they're like "there wasn't enough evidence to prove that he sexually assaulted you", so people may give up after a while.' (FG7)

This combined with intrusive police investigations which could identify women, traumatise them and result in them feeling blamed (even if a man was convicted) were powerful discourses repeated consistently:

> 'Because like I think it's a minimum of six months whenever you're like raped and that's just rape, there's not a lot for like getting, taking explicit pictures or anything or getting them sent to you. Also everybody is going to be like "you ruined that man's future, he's gonna have this charge and are you sure you wanna do that to him?"' (FG2)

The responsibility and pressure placed on women was well understood and participants regularly spoke of the focus being on them to 'prove' they had been assaulted. This was most often spoken about in terms of there being 'enough evidence', with a sense that if a girl could not provide evidence beyond her testimony, that she would either not be believed or there would be no prosecution. Related to this young women also had knowledge that women who were sexually assaulted were often judged or blamed:

> 'People could turn around and be like "you could have just got him off you, it was probably because of what you were wearing, you were probably under the influence of drink" ...' (FG5)

The multiple reasons why girls may not report sexual violence are well illustrated in the following exchange. The use of the term 'obviously' by one young woman illustrates both how commonplace these beliefs are, and how inevitable the experiences are thought to be:

> **I:** So, what might make it difficult for a young woman to report violence or to tell somebody about it?

YW3: Obviously they feel like they can't be believed.
YW1: Yeah, that there's no evidence behind it.
I: And do you think that's more the case for particular types of violence?
YW2: Especially sexual violence, it's one against the other unless they report it straight away and a lot of women don't.
I: That's interesting that you say a lot don't report it straight away. I wonder why.
YW2: They can't process what just happened.
YW3: I think it takes a long time for people to actually realise what's actually happening to them or open up about what's happened.
I: And if women do report it, do you know anything about what their experiences might be?
YW3: I think obviously they report it and then the police try to blame it on them and say "oh, you were taking alcohol or you were so drunk that you couldn't actually stand up so it was your own fault", and it makes them not want to report it. You're being blamed and something has happened to you why would you want to go and report that or go through that traumatic process. (FG7)

> "... it's one against the other unless they report it straight away and a lot of women don't."

The frequency with which these issues were repeated across groups of girls/ young women demonstrates their understanding of the pervasiveness of rape myths and their knowledge of low conviction rates. As outlined in Section 3 young women learn fairly early, and recurrently, that there is a widely held belief that some women 'bring it on themselves', and that this plays a major role in low conviction rates. While this may raise concerns about the outcomes of rape trials and victims accounts being shared in the media, the underlying issue remains criminal justice processes and low conviction rates.

In the accounts of those who disclosed personal experiences of sexual violence many of the issues raised above were evident - not recognising or fully processing what had happened to them, not reporting straight away, not having the 'evidence' beyond their own testimony, feeling they were to blame or would be blamed by others. These factors had impacted their willingness to report/ disclose, along with embarrassment and fearing they would not be believed:

I: ... do you think there's particular types of violence that might be harder to report?
YW3: Sexual violence is always the hardest.
I: And why is that the case?
YW5: There's no proof unless you get checked and all.
...
I: Do you think girls are likely to go to the police.
All: No.
YW4: I didn't go to the police.
YW5: Me either.
I: So why would a girl not go to the police?
YW4: They're [seen as] making stories up.
YW5: They're embarrassed (FG13)

Among some of those who had reported, their experiences spoke to the trauma other girls had heard of, witnessed or feared. Some felt let down by the police and the courts:

'... from experience it's always their word against yours. Like even in a court of law it's like see if you don't directly go next day without having a shower or anything they ... they do nothing at all.' (FG12)

This extract from a focus group where a number of young women had experienced sexual abuse speaks to their own experiences of not being believed, needing to prove self and the physical invasiveness of reporting:

> **I:** A lot of the conversation that you were having there as well was around not being believed [by police].
> **YW1:** Yeah, like people being able to call you a liar.
> **YW2:** And us even having the balls to come forward.
> **YW1:** Yeah, to try to prove yourself, know what I mean.
> **YW2:** You just feel like not telling anyone rather than go through all this shit and be told that you're a liar. I would just suffer, so I would, myself. I wouldn't go and tell like. To go through a swab, take all your clothes, fucking swab everywhere. Fuck that. (FG15)

Another young woman who had eventually reported her experience of sexual abuse to the police felt that while she had been taken seriously, she had not been kept informed about the case. She reiterated on three occasions that since she gave her statement she had received no update: '… nothing has been… like I've no idea about it, I don't know what's happening'. Speaking of what would be useful she said: 'Like even a wee text to say it's still being processed or something' (IV6).

Some young women offered advice on how reporting sexual violence might be made easier. Being believed, not being expected to provide evidence, less intrusive and accusatory questioning, not having to tell their story multiple times, and empathy, were among their recommendations. Unless cultures of blame and criminal justice processes changed, however, it was felt that the barriers to reporting would remain as young women ultimately 'know they're [boys and men] gonna get off with it' (FG15).

7. Preventing violence against girls and women

7.1 Overview

In the last survey question respondents were asked to consider a number of possible interventions to tackle violence against women and girls, and to state how effective or ineffective they felt these would be. Table 3 summarises the responses to this question.

Table 3: Below are some ways in which we might tackle violence against women and girls. How effective do you think these would be? (%)

	Very effective	Quite effective	Not very effective	Not at all effective	Don't know
Education on violence against women and girls in schools and colleges	31	43	19	2	4
Educating people on safe and healthy relationships	47	38	12	1	2
Bystander training – that is training to help people identify and challenge violence when it occurs.	44	41	8	1	5
Support for parents bringing up children	49	37	9	2	3
Awareness raising campaigns in the media	40	41	13	2	5
Tougher measures against social media sites that do not prevent and remove abusive and threatening posts	52	32	8	2	6
More police/justice responses to violence against women and girls	69	20	5	1	5

The table shows that better police and justice responses was the measure that was regarded as very effective by the largest proportion of respondents (69% saying 'very effective'). This was followed by tougher measures against social media sites (52% saying 'very effective'). It is interesting to note that both of these measures would be punitive rather than preventative measures. Measures related to education interventions, training and awareness raising were seen as much less effective than punitive measures. Education on violence against women and girls in schools and colleges, for example was the intervention that the smallest proportion of respondents said would be very effective (31%). This was less than half the proportion of respondents who felt better police and justice responses would be very effective.

The qualitative data, presented below and in Section 3.3, suggests this may reflect the view that current education is ineffective and/or that school may not always be the best place for such learning to take place. The responses may also reflect knowledge that women and girls reporting violence often do not receive appropriate justice and support, as was evidenced by the Gillen report and discussed in this research in relation to sexual violence. The relatively large proportion of respondents who felt measures against social media sites would be very effective may reflect the fact that much online violence is perpetrated via social media sites, and that these have so far largely failed to address this and protect users from online abuse. This is supported by the qualitative data in which girls/ young women felt the only options were to 'block', 'delete' or 'ignore'.

We found no statistical differences at all by any socio-demographic background variable (age, disability, family-financial background, sexual attraction) with regard to young women's perception of effectiveness of possible measures. Even when the 4-point Likert scale was reduced to a binary scale (effective versus ineffective), no differences were found. This suggests that young women (12-17 years) regardless of their background, broadly, share the same views on what measures would be effective when tackling violence against women and girls.

Within the focus group data there was less discussion of tougher criminal justice responses as a means of preventing violence against women and girls. There are a number of possible explanations for this: a. an option/ prompt was not provided to young women whereas the survey provided a list of responses from which to choose; b. the flow of the focus group discussion (this topic often flowed from a discussion on learning about relationships and violence); 3. the framing of the discussion was preventing rather than responding to violence. However, there was discussion about the need to reform criminal justice processes with regards to sexual violence, and more broadly a belief that responses and consequences to violence against women and girls were essential. The data demonstrates a view that preventing violence against girls and women requires broad and systemic change - to attitudes, cultures, policies, institutions and laws. Reflecting the need for change, one young woman commented: '... your kids too, you think if this is happening to you what's it going to be like for them?' (FG15)

7.2 Preventing Violence: Methods and Messages

7.2.1 Do it yourself: avoid, block, ignore

Reflecting the consistency of messages girls/ young women receive about protecting themselves, in discussing ways in which violence against women and girls could be prevented, some again turned attention onto themselves. Young women learn at an early age and from various sources (e.g. home, school, media etc) that they are vulnerable to violence and that little can be done to address this (see Section 3). As such, they felt that the onus

was placed on them to take measures to limit their exposure to those places, people and times that might heighten this vulnerability:

> 'There's like things they would say "don't go through there alone". My dad would be like "if you're going through there don't go alone or make sure you've got your phone on you". There's places in the town we get told "don't go alone"' (FG6)

Alongside avoiding particular places and times they spoke of other strategies to limit their exposure to violence or to minimise the potential for it to escalate. They recalled how they would often have to 'ignore', downplay or not acknowledge certain behaviours as 'calling these out', reporting them or simply drawing attention to unwanted behaviour might heighten their exposure to risk or make the situation worse. Considering what forms of violence are 'worst', which are more tolerable than others, is part of the strategies young women engage in to avoid what they often defined as the 'worst' form of violence (physical, including sexual assault):

> 'I'm more scared of physical violence happening if I speak out. If I shout at somebody who's doing something to me then I'm scared for my safety …' (FG2)

So rather than strategies to prevent violence, what young women actually discussed were the many ways they deal with unwanted behaviours, often having to 'play it down' or 'ignore it' in order that situations do not escalate. These strategies – 'keeping your eyes down', 'don't draw attention to yourself', 'walk on' – were learned through the media, conversations with parents and friends, and reinforced through formal learning in schools. Some recognised that 'it shouldn't be on the woman to not get attacked' and that responsibility for this should be more wide-ranging. As one young woman commented: '…boys walk away and we are the ones sitting learning how to keep ourselves safe' (FG14).

Mirroring this, young women also took responsibility in the online world, following adult advice to simply 'block', 'delete' or 'ignore' unwanted requests, online harassment or unsolicited images. Reflective of many others, one young woman explained: 'we just kind of learned a long time ago just to block them and move on' (FG11). While young women were generally aware that accounts could be reported, and they acknowledged that this would deal with the immediate issues, they also recognised that new accounts would be set up and the experience continue. Other options such as to remove themselves from social media or report to the police were considered unrealistic. Reporting, it was felt, could make the situation worse, open them to ridicule and potential punishment (social censure and legal responses), and to having their devices removed. Learning about online safety in schools fed beliefs of personal responsibility and fears of reporting due to potential criminalisation.

Young women felt talking about violence and providing information might help girls identify 'red flags' and support boys to think about the impact of their behaviours towards girls.

7.2.2 Education about violence against women and girls

Young women reported receiving very little information about violence against women and girls (see Section 3.3), and felt that an important step in prevention was to talk about it more with boys

and girls, but also more generally at a societal level. Talking and providing information, they felt, might help girls identify 'red flags' and support boys to think about the impact of their behaviours towards girls. Being able to identify the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationship was seen as beneficial in preventing violence:

> **I:** What could be done to prevent violence against women and girls?
> **YW2:** Definitely knowing the signs of an unhealthy relationship so you can get out of it early before it gets worse.
> **YW1:** I think also men need to be taught as well to know their boundaries and when no means no and stop.
> ...
> **YW3:** ... they [boys and young men] could be learning about that the likes of when they're in school, telling them how that makes the likes of women feel, that could be more informative, informative sessions with them because obviously they're going to be in relationships and if someone done that to their girlfriend or their wife or something that would anger them. So, they would be informed. (FG6)

Across a number of groups, young women reiterated the need for empathy, for young men to learn how their words and actions made young women feel. There was a sense that because they do not experience many of the forms of violence that girls and young women do, they do not understand its impact. As a result of limited information and discussion, young women perceived that boys and young men might not always recognise their behaviours as wrong, never mind violent. Nor might they appreciate the impact of their 'jokes'. Increased discussion might, therefore, enhance understanding of this. It was regularly suggested that these discussions should take place from a young age and that not talking about violence as a means of protecting children was meaningless given many children experience violence in their everyday lives (e.g. home, school, community):

> **YW1:** I think they should learn about it at a younger age, like P7s should learn about it.
> **YW2:** Would it not be too overwhelming for them?
> **YW1:** Nah cos kids see their mummy and daddy fighting ... (FG7)

Further, while young women regularly noted that there were often no consequences for sexist behaviour and the everyday types of violence they experienced, they did not tend to call for punitive responses (in this instance at least):

> **YW2:** Give them [boys] another group on how it effects the girls and why you shouldn't do it.
> **YW3:** And tell them not to do it and tell them the consequences of it so they won't do it again. ...there's never a consequence.
> **I:** So do you think there should be more consequences?
> **YW2:** Yeah, definitely.
> **I:** What sort of things?
> **YW2:** I dunno. Just that it's really bad and it could harm the girls. They could end up doing something to themselves.
> **YW3:** It could do something to their mental health and they could hurt themselves. (FG9)

Alongside discussion around what might be considered more obvious forms of violence, some young women felt that more needed to be done to support young men to fully appreciate how typically being bigger, stronger and louder, and their use of their bodies and voice could be experienced as intimidating by girls and women. Throughout discussions girls/ young women often returned to the point that boys may not be fully to blame, as they had grown up in cultures (home and school) whereby certain behaviours had been permitted and perhaps even taught. Education early on about respect and empathy could limit

negative attitudes and behaviours towards girls and women developing.

Therefore, young women felt that parents, schools, and youth clubs had a significant role to play in violence prevention. They commented that parents needed to talk with their children (irrespective of gender) about healthy and unhealthy relationships in order that they might be able to identify what is and is not acceptable. One young woman noted that children needed to be 'brought up learning how to treat people properly … treating people with respect … and making sure you know how they feel and what you're saying, how it can hurt them' (IV1).

While young women noted that all children and young people needed education and awareness raising around the topic, they did for the most part, focus on the need for targeted work with boys and young men. The following extract capture the views of many who felt that boys need to understand 'right from wrong' in respect of their attitudes and behaviours towards girls, and that this would remove the onus from girls to identify and respond to unacceptable behaviour:

> 'I feel like they should teach boys more about what they can't do because nobody is telling a boy or a man that they can't do it, it's always the girl that has to speak up about it, but if the boy was told not to do it and he knew that was wrong.' (FG1)

It is noteworthy, however, that while highlighting the need to educate young men, girls/ young women often felt the need to acknowledge their awareness that boys and young men also experience violence. This was particularly pertinent in discussions with the younger age groups, whereby after detailed discussion about the many forms of violence they and their female peers experience, young women would go on to qualify: 'it's not just boys and not just girls, it goes both ways' (FG8).

Overall, and particularly among the younger groups, there was a general desire not to blame boys/ young men, but to educate for change.

7.2.3 Relationships, sex and consent

Young women consistently reported a lack of information around sex, healthy relationships, consent and violence against women and girls within formal education (see Section 3). Those inputs they did receive were often limited in what they covered or were not memorable. Some reported that current school-based learning around these topics was ineffectual due to its sporadic nature, the content, duration or the depth of material covered:

> 'I feel like schools don't really go into it as deeply as they should, they definitely could do better with it. A lot of the times they give you a three minute presentation of people dancing around saying you can tell your parents and then everything will be okay but they don't really go through what you might experience or how to recognise if something bad has happened to you …' (FG3)

As such, they felt that in order for these inputs to be impactful they needed to be more regular, and more meaningful – involving young people in discussion, projects and tasks, drawing on real life scenarios:

> 'they need to be consistent, they [outside organisations] need to come in once or twice a week all year round, they only come in once to maybe one year group once a year but you're gonna forget about that … it's a half an hour session with each year group. It needs to be a project or something almost' (FG6).

It is likely, therefore, that the survey data is a reflection on the current nature of education, recognising that more of the same will be ineffectual.

Young women felt that these inputs also needed to explore relationships more generally in order that they might better understand and recognise the features of healthy and unhealthy relationships, helping them spot 'red flags' at an early stage. The issue of being able to recognise violence was dominant throughout the research. As discussed in Section 4, in their personal accounts of violence, some young women had not recognised behaviours as not the way things should be, as harmful or wrong. Others accounts of everyday violence demonstrate how normalised this is. Not recognising violence, or violence being normalised was also identified as a major barrier to disclosing, reporting and seeking support (see Section 6). Covering all forms of violent behaviour in all relationships – family, intimate partner, peer – was key to prevention:

> 'I think they need to start educating people on different varieties of relationship. So they need to start telling people from a young age that if a boy is mean to you he does not like you, he's just a bully. Then going onto signs that you're in a manipulative or toxic relationship. And then even just talk about gay relationships as well, just say there is differences but there's not a lot of differences. If you feel unsafe in a relationship then you can always trust your gut, you're not gonna be wrong for wanting to get out of a relationship you don't feel okay in.' (FG2)

Receiving this information at an earlier age was thought to be important as a way of preventing violence against girls. Young women suggested that this could be included alongside information received about puberty, body changes and development in primary school. They noted the importance of keeping girls and boys together for these classes, feeling that it might help generate an appreciation and understanding of what the other might be going through and some of the challenges they might be facing:

> 'I think in primary schools that they should bring in when educating about puberty and stuff they should keep boys and girls in the same room, educate all the boys what girls go through and educate girls on what boys go through and also talk about sexual violence that goes on and get a better understanding from a young age and prevent stuff from happening when they get older.' (FG2)

Those young women who attended youth clubs or groups felt that these environments were, or might be, more conducive to learning about sex and relationships than formal education settings. They noted that in these informal settings, the approach was 'more comfortable' and their relationship with the workers allowed them to ask questions and more fully engage with the issue:

> '... in school they wouldn't be able to explain it how xxx [youth worker] would explain it ... they would professionalise it, whereas when you're in a youth place they'd be able to talk to you like how we would talk and how we would understand it.' (FG1)

Within these informal spaces the focus went beyond merely communicating information but sought to ensure that young women (and young men) might have an applied understanding. Providing safe spaces for young women to talk about and share their views and experiences of violence, one young woman noted, would enable consciousness-raising. She explained that it would allow young women to see that they were not alone in their experiences, that these were 'normal' (i.e. commonplace – shared experiences). But it would also enable them to understand that violence against women and girls should not be 'normal' within society:

> 'If you're doing ... violence groups you know it's [experiencing violence] normal. It shouldn't be normal to be treated like that, but it's normal

> for people to be treated like that whenever it shouldn't be. It's not only you being treated like that, other millions and millions of other people are getting treated like that as well.' (IV1)

While perhaps a depressing thought that some young women would find it useful to understand that experiences of violence against women and girls are pervasive, this may remove some of the individualising and internalising of blame.

More broadly, the value of talking and learning about violence against women and girls at all levels could respond to some of the barriers young women identified to reporting – discomfort, shame, not recognising violence, not feeling it is 'serious enough', not feeling they will be taken seriously:

> **YW5**: Speaking about it more makes you feel more comfortable hearing about it and actually speaking up for yourself as well.
> **YW3**: It makes you feel it's important, people are actually talking about this, so like I know this is important, I can talk about it. (FG8)

7.2.4 Responding to violence

While not identified across all focus groups, some young women did highlight the need for harsher punishments as a means of preventing violence against women and girls, noting that 'the punishment should fit the crime' (FG15). Currently they felt that there was little or no consequence for perpetrators of violence and therefore no deterrents for those who committed violent acts. This view was expressed in discussing many forms of violence, including street harassment, online violence, everyday sexism and misogyny. As noted above, however, it was felt that educative rather than punitive responses were the best ways to bring boys and young men into discussions, and to prevent violence in the first place. Even in considering how cat-calling and street harassment might be prevented some suggested a mix of surveillance and education/ rehabilitation:

> 'Have a system like in certain parts where it happens the most, where if they see somebody doing it to take their registration and if they do it multiple times to catch it out and just explain, if you catch them multiple times go into detail about it and get something for them to stop it from happening.' (FG10)

Where the need for more punitive responses was expressed most vociferously was in discussions of sexual violence. Here it was felt that if a strong message was not sent via criminal justice responses, that girls/ young women would continue to be hesitant to report violence, and men would feel there was little consequence for their actions. Young women often felt that:

> 'It's more about the government and the police and all that [as well as education], they need to take it seriously because they don't do anything about it, they think oh, this is not serious, let's just move on.' (FG11)

The narrative needed to change, 'stop blaming victims' one young woman suggested was a means of preventing violence (FG15). Because when the focus is on the victim, having to 'prove that they've touched you' and 'people get let off' (FG15) this fuels assumptions about women making false allegations, changing their minds, or being (partially) responsible. The message to men is that there are few consequences. Speaking from experience, one young women explained:

> 'Listen, the cops don't do nothing only let people off and then you're sitting like a dick and then people are able to call you a liar'. (FG15)

Young women regularly suggested that legal and practical changes were needed in order to

enhance reporting of sexual violence. Beyond this, however, some also felt that sentencing tariffs were too low and needed to be higher in order to deter others. Speaking from experience, one young woman felt there was a need for both victim recognition and punishment:

> '... welcome the victims in with open arms. Don't leave them in the dark. Bring them into the light. Give them help, don't just look at them and turn away because it's pointless. Crime's not going to be stopped if that's what you do. So, add more laws, more legislations. It's the only thing that's going to stop it. Worse punishments. Nothing else is going to stop it.' (IV4)

Punishment, however, was never suggested in isolation to other responses. One group, for example, believed that for prevention to be possible there also needed to be a focus on rehabilitation. This was similar to previous arguments that education and behavioural change is a necessary part of prevention:

> **YW2:** ... like I think we should focus more on rehabilitation than more just punishing someone and then letting them out. ... because if they're gonna get out soon they should at least, if someone raped me and they were only in prison for four years and then they're out I'd be scared to run into them again. If they haven't changed because you're not gonna change if you're getting punished, you're gonna -
> **YW3:** You're just gonna grow angry.
> **YW1:** You're just gonna be more angry at the person who's prosecuted you. If you're getting rehabilitation and getting taught what's wrong and what's right and understanding what you did wrong you're more likely to be more accepting that you done something wrong, you face the consequences and you're not gonna do it again (FG2)

7.3 A Final Word

Some young women, from experience, were sceptical about the possibilities of preventing violence against girls and women. They felt that educational responses alone would be futile as 'they [boys] still wouldn't listen ... they just do what they want really' (FG11). This is why many suggested a combination of responses -increased education from an early age, alongside more effective legal and criminal justice responses and their own personal strategies to prevent violence. Legal and policy change is important, but some recognised it is necessary to de-normalise violence and address attitudes and cultures of violence because legislation already exists and violence continues:

> **YW2:** That goes hand in hand with sexism as well, anything like that I considered a hate crime, in law you have to report it but at the same time, it happens every day but no one reports it because it's just like well -
> **YW4:** Normalised almost.

On the basis of this, one young woman suggested that it was 'everyone's responsibility' to educate boys and men about violence against women and girls (IV1). Another simply noted that in order to prevent it, boys and men need to 'stop being violent':

> '... the problem does start at the root which is not educating men to not hurt women. A lot of the times people put it on the women to make sure they don't get hurt whenever it is the men's responsibility to not hurt them. Women shouldn't be told to cover up or always have someone with them, it should be men told don't go after people. It isn't on the women to make sure that they aren't attacked, it's on the men or the attackers. So, educating boys from a young age that it is not okay to do things like that would probably fix it'. (IV2)

8. Narrative accounts of violence

8.1 Overview

The information provided in focus groups and interviews was analysed thematically and presented as such throughout the report. This is useful for demonstrating re-occurring themes across groups and individuals, as well as those that may be more particular to specific cohorts (e.g. older or younger young women, those living in particular localities). Narratives are an additional method of presenting data. Rather than doing so thematically they are a means through which the full account of a young woman is kept intact, although summarised. In doing so, narratives express and bring together the 'cumulative strands of experience'[2] that speak to the themes of the research.

Below four narratives are presented: grooming/ online exploitation; family violence; sexual violence; and the continuum of violence. All accounts have been anonymised and shared with the consent of participants. These narratives further illuminate key themes within the report: difficulties in recognising violence when young; the pervasiveness and normalisation of street harassment; immediate and longer term impacts of violence; the realities of barriers to disclosure and reporting in the context of various forms of violence; and the ways in which perceptions and/ or social narratives of blame and responsibility can be internalised by girls/ young women.

[2] Mayock, P. and Parker, S. (2021) 'Young people narrating the meaning of homelessness and home' in L. Moran, K. Reilly & B. Brady (eds) Narrating Childhood with Children and Young People: Diverse contexts, methods and stories of everyday life. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 35-61.

8.2 Sarah's Story: Online Exploitation

At age 13, Sarah accepted a friend request on a social media app, assuming it to be from someone she knew - the account name was similar to that of a friend. Shortly afterwards she received a screenshot of her location along with '... a bunch of threats that if I didn't send ... photos ... they would get men to come to my house and injure my family'. The threats were perceived to be real as 'he would send me the locations of his friends and ... tell me that they were all men over six foot and they knew my exact location'. These threats continued over a period of three days until, out of fear, Sarah reluctantly sent photos of herself. This was followed by demands for further images, more threats against her family and now additional threats that the original images would be shared online. Sarah 'was really just terrified at that point because my family was at stake'. On refusal, her images were shared and she decided to speak to someone in her family. Sarah had not disclosed these experiences immediately as she felt she would be held responsible – 'I felt like I would be blamed for it, for like keeping my location on ... and even just having him as a friend'.

While police were contacted and they took the matter seriously, taking statements and providing details of support groups/ organisations 'nothing was helpful' as 'he still got away with it ... nobody found out who it was'. While provided with information about a group for young women with similar experiences, Sarah did not want to attend as while she knew 'everybody there would have a story ... I didn't want to go and share my story with everyone, I would always compare my story to be like "oh yeah, they had it way worse"'. Either not ready to speak openly of her experiences or feeling hers were less valid than others, Sarah found distraction and support in a local youth group.

Sarah now 15 years of age found it difficult to trust people and recollected with anguish the pain she experienced seeing her mother's upset during the police interview. She recognised, however, that her mother was not upset or angry with her, but with what had happened to her. She understood that she had been manipulated and cautioned others her age to 'double check with friends that it is actually them' when receiving a friend request.

8.3 Rachel's Story: Family Violence

From a young age Rachel had experienced violence in her family home explaining that as she was brought up with it, she thought 'it was completely normal … and because I thought it was normal I never told anyone'. At age 13, things had hit 'breaking point' and after the latest episode of physical violence Rachel phoned the police. There was nothing that made this episode different, but Rachel had resolved after the previous incident that 'if this happens again I'm going to call the police. So then it did happen again and then that was just the breaking point'. Until that point she had kept the abuse at home hidden, finding support in her siblings and spending as much time as possible in school to avoid being at home.

Rachel spoke of the physical impacts of violence, marks left for a few days, and of her fear of going home and of speaking out. She noted the many fears she had in disclosing what was happening at home - speaking against her family, breaking up the family, not being believed - 'it is you calling the police on your parents, the amount of situations that can stem from that, like getting put into care if it's bad enough or the thought of the police not believing you or your other family members cutting off connection because [they] might be more inclined to believe [a parent] over me'.

While defining the experience of reporting as 'terrifying' and knowing the potential consequences, Rachel 'knew it was something that had to happen'. The fall out 'was very scary at first' as her father was 'taken away by the police'. Support from wider family members was also difficult at first – 'I don't know if my grandparents really thought it was the right thing to do, I think they were still stuck in the mindset of weans should be hit but they still weren't telling me I did the wrong thing, but they didn't exactly tell me I did the right thing either.'

Despite the difficulties, reporting had brought relief to Rachel and her siblings. Her older brother confided that he had wanted to call the police on several occasions 'but he was never able to bring himself to do it and he said I was very brave for being able to do it'. The family received social services intervention including family therapy 'which was very good', and Rachel receive some support for her anxiety. Her father remained in the family home and the situation at home had improved dramatically. While social services involvement had 'eased up … they still come round every once a month'. Rachel, now 14 years of age, felt that she required longer term supports tailored to her as an individual rather than as part of the family. As she awaits referral to CAMHS Rachel was linked in, by a psychiatrist, to a youth organisation. This has provided opportunities to socialise, to build her confidence and to become involved in social action projects. While identifying this as hugely valuable, Rachel felt that addressing her anxiety though therapy was a need left unaddressed.

8.4 Olivia's Story: Sexual Violence

At the age of 15 Olivia entered her first 'real' relationship with a boy. As many of her peers already had boyfriends, she was happy to now also be in a relationship and to have this in common with her friends. Over the next two months, however, this initial excitement dissipated and was replaced with 'awkwardness', 'fear', controlling behaviours and sexual assaults.

While having a boyfriend at her age was considered the 'norm', Olivia recalls how limited information at school, home and amongst her peers meant that she was not quite sure what that entailed, for example, what was considered healthy, normal or to be expected within a relationship. Prior to this relationship Olivia had 'never kissed anymore before'. As her boyfriend was a year older than her and had been in previous relationships, she felt that 'he knew what he wanted' but that she 'didn't really know much about it' and had 'never really had that sort of affection' before.

Olivia recalls how she would often meet her boyfriend with her friends present to avoid things getting 'awkward'. Despite being in the company of others, her boyfriend's requests (e.g. would you like to go here?) quickly became demands (e.g. this is what we are doing). She talked of how his 'attitude flipped' and he became 'completely different'. While these interactions made Olivia 'anxious going to see him' and impacted negatively on her mental well-being, having not had a boyfriend before she was unsure if these experiences were simply to be expected within a relationship.

From controlling behaviours at the outset of the relationship, things escalated into sexual manipulation and force. Oliva recounted how she had, '...never done anything sexual in my life. He forced me to give him oral sex, which I hadn't a clue about. I didn't know. I knew of it, but I'd never done it before'. Given a lack of sex education and relationship advice, Olivia concluded at the time that 'this is normal, people do this ... this happens'. So, while uncomfortable and unsure of how their relationship was advancing, she felt that what was being asked of her might be normal and to be expected within relationships.

Over the next few weeks, the relationship intensified and despite her friends being present, things worsened. On one occasion, with her friends in the next room, her boyfriend 'made me lie on top of him and he ... put his arms around me as if to say, "you're not going anywhere, you're staying here"'. While Olivia asked him to stop, he refused, telling her 'You like it'. Responding that she did not like it and wanted to stop, she feels that 'he was sort of gaslighting me into thinking that I would like it and that eventually, I would enjoy it but at the end of the day I didn't...'. While her friends were in just the next room, in that moment she recalls how she felt trapped,

needing to negotiate and appease her boyfriend in order to escape the situation - 'Look, listen, my friends are going to want me back in. I'm going back into them. Food's coming. Just leave it there. We'll get back to it another time'. While Olivia was uncomfortable and at times afraid in many of these situations, she 'didn't want to break up with him' and convinced herself 'this is all sunshine and roses. I just love it, it's amazing'.

Despite attempts to always meet her boyfriend while others were present on one occasion he tricked her into meeting alone and sexually assaulted her again - 'I was … putting my shoes on … and he lay on top of me … And I was just sort of like "What are you doing, I'm just trying to tie my shoelaces?" and he was like "Don't worry about it"… And he put his hand down my bottoms and I was like "What are you doing? I need to go … can I leave now?" and he was like "No, I'm not done with you" … he started to have sex with me, and I didn't consent to anything … I knew I didn't consent to it, and I knew what was happening, what was wrong, but for some reason I didn't say anything, I just let it happen. And when he was finished, I got up and I left, I didn't say a word. I just got up and I left, and I didn't say anything from that'.

After this, the relationship ended. Now in a new relationship, Olivia aged 17 has shared some of the manipulation of her previous relationship with her new partner, but stops short of sharing the full details for fear he would consider her 'disgusting … dirty … or gross'. She also refrained from telling her friends for a long time because she imagined that sex was 'expected of you by a certain age and if you haven't done it, you're a weirdo'. Olivia has not told her mum what happened and when she spoke to her dad about it some years later, recalls how his initial reaction was to blame her for getting herself into that situation and letting it happen. Her dad's initial response changed but this was also difficult as he wanted to confront the young man, actions that Olivia felt would only worsen the situation.

Olivia never formally reported what happened to her. She felt that there was little point as '…you can't prove it'. In order for things to change Olivia feels that more needs to be done to assure girls and women that they will be listened to and believed. She recounts the many stories she has heard personally and in the media about the 'police being careless, not caring, [having] no sympathy…' as major barriers to reporting. In addition to not 'treating women like the criminal' she suggested 'more laws, more legislations' and 'worse punishments' as necessary deterrents to sexual violence against women and girls.

8.5 Amy's Story: Continuum of Violence

Amy (aged 21) explained that she had never been 'physically injured by anyone' but had experienced violence through 'speech' – 'words' and name-calling – and what she referred to as 'political violence' – lack of rights as a woman. Added to this, she recalled how witnessing physical violence, hearing about domestic violence within her mother's family and growing up around men (father and brothers) who were loud and verbally aggressive, meant she often anticipated the escalation of violence. The real or imagined threat of violence left her feeling 'anxious', 'powerless', 'insecure' and at times 'fearful'. Speaking of the 'really bad temper' and 'hot flashes' of shouting from her father, which were imitated by her brothers, Amy spoke of feeling at times emotionally 'battered' and 'paralysed' while growing up.

Because these 'flare ups' were not physical or 'typical violence' and were perceived as part of family life, Amy felt that her family may not have understood the impact on her and the ways in which it has shaped her views on men more generally, that is, that they too 'would have these tempers'. This is evidenced within her current relationship. While her 'boyfriend doesn't really yell' or get annoyed with her 'if he gets annoyed about something … even if he's cooking and he gets annoyed when he's cooking, almost yelling at himself it really freaks me out. I almost cower a little bit'.

Outside of the family, Amy experienced violence in other 'non typical' forms. She described how in public 'stares', 'touching', and 'shouting' can be felt as acts of violence and engender a sense of foreboding and fear - '… it could be the way someone looks at you, the way someone touches your shoulder, and it can feel really violent even though it isn't'. She tries to make herself 'small' and 'not take up space' as a means of avoiding negative or unwanted attention while out in public. Despite this, Amy nonetheless experienced cat-calling and street harassment on a number of occasions – being seen even when she tried not to be seen: 'these two guys came up and stood in front of me and were saying stuff and trying to chat to me and I was like, "leave me alone". It feels like it's hard to take up space when stuff like that does happen because you just don't really want to be seen.'

These personal experiences combined with (online) media reporting reinforce for Amy a narrative of young women's vulnerability, especially in public places. She describes how this has made her 'hyperaware' and 'like … a bit of a target'. Being hypervigilant in public and especially when alone, Amy feels 'like your heart is always going really fast and you almost feel like you're having a panic attack, and it's like not really trusting yourself, you feel that something is going to happen to you so your body is prepared for that … your heart's going, you're looking, you're

trying not to look at people's faces but then also you're trying to be really observant of people in cars and things. ...[you] constantly feel like something really bad is going to happen'.

Recently Amy had again experienced cat-calling on the street when out with her boyfriend. When she told him what had happened a physical fight ensued. Amy described her sense of fear and helplessness 'stood in the middle of it', but feeling unable to help as 'I knew I'd have got hurt'. While not physically injured, being involved in this violent incident and witnessing her boyfriend being hit had made Amy 'feel like I'd been hit, but I hadn't'.

Amy had come to understand young women's fear of violence, and their experiences of 'casual' but persistent violence as indicative of the position of women in society – in politics and policy, in the home and in public space. Defining it as 'political violence', Amy spoke of the personal impacts of political movements and/ or legislative changes which deny rights to women. She explained how public debate about women's bodies felt 'very intrusive', reinforcing women's lack of control over their bodies. Social media coverage and comment on abortion rights in Northern Ireland and the US (the overturning of Roe v Wade) had made Amy feel 'a bit sick or really, really anxious ... it's all I saw, you can't escape it, you just feel constantly like you're under attack'.

Connecting political and legal discourse to private and public experiences, Amy felt that what was required to tackle violence against women and girls was legal change, attitudinal change and education whereby young people learn what violence is, the various forms it can take, and how boys/men's presence and words can be forms of violence. So engrained and normalised is some behaviour – in the home, in schools and in public places – that she felt boys and men may not understand its meaning or impact. Amy felt it was important that boys and young men learn in school '...how [their] actions can be interpreted as violence', that violence can be 'indirect or direct, [take] different forms ...' and 'know what consequences our actions have'. Added to this, Amy felt that reporting procedures for female victims should be more sensitive, ensuring that women are not re-traumatised and that if 'prosecution is necessary, prosecution occurs'.

Notes

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