Every Voice Matters!

Violence Against Women in Northern Ireland



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“A total of 542 women took part in the Violence Against Women and Girls survey. Almost all of the participants (98%) had experience at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A sample of 542 women participated in the online *Violence Against Women and Girls Survey* and provided detailed reports of their experiences of different types of violence, the perpetrators, the settings in which violence occurs, and the mental health consequences.

The findings from the online survey represent the most recent, comprehensive, and detailed account of the experiences of abuse and violence by women in Northern Ireland. The main findings from the survey are:

- A total of 542 women took part in the Violence Against Women and Girls Survey. Almost all of the participants (98%) had experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime. Experiences of at least one form of violence or abuse were common before age 11 years (50%), between ages 11-18 years (87%) and in adulthood (91%). This shows that violence or abuse is common and persistent throughout women's lives.
- Exposure to any form of violence or abuse is not only common throughout the lifetime, but there is also evidence of recency; nearly seven in ten of the sample had experienced some form of violence or abuse in the last 12 months.
- Harassment or sexual harassment was the most commonly reported type of abuse and occurred for approximately one third of the participants as a child (up to age 11 years). As an adult this was pervasive, with 87% of the participants having reported this experience. Over half of the participants reported experiencing harassment or sexual harassment in the past 12 months.
- Childhood sexual (8%) and physical (9%) violence were not uncommon. The likelihood of experiencing such violence increased with age, with almost half the participants reported sexual (46%) or physical (46%) violence as an adult.
- Psychological and emotional abuse was also reported to be common during childhood (34%), adolescence (63%), and adulthood (70%). This form of abuse was a recent experience, happening in the last 12 months for 42% of the participants. As an adult the participants also reported a broad range of other forms of violence and abuse such as stalking (28%), digital abuse (51%), and Troubles related abuse (3%).
- The perpetrators of the violence and abuse were most often only men (50%) but it was not uncommon for it to be mainly men but also some women (33%). The worst experience of violence or abuse was most commonly committed by stranger (29%), however often the perpetrator was known to the victim (romantic partner 23%; friend or acquaintance 19%) and occurred in their own home (26%).
- The early experience of violence and abuse, under the age of 18 years, is a strong predictor of violence and abuse in adulthood. This relationship holds for all forms of violence and abuse.
- Of those who reported any form of violence or abuse, 24% reported high levels of traumatic stress and 32% high levels of psychological distress. Impairment in participant's ability to work (12%), socialise (23%), and carry out everyday activities (17%) was also reported.
- Overall, only one third of the participants felt able to speak about, or report, the violent incident that had occurred; shame and embarrassment was the greatest barrier to reporting violent experiences.
- Although the majority of women reported feeling very safe or fairly safe in their home (89%) in work (83%) and university or college (74%), it was also very common that they took precautions such as walking or travelling with someone (72%), keeping to well-lit areas (56%) and avoiding particular areas (48%).

During the research process, we spoke with a further 34 women using individual interviews and focus groups and asked about their perspective of the issue of violence against women living in Northern Ireland. Following thematic analysis of all interview transcripts, six major themes and subsequent sub-themes were generated:

- Theme 1 explores women's thoughts and opinions about violence against women within the Northern Irish context. It was felt that every woman, and by proxy, every man, has been affected by this issue.
- Theme 2 explores perceived risk factors of violence against women and girls including early childhood exposure, the legacy of the Troubles and social attitudes and norms which perpetuate violence against women within our wider society.
- Theme 3 focused on the impacts of experiencing violence and abuse including, diminished relationships, significant and enduring mental health implications as well as impacts on children.
- Theme 4 addresses the factors which impact the likelihood of women disclosing or reporting their experience of violence. Here women discuss reasons for not reporting as well as the barriers they face when they do report including victim blaming, ostracization and not being taken seriously.
- Theme 5 looks at the road to justice for women following a report of violence. Difficulties with evidencing violence or abuse, lengthy judicial process and lenient sentencing are discussed.
- Theme 6 details recommendations from women about how we can keep women and girls safe. Suggestions include, safe spaces for women and girls, healthy relationship education, greater societal awareness of the issue of VAWG, as well as the need for significant government resource and commitment to ensure that, "*hopefully in a generation, it's something that won't be an issue to the same extent that maybe it is currently and has been in the past*" (VAWG20).

INTRODUCTION

The issue of violence against women and girls (VAWG) has been noted as a significant global challenge. During 2018, it was estimated that 736 million women, almost one in three, had experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime (WHO, 2021). Whilst this finding is stark, it is also highly likely that it is a significant underestimation. Many women and girls will not report their experiences. Violence in a blatant physical form is more easily captured than some other forms of abuse or harassment which are often normalised or accepted such as unwanted sexual attention or harassment. It is often these subtle forms of violence that perpetuate the normalisation and anticipation of harm to women from the home to the streets, with an intolerable status quo of fear and caution among this group (Bunch, 1997). Indeed, the deaths of Sabina Nessa, Sarah Everard, and Aisling Murphy further demonstrate the real risk to life for women and girls on the basis of gender. The recent deaths of Caoimhe Morgan, Katrina Rainey, Karen McClean and Stacey Knell in Northern Ireland also tell us that this is not an issue for somewhere or someone else, this is a Northern Ireland issue that needs immediate address.

The impacts of violence exposure on mental and physical health are well understood, with a plethora of research to date demonstrating the adverse outcomes for women and girls (e.g. Lagdon, Armour, & Stringer, 2014; García-Moreno, & Riecher-Rössler, 2013; Grose, Chen, Roof, Rachel, & Yount, 2021; Bacchus, Ranganathan, Watts, & Devries, 2018, Lagdon, Ross, Waterhouse-Bradley & Armour, 2022). Awareness and understanding of the detrimental effects of violence has also resulted in major movements within and across regions to develop prevention-focused responses and interventions within diverse settings including education, justice and health care. In addition, significant efforts by social activists calling for further action at a legislative and policy level have resulted in more subtle forms of violence such as coercive controlling behaviours being acknowledged and made into a criminal offence. While this is a major step forward, there remains much to learn regarding the nature of these types of violence and abuse that women are exposed to, particularly at the regional level. Indeed, there are women impacted every day by incidents of unwanted behaviour but who may not see themselves as victims.

> “The aim of the current research was to obtain reliable data on the experience of violence against women living in Northern Ireland, adding to our ever growing evidence base of this issue within the Northern Irish context.”

“The 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by member countries in 2015, calls for the elimination of violence against women and girls—namely through target 5.2 under goal 5 on gender equality and women’s empowerment” (Sardinha, Maheu-Giroux, Stöckl, Meyer, & García-Moreno, 2022, p.3). Empowerment begins with giving a voice to the issue and allowing those affected to share their experience. The aim of the current research was to obtain reliable data on the experience of violence against women living in Northern Ireland, adding to our ever growing evidence base of this issue within the Northern Irish context.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The Executive Office (TEO) for Northern Ireland provided a specification for the proposed work which should seek to gather evidence on the nature, prevalence, and settings where women living within Northern Ireland experience violence towards them. The research team designed a mixed-method approach in order to address this aim, implementing both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Subsections below provide brief detail of the methodological approach. The research framework adopted the definition of 'violence' against women as set by the TEO specification which was:

> *"any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life"*

Online Survey Data Collection

A survey was developed and distributed using the Qualtrics web-based survey platform. This digital survey management tool allowed the researchers to build and design a survey aimed at capturing information about the nature and prevalence of violence against women across Northern Ireland. Specifically, the survey was designed to capture information on:

- the extent of violence experienced by women in Northern Ireland, including the different types of violence;
- the perpetrators of violence against women and the settings in which violence occurs;
- the consequences of violence against women including impacts of violence (measures of personal wellbeing) and perceptions of safety in the community.

All survey questions and sections were discussed and agreed upon with members of the Executive Office VAWG group. The research team also engaged with VAWG advocates within the voluntary and community sector to support sense checking and authenticity of survey and later interview questions included. The research team also consulted the Research Integrity Framework on Domestic Violence and Abuse during the formal design period (https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Research-Integrity-Framework-RIF-on-Domestic-Violence-and-Abuse-DVA-November-2020.pdf). While this is specific to domestic violence and abuse, the framework is useful with regards to other forms of violence and abuse based research. The study was reviewed and approved by the Ulster University Research Ethics Committee August 2022.

The survey was shared with women over the age of 18 living in Northern Ireland via the Qualtrics distribution service between September 2022 – October 2022. The survey took less than 25 minutes to complete, helping to control for response fatigue. All survey respondents were required to review a participant information sheet and complete a study consent form before taking part. Throughout the survey, information about sections and the nature of questions were highlighted before the respondent was presented with questions, this ensured that participating women were informed and prepared for questions of a sensitive nature. All survey respondents were provided with support information throughout the duration of the survey as well as being presented with a study debrief sheet at the end of the survey which included further support details.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The distribution of categorical variables was described using frequency counts and percentages. The association between categorical variables was described using cross tabulations and assessed using chi-square tests. The chi-square test show if there is an association between the variables that is greater than expected by chance (indicated by $p < .05$). Causality cannot be inferred from these tests.

Binary logistic regression was used when there was clear temporal ordering of categorical variables, for example, early age experience of violence predicting subsequent adult violence. Logistic regression results are reported as 'odds ratios' (OR) for each of the predictor variables. In this report, binary logistic regression analysis was performed to examine whether early age and adolescent violence events predicted same violence type occurring in adulthood. An OR is a measure of association between an exposure and an outcome. Odds ratios above 1 indicate an increase in the probability of an outcome occurring (e.g. an OR of 2 means the event is 2 times as likely to take place) and odds ratios between 0 and 1 indicate a decrease in the probability of an outcome occurring (e.g. an OR of 0.50 the event is 50% less likely to occur). This technique also allows for ORs to be calculated while controlling for, or removing the effect, of other variables; the analyses in this report controlled for age, urbanicity, income, education and having children.

METHODOLOGY

Mental Distress

Psychological distress was measured by Kessler 6 (K6; Kessler et al, 2003) scale, a screening scale of non-specific psychological stress. The scale presents the participants with six questions pertaining to how often they experienced negative feelings in the past 30 days (e.g. 'restless or fidgety', 'worthless'). Each question was rated on a scale of 0 (none of the time) to 4 (all of the time) with total score ranges from 0 to 24. We adopted a threshold of 5 which is commonly used to screen for mild/moderate distress.

The International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ: Cloitre et al., 2018) is a self-report measure of ICD-11 posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Participants were asked to complete the ITQ thinking about their most distressing experience of violence or abuse. Six items measure PTSD symptom clusters of (1) re-experiencing in the here and now, (2) avoidance, and (3) sense of current threat, and participants indicate how bothered they have been by these symptoms in the past month. All items are answered using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ('Not at all') to 4 ('Extremely'), and a symptom is considered present based on a response of > 2 ('Moderately'). Diagnostic requirements, or caseness, for PTSD are one symptom from each PTSD cluster, and presence of functional impairment associated with these symptoms.

Face-To-Face Interviews

The second phase of data collection involved qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with women aged 18 and over. These interviews took the form of individual interviews or focus groups depending on the preference of those willing to be involved with the research. Our previous work (Lagdon, Armour & Stringer, 2015) suggests that some women feel more supported in a focus group setting, while others prefer the increased confidentiality of an interview, the decision was left with women themselves.

During the interviews, women were asked several open-ended questions about their thoughts and opinions on the issue of violence against women living in Northern Ireland. Questions were designed to encourage open discussion and did not require any woman to talk about personal experiences of violence if she did not want to. The interviews were more focused on the perceptions of the impact on the person(s) and perceived facilitators and barriers to support, and preferred outcomes following any women's experiences of violence. All participating women did complete a short demographics survey before taking part in an interview. Questions within this short survey did ask about previous experiences of different forms of violence and abuse across their lifetime (Further details included within Table 20).

Women who took part in an interview self selected to take part by responding to a recruitment invitation email shared with them. Any individuals interested in participating had to read the study information sheet and complete a study consent form before arrangements for interview were made. All interviews lasted no longer than 60 minutes, but extra time was allocated after the formal interview to allow for a debrief with the researcher. Location of interviews were flexible to the needs of participants with a combination of in-person and online interviews offered.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Following the completion of each interview, recordings were transcribed and final transcriptions uploaded to NVivo (a qualitative data analysis software package) for review and completion of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved the researcher reading and re-reading all the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the content. The researcher then developed codes for some of the content in the transcripts and further categorised these codes into themes and sub-themes, bringing together the shared views of all participating women into a structured framework to understand violence against women in Northern Ireland. During this process, anonymized samples of transcripts were shared with two additional research team members not involved with the interviews. Both researchers independently developed their own codes and themes for the transcripts. The team then compared their findings against the proposed framework to ensure consistency and validity before final coding was approved and agreed. Further details of final Thematic Framework discussed in qualitative findings section of the report.

ONLINE SURVEY FINDINGS



ONLINE SURVEY FINDINGS INTRODUCTION

A total of 542 women took part in the Violence Against Women and Girls Survey, the vast majority of which were born in Northern Ireland (over 95%). The demographic profile of the sample is shown in Table 1. Compared to Northern 2011 census data, the most populous county in Northern Ireland, Antrim, was overrepresented in the sample (46%) compared to the general population (34%). Representation from Armagh and Fermanagh was very close to that seen in NI census data. By contrast, Down, Tyrone and Derry/Londonderry were slightly under-represented in the sample (by approximately 4 percentage points). The majority of the sample reported that they lived in an urban area (47%) and had a sexual orientation of heterosexual (89%). Overall, the sample is younger than that of the general population of women in Northern Ireland.

Table 1.
Demographic Profile of Study Sample

		Frequency (percentage)
In what region of Northern Ireland do you currently live?	Antrim	247 (45.6%)
	Armagh	51 (9.4%)
	Down	137 (25.3%)
	Fermanagh	18 (3.3%)
	Derry/ Londonderry	56 (10.3%)
	Tyrone	33 (6.1%)
Would you describe where you live as:	Urban	257 (47.4%)
	Rural	144 (26.6%)
	Urban/ Rural	140 (25.8%)
	Undisclosed	1 (0.2%)
What is your Sexual Orientation?	LGBTQ	51 (9.4%)
	Heterosexual/straight	482 (88.9%)
	Prefer to self-describe/prefer not to say	9 (1.7%)
Education	Below Undergrad	261 (48.2%)
	Undergraduate degree (or equivalent)	200 (36.9%)
	Postgraduate degree (or equivalent)	79 (14.6%)
	Other	2 (0.4%)
Age	18 - 25	117 (21.6%)
	26 -35	211 (38.9%)
	36- 45	116 (21.4%)
	46+	98 (18.1%)

SURVEY SECTION 1 - THE EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE – AN OVERVIEW

The vast majority (98%) of the participants had experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime. Table 2 presents a breakdown of types of violence experienced stratified by age of when the event occurred. Experiences of at least one form of violence or abuse were very common before age 11 years (50%), between ages 11-18 years (87%) and in adulthood (91%). Nearly seven in ten (68%) of the sample had experienced some form of violence or abuse in the last 12 months. *Harassment/Sexual Harassment* was the most commonly reported type of abuse to have occurred under age 11 (35%), ages 11-18 (82%), over 18 (87%), and in the past year (53%). Psychological and emotional abuse was also commonly reported for all time periods examined (age 11 years, 34%; ages 11-18 years, 63%; over 18 years, 70%; in the past year, 42%).

> “Harassment/Sexual Harassment was the most commonly reported type of abuse to have occurred under age 11 (35%).”

Table 2.
Types of Violence and Abuse Experienced across the life course

		Primary school - up to age 11 (N= 542)	Secondary school - between ages 11-18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Happened in the past 12 months (N= 542)
Reported Any (%)		269 (49.7%)	470 (86.8%)	492 (90.8%)	368 (67.9%)
Harassment / Sexual harassment	No Experiences	352 (64.9%)	97 (17.9%)	71 (13.1%)	257 (47.5%)
	At least one	190 (35.1%)	445 (82.2%)	471 (87%)	285 (52.6%)
Stalking	No Experiences	525 (96.9%)	451 (83.3%)	390 (72%)	488 (90.1%)
	At least one	17 (3.2%)	91 (16.8%)	152 (28.1%)	54 (10%)
Digital Abuse	No Experiences	511 (94.3%)	337 (62.2%)	267 (49.3%)	413 (76.2%)
	At least one	31 (5.8%)	205 (37.9%)	275 (50.8%)	129 (23.9%)
Sexual Violence	No Experiences	498 (91.9%)	388 (71.6%)	292 (53.9%)	465 (85.8%)
	At least one	44 (8.2%)	154 (28.5%)	250 (46.1%)	77 (14.3%)
Physical Violence	No Experiences	492 (90.8%)	391 (72.2%)	294 (54.3%)	487 (89.9%)
	At least one	50 (9.3%)	151 (27.9%)	248 (45.8%)	55 (10.1%)
Psychological & Emotional Abuse	No Experiences	357 (65.9%)	200 (37%)	164 (30.3%)	314 (58%)
	At least one	185 (34.2%)	342 (63.1%)	378 (69.8%)	228 (42.1%)
Troubles Related Abuse	No Experiences	537 (99.1%)	528 (97.5%)	526 (97.1%)	537 (99.1%)
	At least one	5 (1%)	14 (2.6%)	16 (3%)	5 (1%)

Harassment and Sexual Harassment

Table 3 presents a more detailed breakdown of the specific types of harassment that participants had experienced across their lifespan and in the last year. For each type of *harassment/sexual harassment*, less than a quarter of the sample reported experiencing each type before the age of 11 years, with *bullying* being the most commonly reported type during and prior to primary school (22%). More than half of participants reported experiencing being *cat called/wolf whistled* at between ages 11-18 years (65%). In adulthood the majority of the sample had experienced several types of harassment including *cat calling/wolf whistling* (66%), *being stared at* (64%), *sexual comments* (59%), and *inappropriate advances* (61%); these were also the most commonly experienced types of harassment within the last year.

Table 3.
Harassment and Sexual Harassment

		Primary school - up to age 11 (N= 542)	Secondary school - between ages 11-18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Happened in the past 12 months (N= 542)
Harassment / Sexual harassment	Someone has cat called/ wolf whistled/ or shouted at you in a public place (e.g. street)	79 (14.6%)	351 (64.8%)	360 (66.4%)	139 (25.6%)
	Someone has inappropriately stared or gestured at you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable	64 (11.8%)	259 (47.8%)	345 (63.7%)	183 (33.8%)
	Someone has taken pictures of you or part of your body in public without your permission (including trying to take pictures under your clothes)	8 (1.5%)	63 (11.6%)	72 (13.3%)	26 (4.8%)
	Someone has made sexual comments, remarks, jokes either face-to-face or online to you that made you feel uncomfortable	42 (7.7%)	238 (43.9%)	319 (58.9%)	163 (30.1%)
	Someone has made an advance at you that made you feel uncomfortable	37 (6.8%)	208 (38.4%)	328 (60.5%)	139 (25.6%)
	Someone has repeatedly bullied you in person	117 (21.6%)	217 (40.0%)	112 (20.7%)	41 (7.6%)

Stalking

The two forms of stalking participants reported on had similar prevalence rates within the lifespan timeframes examined (Table 4). Experiences of being stalked were very rare before age 11 years (1-2%), becoming more common during adolescence (11-13%) and particularly so in adulthood (19-20%).

Table 4.
Stalking

		Primary school - up to age 11 (N= 542)	Secondary school - between ages 11-18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Happened in the past 12 months (N= 542)
Harassment / Sexual harassment	Someone has followed you or hung around outside your home or work	13 (2.4%)	71 (13.1%)	108 (19.9%)	33 (6.1%)
	Someone has turned up unannounced to places that you have been which has caused you concern	6 (1.1%)	57 (10.5%)	101 (18.6%)	39 (7.2%)

Digital Abuse

Digital forms of abuse were rarely experienced before age 11 years (1-3%), with rates increasing thereafter. Although it should be borne in mind that a large proportion of the sample grew up before the digital era meaning that digital abuse rates before age 11 years are likely to be higher for younger than older generations. For ages 11-18 years, age 18 years and over, and in the past year categories, the most commonly experienced types of digital abuse were *harassment by phone, text or email and being sent sexually explicit messages or photos*.

Table 5.
Digital Abuse

		Primary school - up to age 11 (N= 542)	Secondary school - between ages 11-18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Happened in the past 12 months (N= 542)
Digital Abuse	Someone has harassed you by phone, text or email	14 (2.6%)	120 (22.1%)	184 (33.9%)	62 (11.4%)
	Someone has repeatedly bullied or trolled you online using social medial (Twitter, Facebook etc.)	16 (3.0%)	74 (13.7%)	57 (10.5%)	24 (4.4%)
	Someone has sent you sexually explicit messages or photos when you did not want them to	12 (2.2%)	120 (22.1%)	168 (31.0%)	79 (14.6%)
	Someone has pressured you into sharing an intimate photo of yourself	6 (1.1%)	95 (17.5%)	102 (18.8%)	41 (7.6%)
	Someone has shared intimate photos/ videos of you without your permission	4 (0.7%)	46 (8.5%)	51 (9.4%)	26 (4.8%)

Sexual Violence

All forms of sexual violence examined affected 2-4% of the sample before the age of 11 years, rising to 5-17% between ages 11-18 years, and 11-34% in adulthood. The most commonly reported form of sexual violence from age 11 years onwards and in the past year was *engaging in sexual acts because they felt they couldn't say no*.

Table 6.
Sexual Violence

		Primary school - up to age 11 (N= 542)	Secondary school - between ages 11-18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Happened in the past 12 months (N= 542)
Sexual Violence	Someone has asked you to do something sexual in exchange for giving you something (e.g., a better grade, a recommendation, promotion, etc.)	16 (3.0%)	36 (6.6%)	58 (10.7%)	19 (3.5%)
	Someone made you perform sex acts that you did not enjoy or like	21 (3.9%)	74 (13.7%)	127 (23.4%)	28 (5.2%)
	Someone inserted fingers or objects into your vagina or other parts of your body without your consent	20 (3.7%)	53 (9.8%)	85 (15.7%)	11 (2.0%)
	Even though it didn't happen, someone tried to force you to have sex	13 (2.4%)	90 (16.6%)	140 (25.8%)	18 (3.3%)
	Someone forced you through threat or use of force to have sex	10 (1.8%)	27 (5.0%)	54 (10.0%)	10 (1.8%)
	Have you ever given in to sex or engaging in sexual acts because you felt you couldn't say no	9 (1.7%)	83 (15.3%)	182 (33.6%)	40 (7.4%)

Physical Violence

Physical forms of violence were rarely experienced across the lifespan and in the last year. That said it is still concerning to see 1-2% reporting being *hurt with a weapon, strangled, or experiencing genital mutilation* within the past year. The less physically intense forms of violence were generally more common, and the risk of experiencing them appears to increase with age.

Table 7.
Physical Violence

		Primary school - up to age 11 (N= 542)	Secondary school - between ages 11-18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Happened in the past 12 months (N= 542)
Physical Violence	Someone has pushed, grabbed, shoved or shook you aggressively	34 (6.3%)	96 (17.7%)	201 (37.1%)	33 (6.1%)
	Someone has tried to hit you with a fist or object	24 (4.4%)	83 (15.3%)	145 (26.8%)	20 (3.7%)
	Someone has physically assaulted you by punching, kicking, slapping, or biting you	28 (5.2%)	86 (15.9%)	122 (22.5%)	22 (4.1%)
	Someone has hurt you with a weapon (knife, gun, bomb etc.)	2 (0.4%)	10 (1.8%)	19 (3.5%)	10 (1.8%)
	Someone has strangled you to hurt you	5 (0.9%)	22 (4.1%)	48 (8.9%)	7 (1.3%)
	Someone has cut or sewn part of your genital area (vaginal area)	2 (0.4%)	4 (0.7%)	9 (1.7%)	6 (1.1%)

“The less physically intense forms of violence were generally more common, and the risk of experiencing them appears to increase with age.”

Psychological and Emotional Abuse

Throughout the lifespan and within the last year, the most common forms of psychological and emotional abuse were being *humiliated, put down or insulted* (past year rate, 27%) and being made to feel *unloved, unwelcome and worthless* (past year rate, 30%). Of note, prevalence of experiences related to psychological and emotional abuse over the three time periods seem to indicate a gradual increase in exposure, much like other forms of violence and abuse.

Table 8.
Psychological and Emotional Abuse

		Primary school - up to age 11 (N= 542)	Secondary school - between ages 11-18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Happened in the past 12 months (N= 542)
Psychological & Emotional Abuse	Even though they didn't follow through, someone has threatened to cause you harm	22 (4.1%)	98 (18.1%)	151 (27.9%)	32 (5.9%)
	Even though they didn't follow through, someone has threatened your life with a weapon (knife, gun, bomb etc.)	7 (1.3%)	33 (6.1%)	49 (9.0%)	16 (3.0%)
	Someone has humiliated, put down, or insulted you	160 (29.5%)	311 (57.4%)	303 (55.9%)	144 (26.6%)
	Someone has made you feel unloved, unwelcome, and worthless	113 (20.8%)	247 (45.6%)	298 (55.0%)	163 (30.1%)
	Someone has deprived you of food and/ or water	11 (2.0%)	15 (2.8%)	23 (4.2%)	12 (2.2%)
	Someone has restricted or managed your access to female related health care (e.g. Birth control or condom use)	5 (0.9%)	11 (2.0%)	25 (4.6%)	12 (2.2%)
	Someone has kept me from seeing or talking to family, friends or your children	4 (0.7%)	33 (6.1%)	62 (11.4%)	19 (3.5%)
	Someone has kept you from having access to a job, money or financial resources	4 (0.7%)	17 (3.1%)	33 (6.1%)	13 (2.4%)
	Someone has held you against your will or restricted where you can go and who you can talk to	7 (1.3%)	30 5.5%)	49 (9.0%)	15 (2.8%)
	Someone has told you that you are crazy, or tried to convince others you are unstable or tried to turn them against you	12 (2.2%)	71 (13.1%)	164 (30.3%)	65 (12.0%)
	Someone has blamed you for causing their violent behaviour	21 (3.9%)	67 (12.4%)	136 (25.1%)	48 (8.9%)

Troubles Related Abuse

The incidence of Troubles related abuse was low within the sample. Less than 1% of participants reported recent events of this kind. Nevertheless, findings do highlight the continued threat and violence for women in Northern Ireland post-conflict.

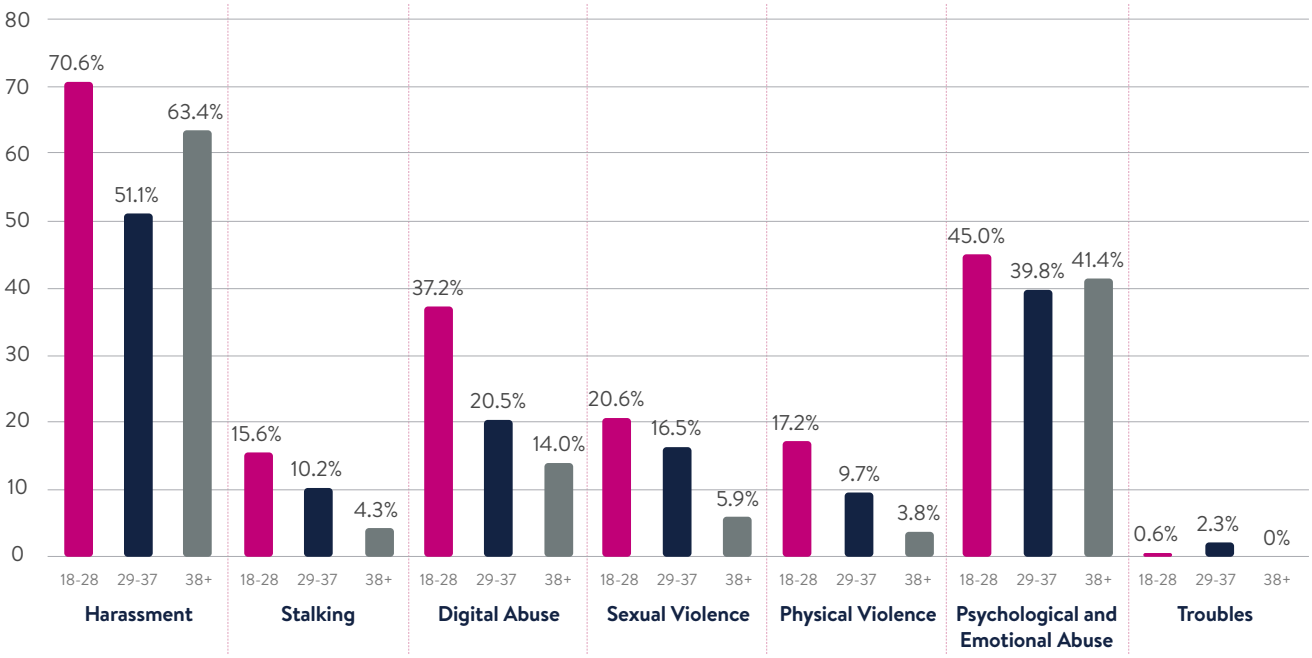
Table 9.
Troubles Related Abuse

		Primary school - up to age 11 (N= 542)	Secondary school - between ages 11-18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Happened in the past 12 months (N= 542)
Troubles Related	Have you ever been threatened or physically assaulted as a result of a paramilitary group	5 (0.9%)	14 (2.6%)	16 (3.0%)	5 (0.9%)

Experiences of Different Types of Violence and Abuse by Age

Previously, ONS (2018) data for England and Wales showed that younger women are more likely to have experienced abuse from their partner in the past year. *Figure 1* shows the proportion of our Northern Ireland sample who had experienced each type of abuse broken down by respondent age group. In general, younger women aged 18-28 years were more likely to report experiencing each type of violence or abuse within the past year than other older age groups; this excludes coercive control and troubles related violence/abuse, for which similar rates were evident across age groups.

Figure 1.
Experience of Different Types of Violence or Abuse in the Previous 12-months by Age Category (N=542)



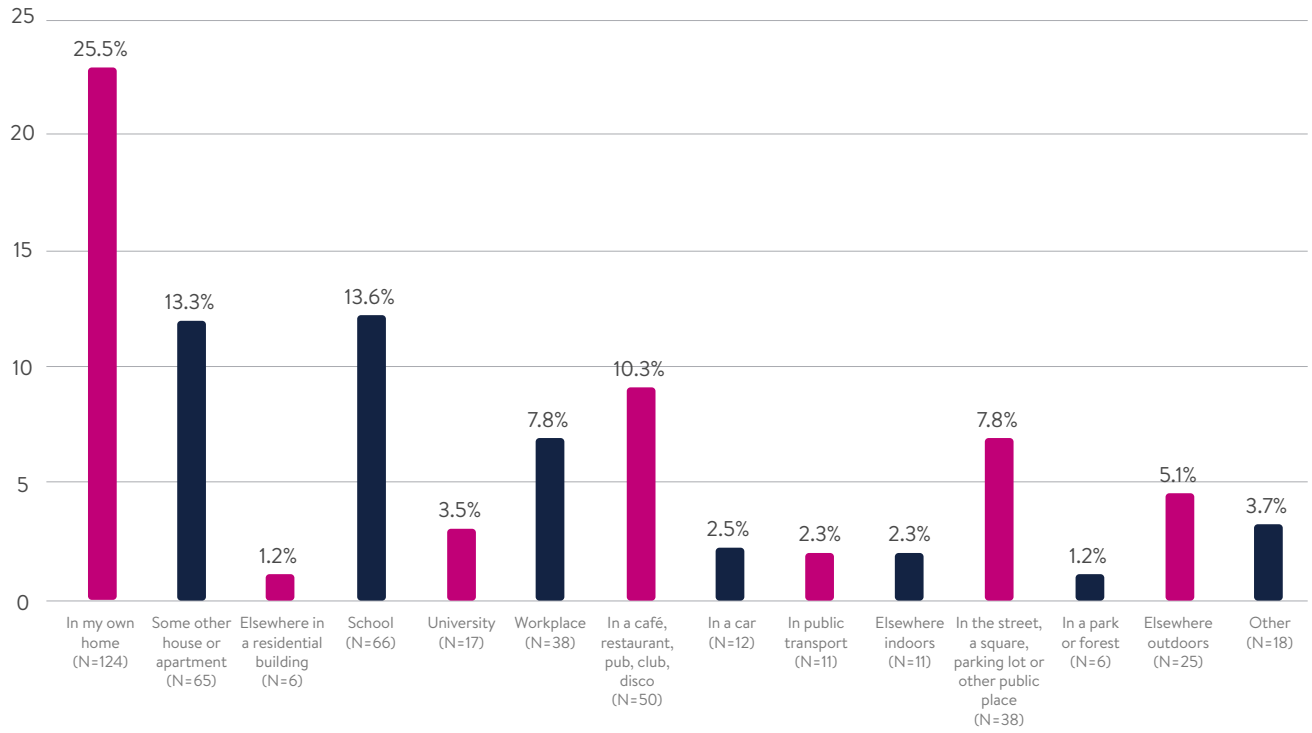
Perpetration of VAWG

Table 10.
Gender of perpetrators (N=495)

		Frequency (percentage)
Of all of the experiences mentioned before, what was the primary gender of the person or persons who did this to you?	Only Men	246 (49.7%)
	Mainly Men but also some women	165 (33.3%)
	Only women	10 (2.0%)
	Mainly women but also some men	24 (4.8%)
	Equal mix of men and women	47 (9.5%)
	Other:	3 (0.6%)

Most commonly, respondents reported that the perpetrators of the violence and abuse they experienced included only men (50%) or included mainly men but also some women (33%). However, a sizable minority of participants reported that their perpetrators were only women, mainly women or included an equal mix of men and women (16%). It is important that awareness raising campaigns about abuse and violence communicate the full complexity of violence experienced.

Figure 2.
Location of worst recalled violent event occurring (N=487)



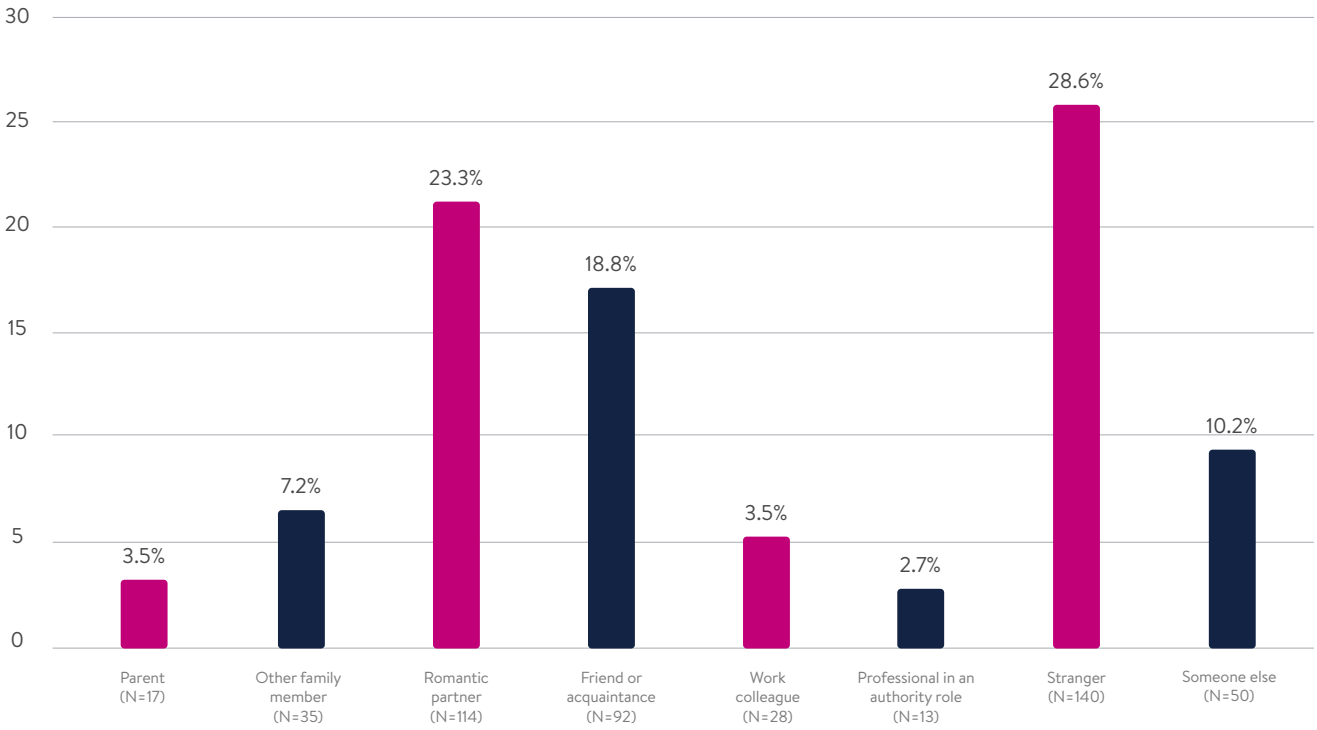
“It is important that awareness raising campaigns about abuse and violence communicate the full complexity of violence experienced.”

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate where they had experienced their worst violence or abuse event (*Figure 2*). Abuse occurred in a wide variety of places and frequently occurred in places where women should feel safe including in their own home (26%), the workplace (8%) and school (14%). This highlights the need for workplaces and schools to have clear processes for reporting and dealing with abuse allegations, so that victims have a means of escaping abuse without having to leave their school or employment in situations where there is a differential in power.

Worst Experience of Violence or Abuse

Following this, participants were asked in relation to the worst event that they could recall 'Who was the person that did this to you?' (*Figure 3*). While the most common response was a stranger (29%), often the perpetrator was known to the victim (*romantic partner* 23%; *friend or acquaintance* 19%) including perpetrators who were in positions of power over the victim (e.g. parent, 4%; professionals in an authority role, 3%). The fact that abusers in the workplace can sometimes be the actual boss demonstrates the need for channels of reporting that are independent of the boss. The results also highlight the importance of raising awareness amongst children (e.g. in schools) about what to do if they are experiencing abuse at the hands of a family member.

Figure 3.
Perpetrator of worst recalled event (N=490)



Experiences of Other Female Friends and Family Members

Half of the sample were aware that at least one female friend or family member had experienced violence or abuse (*Table 11*). This is quite low when we consider that 98% of the survey respondents reported experiencing at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime. This would suggest that women may not discuss or disclose experiences to friends and family which is further evident from findings under section three of the survey findings.

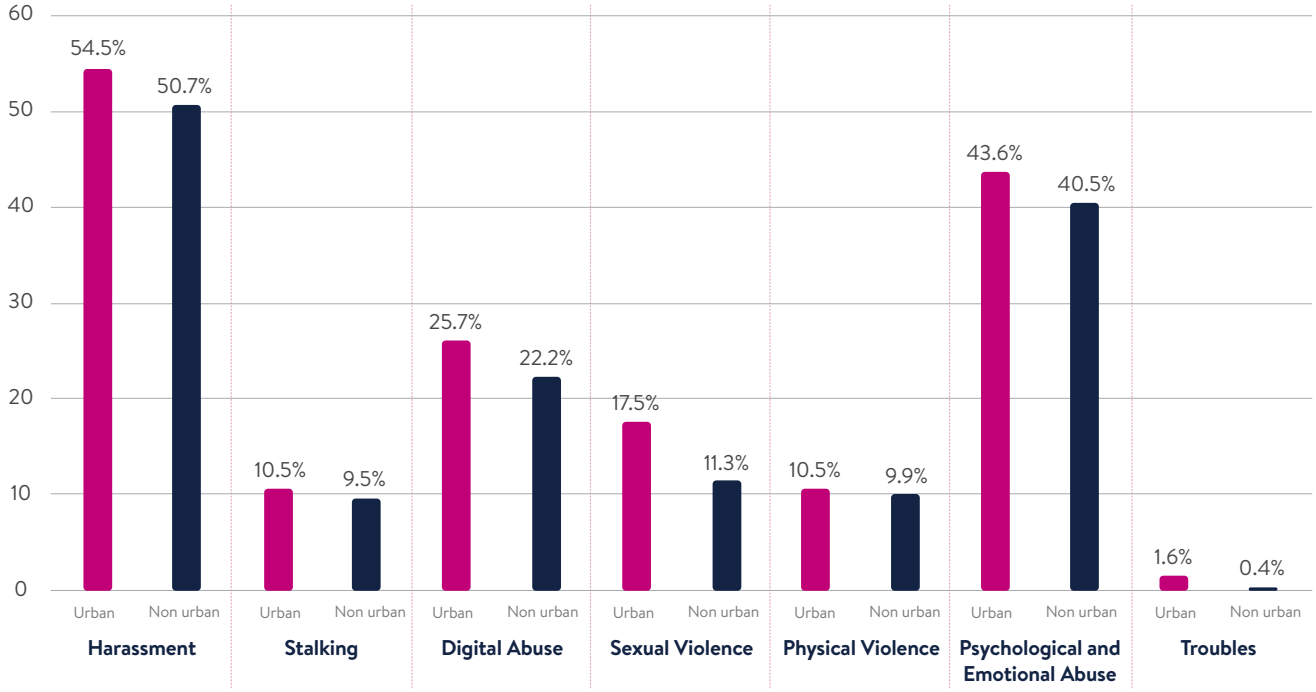
Table 11.
Occurrence of violent events among female friends and family (N=537)

Of all the experiences mentioned in the previous section do you recall if any of your female friends or family members having had such experiences?	Yes	264 (49.2%)
	No	273 (50.8%)

VAWG In Urban and Non-Urban Areas

Experiences of sexual violence in the last twelve months were more commonly reported by respondents living in urban (18%) areas compared to those living in non-urban areas (11%; *Figure 4*). For all other types of violence and abuse, similar rates were reported in urban and non-urban areas

Figure 4.
Experience of violence in the past 12 months stratified by urbanicity (N=542)



> “The results also highlight the importance of raising awareness amongst children (e.g. in schools) about what to do if they are experiencing abuse at the hands of a family member.”

Early Violence as a Predictor of Later Exposure

Analyses revealed that violence or abuse experienced before age 18 years, was associated with increased odds of experiencing the same type of abuse in adulthood (*Table 12*). This was the case for the vast majority of all types of abuse examined. This would suggest that those who experience violence or abuse early on in life run the risk of becoming trapped in cycles of abuse throughout their life course.

Table 12.
Early age violence predicting adult violence (N=542)

		Happened before age of 18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Odds Ratio
Harassment / Sexual harassment	Someone has cat called/ wolf whistled/ or shouted at you in a public place (e.g. street)	364 (67.2%)	360 (66.4%)	2.512 (0.5)*
	Someone has inappropriately stared or gestured at you in a way that made you feel uncomfortable	267 (49.3%)	345 (63.7%)	3.137 (0.62)*
	Someone has taken pictures of you or part of your body in public without your permission (including trying to take pictures under your clothes)	66 (12.2%)	72 (13.3%)	9.076 (2.96)*
	Someone has made sexual comments, remarks, jokes either face-to-face or online to you that made you feel uncomfortable	240 (44.3%)	319 (58.9%)	4.278 (0.87)*
	Someone has made an advance at you that made you feel uncomfortable	216 (39.9%)	328 (60.5%)	3.562 (0.73)*
Stalking	Someone has repeatedly bullied you in person	261 (48.2%)	112 (20.7%)	3.012 (0.71)*
	Someone has followed you or hung around outside your home or work	74 (13.7%)	108 (19.9%)	3.303 (0.91)*
	Someone has turned up unannounced to places that you have been which has caused you concern	58 (10.7%)	101 (18.6%)	3.703 (1.15)*
Digital Abuse	Someone has harassed you by phone, text or email	122 (22.5%)	184 (33.9%)	2.326 (0.52)*
	Someone has repeatedly bullied or trolled you online using social medial (Twitter, Facebook etc.)	78 (14.4%)	57 (10.5%)	4.958 (1.84)*
	Someone has sent you sexually explicit messages or photos when you did not want them to	125 (23.1%)	168 (31.0%)	3.132 (0.78)*
	Someone has pressured you into sharing an intimate photo of yourself	97 (17.9%)	102 (18.8%)	2.928 (0.83)*
	Someone has shared intimate photos/videos of you without your permission	48 (8.9%)	51 (9.4%)	5.062 (1.93)*
Sexual Violence	Someone has asked you to do something sexual in exchange for giving you something (e.g., a better grade, a recommendation, promotion, etc.)	46 (8.5%)	58 (10.7%)	11.125 (4.03)*
	Someone made you perform sex acts that you did not enjoy or like	85 (15.7%)	127 (23.4%)	2.511 (0.65)*
	Someone inserted fingers or objects into your vagina or other parts of your body without your consent	67 (12.4%)	85 (15.7%)	3.692 (1.13)*
	Even though it didn't happen, someone tried to force you to have sex	97 (17.9%)	140 (25.8%)	2.715 (0.67)*
	Someone forced you through threat or use of force to have sex	31 (5.7%)	54 (10.0%)	6.255 (2.68)
	Have you ever given in to sex or engaging in sexual acts because you felt you couldn't say no	87 (16.1%)	182 (33.6%)	2.831 (0.7)*

Table 12 Continued.

		Happened before age of 18 (N= 542)	After the age of 18 (N= 542)	Odds Ratio
Physical Violence	Someone has pushed, grabbed, shoved or shook you aggressively	103 (19.0%)	201 (37.1%)	2.942 (0.68)*
	Someone has tried to hit you with a fist or object	87 (16.1%)	145 (26.8%)	3.137 (0.81)*
	Someone has physically assaulted you by punching, kicking, slapping, or biting you	90 (16.6%)	122 (22.5%)	2.418 (0.64)*
	Someone has hurt you with a weapon (knife, gun, bomb etc.)	11 (2.0%)	19 (3.5%)	3.377 (3.67)
	Someone has strangled you to hurt you	25 (4.6%)	48 (8.9%)	2.948 (1.65)
	Someone has cut or sewn part of your genital area (vaginal area)	6 (1.1%)	9 (1.7%)	22.486 (30.89)
Psychological & Emotional Abuse	Even though they didn't follow through, someone has threatened to cause you harm	101 (18.6%)	151 (27.9%)	6.053 (1.49)*
	Even though they didn't follow through, someone has threatened your life with a weapon (knife, gun, bomb etc.)	34 (6.3%)	49 (9.0%)	12.969 (5.76)*
	Someone has humiliated, put down, or insulted you	323 (59.6%)	303 (55.9%)	3.734 (0.74)*
	Someone has made you feel unloved, unwelcome, and worthless	251 (46.3%)	298 (55.0%)	4.424 (0.88)*
	Someone has deprived you of food and/ or water	19 (3.5%)	23 (4.2%)	7.157 (4.3)
	Someone has restricted or managed your access to female related health care (e.g. Birth control or condom use)	13 (2.4%)	25 (4.6%)	14.207 (9.13)
	Someone has kept me from seeing or talking to family, friends or your children	35 (6. 5%)	62 (11.4%)	12.457 (5.02)*
	Someone has kept you from having access to a job, money or financial resources	19 (3.5%)	33 (6.1%)	16.671 (9)
	Someone has held you against your will or restricted where you can go and who you can talk to	33 (6.1%)	49 (9.0%)	11.854 (5.17)*
	Someone has told you that you are crazy, or tried to convince others you are unstable or tried to turn them against you	71 (13.1%)	164 (30.3%)	6.544 (1.85)*
	Someone has blamed you for causing their violent behavior	71 (13.1%)	136 (25.1%)	8.511 (2.47)*
Troubles Related	Have you ever been threatened or physically assaulted as a result of a paramilitary group	17 (3.1%)	16 (3.0%)	18.025 (13.22)

Note. Regression analyses controlling for Age, Urbanicity, Income, Education and having Children were ran examining whether early age and adolescent violence events predicted same violence type occurring in adulthood.

SURVEY SECTION 2
THE IMPACTS OF VIOLENCE

The next part of the survey focused on assessing the impact of violence and abuse on women particularly with regards to their mental health and well-being. Survey respondents were asked to indicate which of the violence/abuse types that they had experienced was the most distressing for them. The most common response was *harassment/sexual harassment* (*Table 13*). This finding should be treated with caution as this was the most common type of abuse that the sample had experienced overall, thereby inflating the likelihood of this type of abuse being named as most distressing.

To further assess the impact of violence against women and girls, participants were asked to indicate which emotions they associated with the most distressing violence/abuse event they had experienced (*Figure 5*). Participants could pick as many emotions as they deemed relevant. Over half the sample indicated that they associated *fear* (54%) or *embarrassment* (52%) with the event. All the other negative emotions including embarrassment, annoyance, anger, shock, disgust, sadness and shame, felt by at least a fifth of the sample, and only 2% felt no emotion at all.

Table 13.
Most distressing type of violence recalled

Of all of the experiences mentioned before, please indicate which event was the most distressing for you? (N=506)	Frequency (percentage)
Harassment / Sexual harassment	200 (39.5%)
Stalking	25 (4.9%)
Digital Abuse	29 (5.7%)
Sexual Violence	107 (21.1%)
Physical Violence	44 (8.7%)
Psychological & Emotional Abuse	59 (11.7%)
Troubles Related Abuse	4 (0.8%)
None	38 (7.5%)

> “The next part of the survey focused on assessing the impact of violence and abuse on women particularly with regards to their mental health and well-being.”

Figure 5.
Word cloud - Emotions following worst event



As part of the survey, respondents completed the International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ; Cloitre et al, 2018) which measures the core features of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD).

Amongst individuals who reported having experienced violence or abuse, just under one quarter (24%) gave responses that would suggest a probable PTSD diagnosis (*Figure 6*). The violence and abuse that the respondents reported in this survey are likely to have contributed to the development of PTSD, particularly those reporting several types of violence or abuse experiences. Indeed, some papers have reported a dose effect for number of traumas and severity of PTSD (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that the participants may have experienced other forms of trauma in their lifetime that would not be classified as violence or abuse against a person (e.g. bereavement; severe illness or injury, witness to a natural disaster) and these too may have contributed to the development of PTSD symptoms.

Figure 6.
Probable PTSD diagnosis for sufferers of violence (N=521)

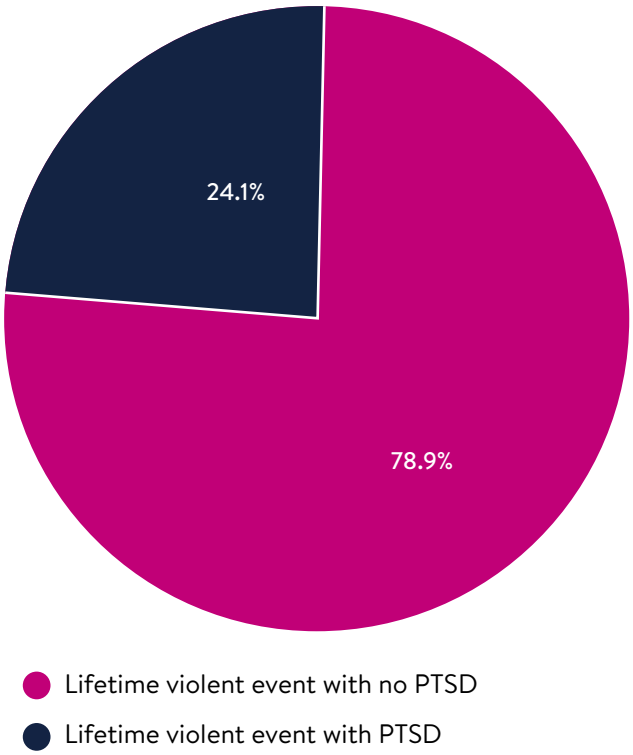
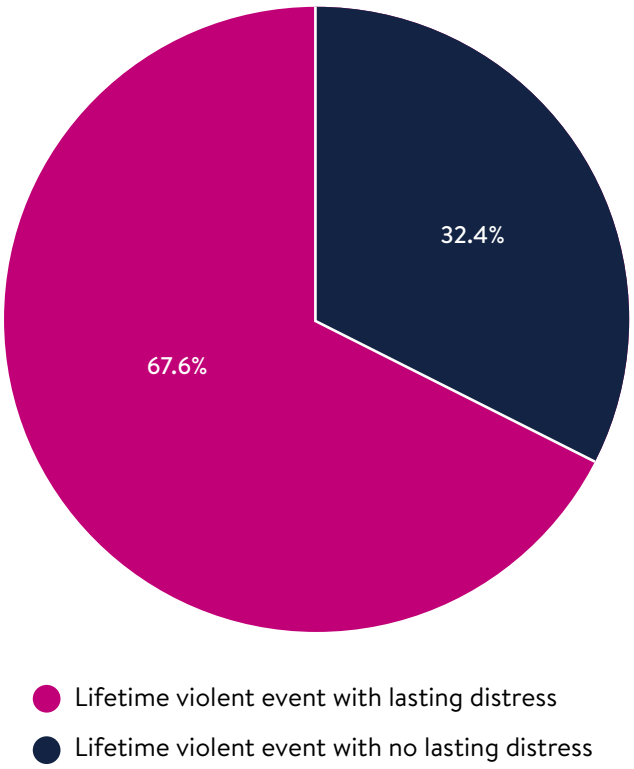


Figure 7.
Psychological distress diagnosis for sufferers of violence (N=521)



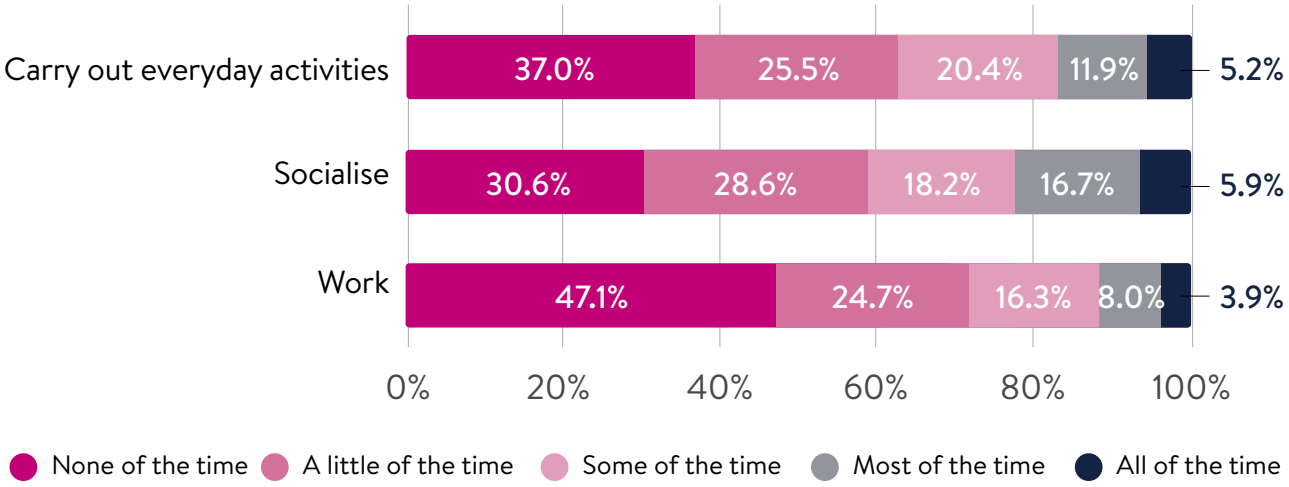
Within the survey, we also asked participants to respond to The K-6 Distress Scale (Kessler et al, 2003) which is a short self report measure for psychological distress (*Figure 7*). Around one third (32.4%) of those who had experienced violence or abuse had results that would suggest substantial psychological distress.

Unfortunately, very few women in the sample had no violence or abuse experiences (2%), and therefore it was not possible to provide a comparative measure of the proportion of women with psychological distress based on those who had no lifetime experiences of violence or abuse. Therefore we cannot draw strong conclusions about whether the psychological distress reported by the current study participants, is related to their violence and abuse experiences exclusively but proceeding questions relating to how women feel their experience has impacted their functioning do give us a good indication of some of the impacts of experiencing violence.

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which the problems associated with their most distressing violence or abuse experience had affected their ability to work, socialise, or carry out everyday activities in the past 30 days (Figure 8). Many were substantially impacted by their violence and abuse experiences as evidenced by the proportion who said their ability to work (12%), socialise (23%), and carry out everyday activities (17%) was affected most or all or the time.

For those who reported being unable to work, the associated financial consequences may sadly lead, in some cases, to victims going back to abusive relationships in order to maintain some financial security. It is particularly concerning that so many women were significantly impacted in their ability to socialise, as social contact is an important protective factor for wellbeing and recovery. It is possible that some women may be socially isolating themselves as a result of their mental ill health symptoms or to remove themselves from further exposure to violence or abuse. Further, for those reporting difficulty in carrying out everyday activities, there may be a knock-on effect on caring responsibilities, including care for children and other dependents as well as meeting one's own self care needs.

Figure 8.
Impact of distress on ability carry out everyday activities (N=538), socialize (N=539) or work (N=539)



> "It is particularly concerning that so many women were significantly impacted in their ability to socialise, as social contact is an important protective factor for wellbeing and recovery."

SURVEY SECTION 3 REPORTING VIOLENCE

Women completing the survey were asked about their experience of reporting violent incidents. Questions included whether or not they reported the incident, to whom they reported it and how helpful they found the response when they did report. We also asked the reasons why people did not report incidents and how they tried to cope in the aftermath. Finally, confidence in reporting physical and sexual violence as well as non-physical forms of abuse to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) was also asked.

Around one third of women were able to speak about or report the violent incident that had occurred (*Table 15*). This is in line with the international research that finds low rates of reporting of intimate partner or sexual violence.

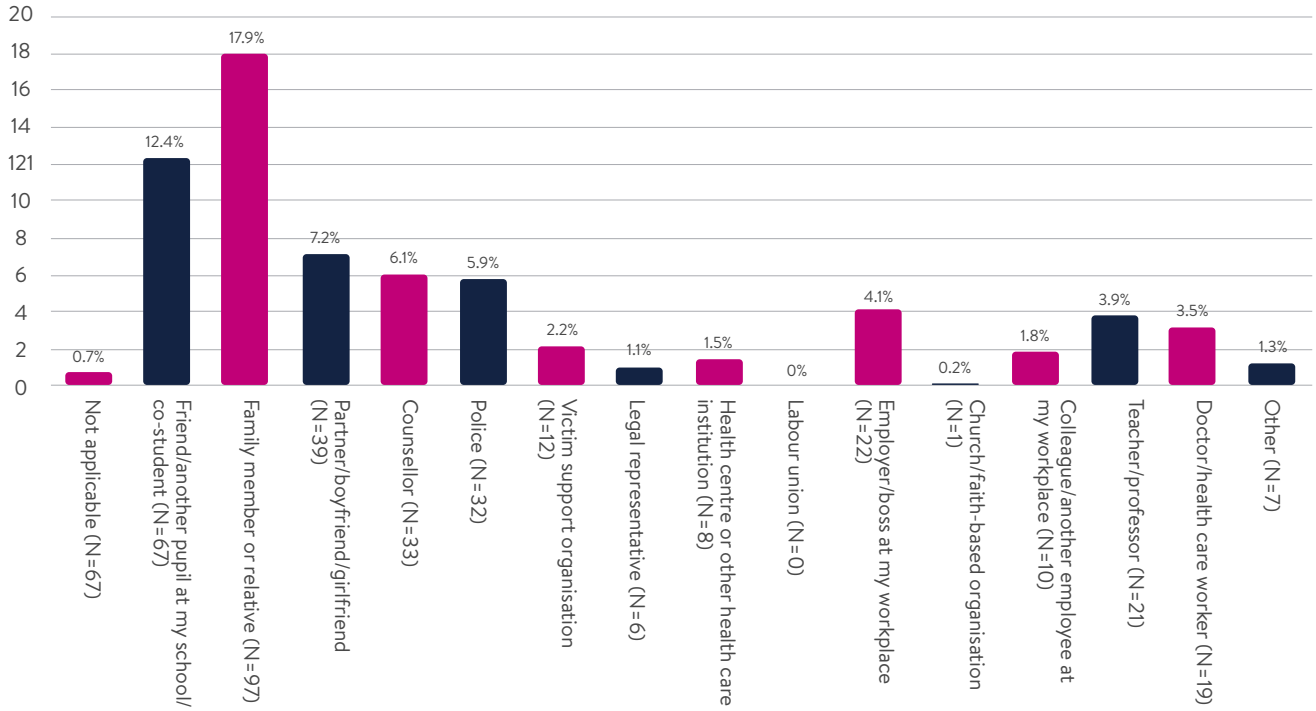
Table 15.
Disclosure of violent incidents

Reporting Details (N=498)		Frequency (percentage)
Did you speak about this incident or report it to anyone?	Yes	170 (34.1%)
	No	328 (65.9%)

Who Did You Talk To?

The women who were able to talk about their experience, did so with a family member/relative (18%) or a friend or fellow student (12%) (Figure 10). A small number were able to speak with a partner, girlfriend or boyfriend demonstrating how difficult dealing with these incidents can be and the associated shame and fear often experienced by victims. Other, seemingly obvious, sources of support were not routinely accessed by victims (6% spoke to a counsellor; 6% reported to the PSNI). Fewer still spoke to victim support, a health care provider, work colleague or employer. How and to whom people report incidents could be used to inform public health messaging and interventions to help women access the support and help they need. The responsibility appears to lie with friends and family to provide support or signposting should a woman disclose a violent event, providing advice and direction to the general public how to respond appropriately may be a valuable aspect of early intervention strategies.

Figure 9.
Disclosure channel (N=378)



When You Spoke To Someone, Did You Find The Response You Got Helpful?

Given how helpful women rated people's responses when they reported or shared their experience of a violent event, clearly, more work is required to provide appropriate and adequate early responses to women affected by violence. Women were more likely to endorse *somewhat helpful* (37.6%) but only 17.6% found the response *extremely helpful* (*Table 16*).

Table 16.
Helpfulness of disclosure (N=170)

When you spoke to someone, did you find the response you got helpful?	
Extremely helpful	30 (17.6%)
Very helpful	44 (25.9%)
Somewhat helpful	64 (37.6%)
Not so helpful	21 (12.4%)
Not at all helpful	11 (6.5%)

Not Reporting Experiences of Violence

Understanding why women do not report experiences of violence is of equal importance. *Shame and embarrassment* were the greatest barrier to reporting violent experiences, with almost 40% of the those who had responded to this question citing this as the primary reason for not reporting the event (*Table 17*). Similarly, others wanted to *keep it private* (32%) or felt *it was not serious enough* (29%) or *did not think it would help* (29%). While 29% of respondents *felt equipped to deal with it* themselves, there were many others who were not able to report it because they believed that they were *at fault themselves* (21%), *would not be believed* (16%), were *afraid of the perpetrator* (14%), or *didn't want to get into trouble* (14%). Around one in five (19%) of respondents were *too emotionally upset to report it*.

Of interest, is the number of respondents who *did not think of reporting it* (14%), *did not know where to report it* (89%); a small number of women were *stopped or discouraged from doing so* (2%). Again, this has clear messaging for women and how they can be supported to come forward and report and/or seek help.

Tackling shame and stigma around violence against women remains a significant barrier to disclosing experiences, this may also impede women seeking appropriate support and care following an event that can have potentially longer term impact on their wellbeing.

Table 17.
Reasons for not reporting the experience (N=327)

Why did you not tell anyone?	
Was able to deal with it myself	96 (29.4%)
Too minor/not serious enough to report or tell anyone	96 (29.4%)
Never occurred to me	45 (13.8%)
Did not think it would help	95 (29.1%)
Fear of the person who did this to me	47 (14.4%)
I did not want to get into trouble	47 (14.4%)
Somebody stopped me or discouraged me	6 (1.8%)
Shame, embarrassment	126 (38.5%)
Thought it was my fault	67 (20.5%)
Did not want anyone to know/kept it private	104 (31.8%)
Too emotionally upset to tell anyone	62 (19%)
Would not be believed	52 (15.9%)
I did not know where I could get help	28 (8.6%)
Other reason	8 (2.4%)
Prefer not to say	3 (0.9%)

> more work is required to provide appropriate and adequate early responses to women affected by violence.

What Helped (If Anything) to Deal with Your Experience of Violence?

Receiving support from family and friends helped a number of women to cope (*Table 18*), this is encouraging as this group remains the primary source of support if victims choose to speak about or report their experience of violence. Nonetheless, it is of equal concern that more than one quarter (30%) of respondents to this question felt that *nothing helped*. Acknowledging that violence was/is wrong was beneficial for 22% of victims, but others found other sources to help them deal with their experience of violence including talking to others, seeking professional support, and severing links with the perpetrator through divorce, separation or moving away. Fewer than 3% of respondents of this question found bringing charges against the perpetrator or a court conviction helped, and this may reflect the very low prosecution and conviction rates for sexual crime and the many negative experiences women have reported experiencing through the criminal justice process.

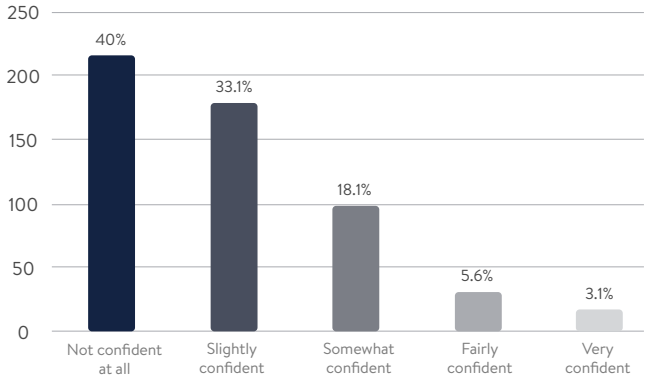
Table 18.
Sources of support (N=498)

What helped (if anything) to deal with your experience of violence	
Support from family and friends	149 (29.9%)
Divorce/separation/moving away	43 (8.6%)
Telling others about the experiences	79 (15.9%)
Acknowledging that the violence was/is wrong	107 (21.5%)
The perpetrator made amends/changed behaviour	30 (6%)
Professional support including counselling and victim support	45 (9%)
Charges brought against the perpetrator/ conviction in court	14 (2.8%)
Other means	60 (12%)
Nothing helped	150 (30.1%)

> ...it is of equal concern that more than one quarter (30%) of respondents to this question felt that 'nothing helped'.

Respondents were asked to rate their confidence in reporting physical violence (*Figure 10*) sexual violence (*Figure 11*) or non – physical violence (*Figure 12*) to the PSNI. Almost three quarters (73%) of respondents to the question were *not confident at all* or *slightly confident* in reporting physical violence to the PSNI (*Figure 10*). This is a stark finding; physical violence may carry less shame and stigma and, in some cases, may be less of an ordeal to report and perhaps easier to prove yet many women do not feel confident in reporting to the police.

Figure 10.
Confidence of reporting physical violence to PSNI (N= 540)



> “Almost three quarters (73%) of respondents to the question were not confident at all or slightly confident in reporting physical violence to the PSNI. This is a stark finding.”

Confidence in the reporting of sexual violence to the PSNI was also low, with over three quarters (77%) of respondents (n=540) *not confident at all* or *slightly confident* (*Figure 11*). This sends a strong message that the PSNI has work to do to establish trust and increase confidence for female victims of violence.

Figure 11.
Confidence of reporting sexual violence to PSNI (N= 540)

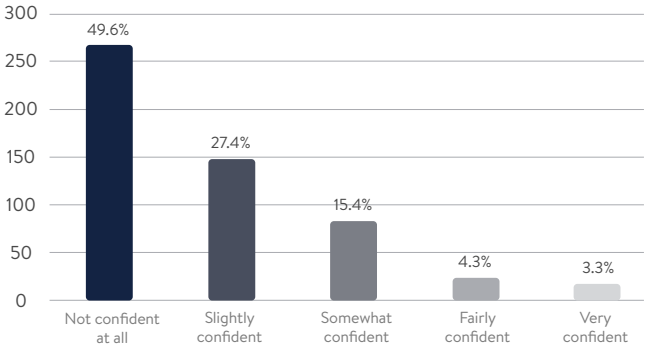
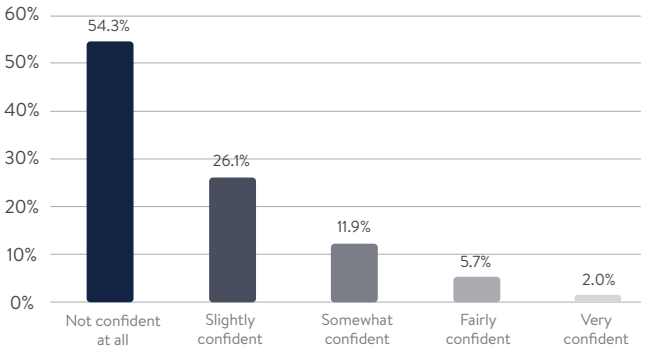
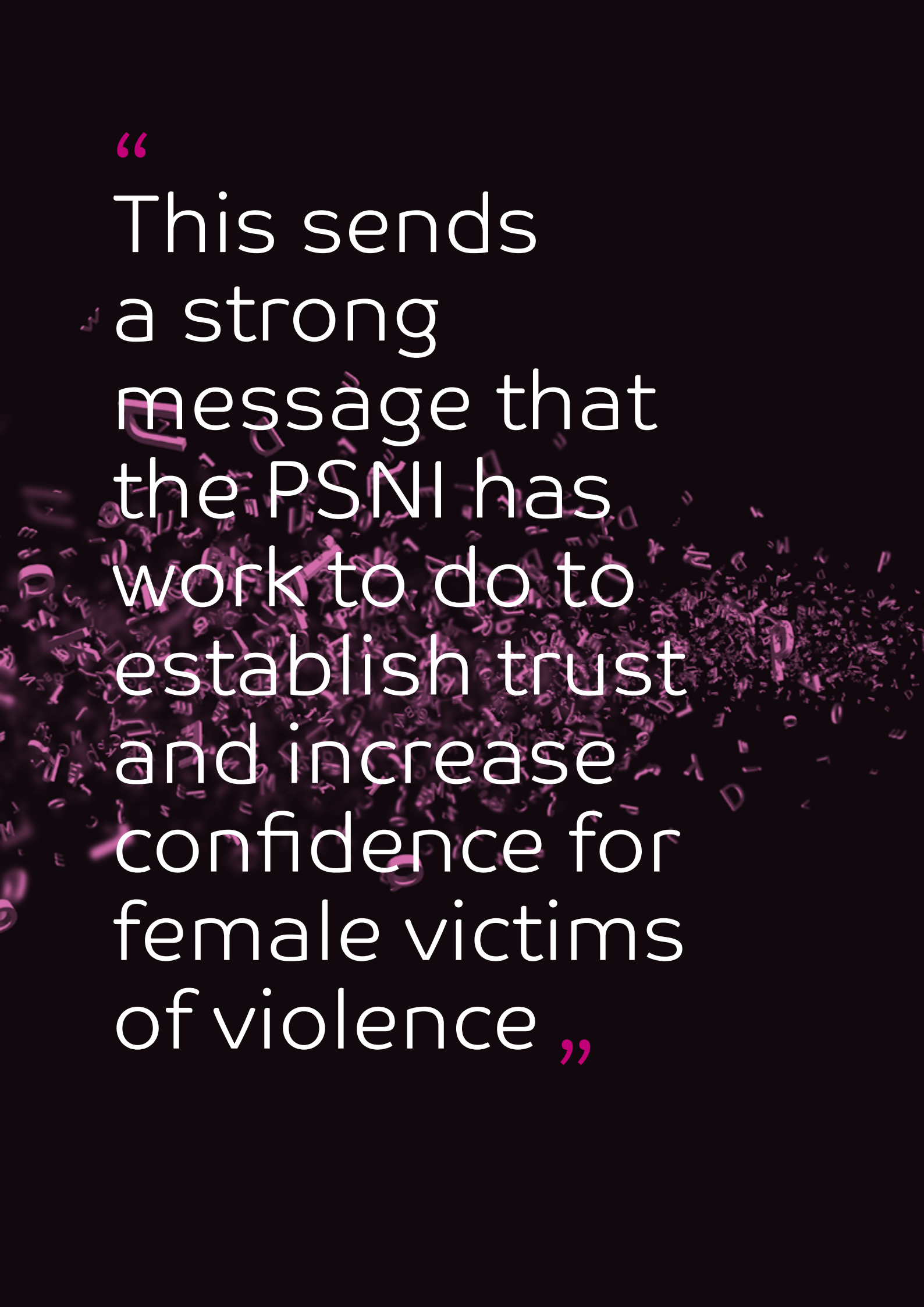


Figure 12 shows that only 8% of respondents (n = 540) felt that women feel fairly or very confident reporting non-physical violence to the police.

Figure 12.
Confidence of reporting non - physical violence (N=540)





“This sends a strong message that the PSNI has work to do to establish trust and increase confidence for female victims of violence„

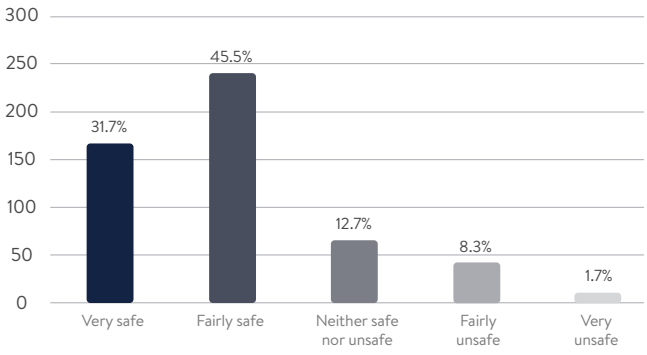
SURVEY SECTION 4 SAFE FROM VIOLENCE

The final section reports on women's experience of safety in public spaces. We asked women about how safe they felt walking alone in the area they lived during the day or night and the use of public transport by day or night Respondents were also asked to rate how safe they felt at home, at work, or at university/college.

Reported Safety of Walking Alone or Using Public Transport

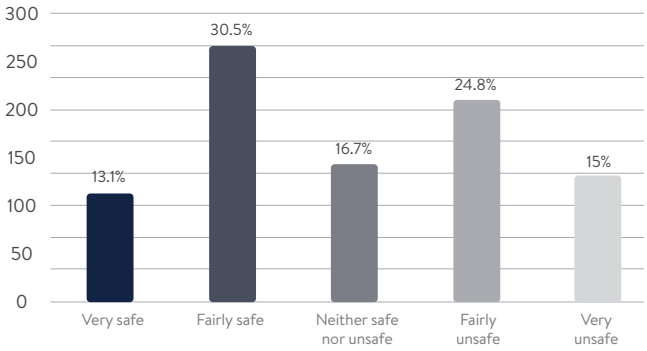
Most women felt safe walking alone in the area they lived during the day, despite this a sizeable minority (10%) felt *fairly unsafe* or *very safe* (*Figure 13*). We cannot tell from our data where these women live, the particular sources of fear, or if these experiences are clustered geographically but it remains important that a number of women still feel frightened during the day in their local neighbourhood.

Figure 13.
Reported safety of walking alone during the day (N= 527)



Unsurprisingly perhaps, a greater proportion of women reported feeling *very* or *fairly unsafe* walking alone at night (40%; Figure 14), compared to during the day (10%; Figure 13). Again, we do not know more detail about the areas where these women live or the reasons for feeling unsafe.

Figure 14.
Reported safety of walking alone during nighttime (N=521)



A similar pattern was observed in the use of public transport by day and night (Figure 15 and 16). With around 11% felt *fairly* or *very unsafe* during the day, increasing to almost 43% at night. How transport companies can restore feelings of safety and security in public transport is important to consider.

Figure 15.
Reported safety of using public transport during daytime (N= 504)

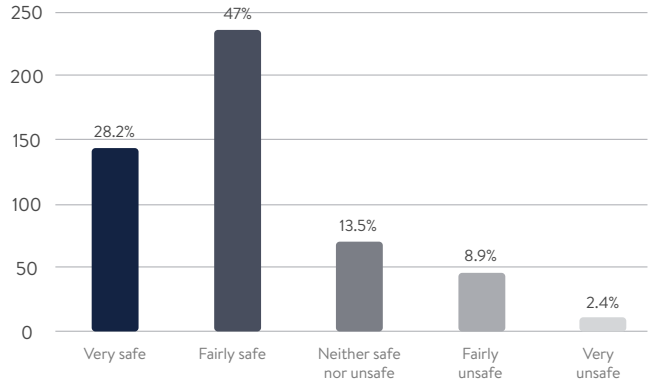
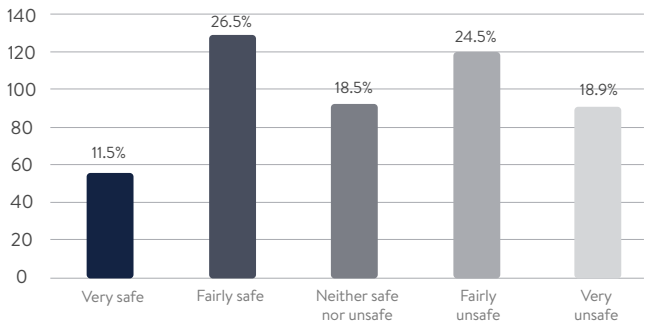


Figure 16.
Reported safety of using public transport during nighttime (N=486)



Feelings of safety from violence at home, work and university/college were also explored in the survey (*Figure 17*). The majority of women reported feeling *very safe* or *fairly safe* in their home (89%) in work (83%) and university or college (74%) However, a sizable minority of women did not feel *very* or *fairly safe* in their home (5%), work (8%) or university/college (10.0%). We do not know from the data who they feel unsafe from however it is a worrying trend that a considerable number of women reported feeling that their safety was in some way compromised in places where they should feel safe.

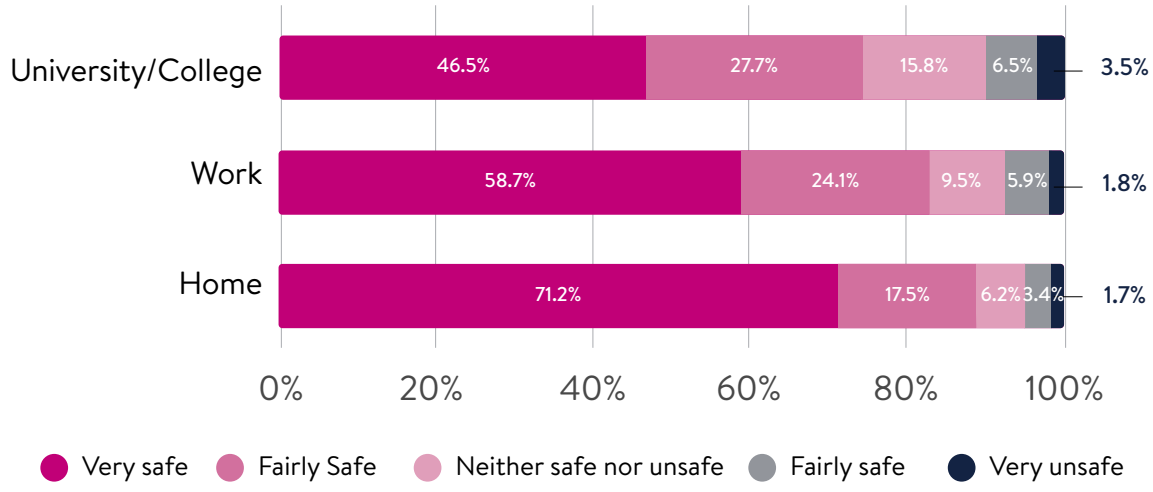
Taking Precautions

Respondents were asked to consider the top three precautions they could take to make them feel safer in public spaces (*Table 19*). The behaviours reported make it clear that women feel that the onus is placed on them to tailor their behaviours to reduce their vulnerability with the most endorsed items included *walking/travelling with someone* (72%), keeping to well lit areas (56%) or avoiding particular areas (48%). The use of personal safety equipment or other technology such as CCTV or apps/GPS trackers were less common (around 20% of respondents endorsing these as precautionary measures). It would appear that the rationale women prioritised was to avoid putting themselves in vulnerable situations in the first place to avoid having to react or respond should something happen to them. Asking women to take precautions rather than promoting behaviour change in men that may help women feeling safer in public spaces appears to be the focus of initiatives.

Table 19.
Recommended precautions (N=542)

What helped (if anything) to deal with your experience of violence	
Walking or travelling with someone	389 (71.8%)
Avoiding particular areas	262 (48.3%)
Using personal safety equipment (alarms etc.)	117 (21.6%)
Speak to someone on the phone while I walk or travel	241 (44.5%)
Keeping to well lit areas	304 (56.1%)
Keeping to where CCTV cameras are in place	109 (20.1%)
Keeping to areas where there are lots of other people	250 (46.1%)
Using an app or other GPS tracker to send my location to someone I know	109 (20.1%)
Not leaving home after dark	107 (19.7%)

Figure 17.
Reported safety at university/college (N=260), work (N = 494), and home (N = 531)



QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW FINDINGS



Between September 2022 and November 2022, a total of 34 women took part in an interview or focus group with one of the researchers. This included 18 individual interviews and three focus groups ranging from three to nine participants.

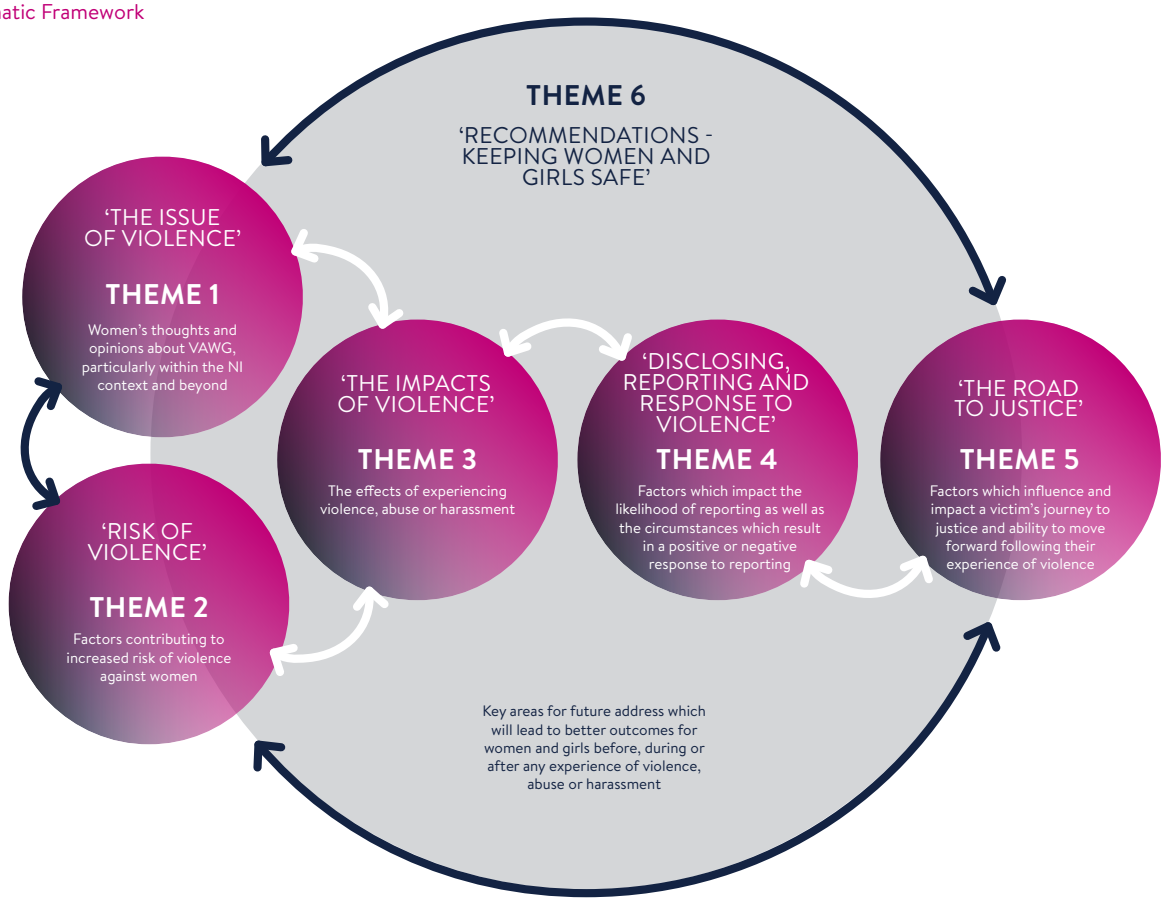
Most women were born in Northern Ireland (79%) and currently lived in the Derry/ Londonderry region of Northern Ireland (47%), followed by the Antrim (32%) Armagh/ Down (15%) and Fermanagh/ Tyrone (6%) areas. The majority of women were aged between 47-56 years of age (32%) followed by 56-66 years (27%), 37-46 years (24%) and 25-36 year of age (18%).

Most of the women reported their ethnicity as white (94%, Black African, 2.9%, Chinese, 2.9%,) and described their sexual orientation as heterosexual (94%), bisexual or queer (6%). As noted during the introduction of this report, the team completed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) following review of all interviews in order to identifying shared perspectives and insights from all participating women.

The Thematic Framework (*Figure 18*) displays six major themes, including the direction of connections between themes. The remainder of this section will discuss these key themes and subsequent sub-themes identified from the interview data supported with quotations taken from the interviews.

“The remainder of this section will discuss these key themes and subsequent sub-themes identified from the interview data supported with quotations taken from the interviews.”

Figure 18.
Thematic Framework



THEME 1

THE ISSUE OF VIOLENCE

This theme explores women's thoughts and opinions about violence against women, particularly within the Northern Irish context. Every woman interviewed agreed that violence against women and girls was a significant issue regionally, and one which *"lies beneath the surface"* (VAWG12-15). During the interviews many spoke about how violence has touched **Every Woman** *"at every point in their life"* (VAWG18) and by proxy, many others,

> *"I would say that it's quite an extensive issue and one that has, in some way or another, probably touched everybody... every woman... and probably by extension, every man's life as well. I would think that either somebody who has had violence physically done to them in one shape or form, or knows of somebody else who it has happened to".* (VAWG7)

> *"... I think really even, looking at wider society, unfortunately you don't need to turn on the news very often to hear the sad outcome of violence against women. And it's horrific, obviously, women losing their lives. And I think that doesn't even touch the surface in terms of maybe women that don't report"* (VAWG5)

Those interviewed expressed how violence against women is often normalized and often to the point of invoking routine fear, *"Men are afraid that women will laugh at them and women are afraid that men will kill them"* (VAWG2); *"I would feel a little bit scared when I went out in the dark. So I would assume that's for a reason".* (VAWG6).

Often the discussion around the fear and vulnerability of women within society stemmed from a real sense of **Power Imbalance** between men and women within Northern Ireland, *"We've always had less power in society"* (VAWG26-34FG). The women perceived that there is a social expectation that requires women to take a step back, take up less space and speak a little less loudly; women are settled with *"... a culture of entitlement perpetuated by the male dominance in this society..."* (VAWG8) which leaves women vulnerable to violence and abuse.

Prior to the interviews, those taking part were asked about their experiences of different **Types of Violence**, abuse, and harassment throughout their lives (*Table 1*). While an experience of violence was not a requirement for participation, many women reported experiencing different forms of violence at different stages of their life. This was particularly evident to sexual and physical violence as well as a high rates of exposure to psychological and emotional abuse. During interviews, participating women drew on their own experiences and those of others when considering the impact of violence for women living in Northern Ireland.

During the interviews, some women reflected on their lifetime exposure of violence they have faced, including incidents at home, school, work and church,

> *"... it has happened to me in somebody else's home, it has happened to me in school and it has happened to me in various different scenarios throughout my life. And although I've mentioned the sexual kind of aspects, and I know I mentioned as well that there's been physical and mental things that have happened too... and it's just... it's just wrong."* (VAWG4)

For those reporting their own experiences of violence, most commonly the perpetrators of violence were men (61%), albeit a sizable minority of participating women reported experiencing violence from both men and women (33%) or only from women (6%). This, for the majority, included violence at the hands of parents and other family members as well as friends and acquaintances. Spaces where violence and abuse often occurred included home, school and public places.

Table 20.
Interviews – Experience of Violence

Note: 'Less than 10%' label within cells denotes number of participants less than 5.

		Primary School – Up to Age 11 (n= 34)	Secondary School - Ages 11-18 (n= 34)	After Age of 18 (n= 34)
Reported Any (%)		24 (71%)	23 (68%)	28 (82%)
Financial Abuse	No Experiences		34 (100%)	20 (59%)
	At least one	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	14 (41%)
Stalking	No Experiences	34 (100%)	29 (85%)	18 (53%)
	At least one	0 (0%)	5 (15%)	16 (47%)
Digital Abuse	No Experiences	34 (100%)	32 (94%)	26 (77%)
	At least one	0 (0%)	Less than 10%	8 (24%)
Sexual Violence	No Experiences		24 (71%)	14 (41%)
	At least one	6 (18%)	10 (29%)	20 (59%)
Physical Violence	No Experiences	15 (44%)	17 (50%)	15 (44%)
	At least one	19 (56%)	17 (50%)	19 (56%)
Psychological and Emotional Abuse	No Experiences	19 (56%)	17 (50%)	11 (32%)
	At least one	15 (44%)	17 (50%)	23 (68%)
Troubles Related Abuse	No Experiences	34 (100%)	34 (100%)	28 (82%)
	At least one	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (18%)

The reality of the issue of violence against women is that it is '**Every Woman**'. Women do not feel safe and with good reason, *"it can happen anywhere at any anytime"* (VAWG18), *"It's probably going through their head, am I next?"* (VAWG12-15FG),

> *"Worldwide, women are at risk regardless of where they go. Whether that's school, whether it's work, whether they are just taking a walk around a local park or walking to the shop, whatever they are doing. Walking round town, out for a night out, any situation that a woman is in. Even out driving alone in the car. These are situations. At any point where women are on their own, is opportunity. A risk for violence"* (VAWG16)

> *"These things, they can happen so randomly. Like I was in what I deemed probably one of the safest places that I am. And it still happened there. I don't know that there's anything more they could have done to stop someone like that coming into a church"* (VAWG17)

Women from all walks of life are living each day as potential victims with little sense of safety and *"if you're lucky to survive, then you've survived"* (VAWG26-34FG).

THEME 2

RISK OF VIOLENCE

The theme of risk of violence explores women's perceptions of the factors that contribute towards the victimization of women. This included individual, familial and social level factors. Many women highlighted the role of **Early Exposure** to violence and abuse within family homes resulting in the normalization and acceptance of violence, risking future victimization or perpetration: *"because they've been brought up in that environment, that's acceptable. Whereas they don't realise the danger that they are in"* (VAWG12-15 FG), "... women who have experienced stuff, especially early in life, in terms of repeat patterns, and they are maybe drawn to people who do treat them badly, without even realising that. And I suppose repeating the cycle" (VAWG5). Also *"...men who think that they can get whatever they want by being abusive, and that continues into adulthood. So growing up an a violent home contributes towards it"* (VAWG26-34).

Some women also discussed how the **Troubles** conflict in Northern Ireland has created *"an undercurrent of violence"* (VAWG19) which often filters down to how women are treated,

> *"In Northern Ireland, I think we have a lot of layers of violence against women, where we are a post war society and a lot of that is still feeding down from paramilitary groups. Or there would be a lot of violence... it's probably more prevalent in inner city societies. I would see less of it, but I do know that there is a lot of it in the likes of large cities like Belfast and Derry. There would be estates that would be nearly controlled and then that would filter down into how the men that are in those groups, would deal with women. So we have that layer that wouldn't necessarily be prevalent in other UK nations like Scotland or England or Wales".* (VAWG11)

Some reflected on historical experiences of violence and abuse and entrapment as a result of mistrust between the police service and communities during that period, *"You didn't phone the police and that was the thing. And the police didn't come into the areas. And maybe now women would phone the police and would pick up or go and look for help. But then you didn't"*. (VAWG12-15)

Unfortunately, experiences of paramilitary threat were not all historical: *"I spent a year... I spent a year of having threats, the UDA, everything. Oh, I'm going to burn your car out. I'm going to burn your house out. I'm going to do this. I spent a year of living like that. And that needs to change"* (VAWG25). Some women also expressed how currently, *"because of the post war society as well, there's a lot of distrust of the PSNI, so a lot of women won't go and won't report"* (VAWG11).

Additionally, the 'behind closed doors' mentality of Northern Irish society and broader **Social Attitudes** (including the attitudes of other women), was often viewed as perpetuating the use of violence and preventing women from speaking about their experiences, *"it's a cultural thing, where women in Northern Ireland traditionally have not spoken out..."* (VAW22-24), *"Because there's still a lot of families and communities where they would rather what goes on behind closed doors, stays behind closed doors"* (VAWG19);

> *"Because, I suppose maybe within Northern Ireland it's more it stays in the family and then I think, because of history, you maybe had family and you had the church and you had community and things, just stayed silent. It was almost like it was shameful to go outside and seek help outside that. As in, you are airing your dirty laundry"* (VAWG5)

> *"My experiences in community, in the community, is that everyone just puts their heads down and wants to ignore it. And people don't reach out. And maybe I would have been as guilty of that. But we don't… I suppose we should be more aware of our neighbours and reaching out to them"* (VAWG9)

The role of **Faith and Churches** was also raised as a potential risk factor for women in terms of their acceptance of violence and expectation to endure violence on the grounds of religious doctrine surrounding marriage,

> *"I would say the religious factors that we have in Northern Ireland here. I guess I can only speak somewhat from a little bit of experience as well, in terms of being brought up within a church. And you are kind of taught, or conditioned in a way, that your place as a woman is to be quiet and just accept and tolerate. I think that's a huge issue, particularly in Northern Ireland anyway. Not to mention the other political issues that we have here as well, which can create a bit of a problem"* (VAWG16)

> *"There was a time where I thought, if my parents' church, if my parents' religious leaders had been more sympathetic to my plight, how much different my life would have been"* (VAWG2)

That said, across interviews, there was consensus that the **'Roles' of Men and Women** perceived by society more broadly also creates differences in how women are treated, increasing the risk of violence against women, *"…it starts right from nurturing, right from the beginning when baby boys and girls are born, how they are treated differently and socialised differently. And then that just carries on into society at large"* (VAWG19).

During interviews, there was also a wider discussion about some of the circumstances which contribute to the risk of violence, this included issues such as economic deprivation which help maintain abusive relationships by creating **Financial Dependency**, *"… monetary control, financial control, which is another form of violence against women. And you'll find that that now is… it's worrying now, with the cost of living crisis especially, that that can continue to escalate. And there are women that are going to be stuck in relationships"* (VAWG11). Indeed, wider issues facing the public such as Covid-19 and Cost of Living Crisis were acknowledged as furthering risk of violence against women,

> *"But I think that lockdown really escalated domestic violence in the home, because you couldn't escape. And it would have triggered people that maybe hadn't yet experienced the violence, because a the men had an outlet, to go to work and let off steam. And when you were stuck 24/7 in a house there was nowhere to go and nowhere to escape to…"* (VAWG11)

There are layers to the risk of violence against women, the majority of which, women have no control over. Women and girls are exposed to various forms of violence, abuse and harassment over the course of their lifetime and expected to *"put up with a lot of unacceptable behaviour"* (VAWG22-24 FG). This experience has serious consequences, not least, the complete loss of one's own self value, *"after years and years and years of it… you actually start believing what you're told. Because you think well, you've heard it that many times, it's like typing something up continuously and then all of a sudden you start believing that that's exactly what you are. Worthless"* (VAWG26-34 FG).

THEME 3

THE IMPACT OF VAWG

This theme explores the perceived effects of experiencing violence. All women acknowledged that *"the potential effects on women, can just be so vast"* (VAWG10). Many women discussed how the threat of violence often impacts **Women's Identity and Sense of Vulnerability** in everyday life. This sense of vulnerability means that *"You do change your behaviour. You don't go places. You go at different times or you go with someone. So you are always limiting your life, just to avoid things. and that's not even the serious stuff."* (VAWG22-24). For some, early negative experiences also mean that *"You can go through sometimes, your adult life, thinking that there's a vulnerability within you because of experiences that you've had."* (VAWG20).

> *"Every woman is going to be different, depending on how long it lasts or what it looks like."* (VAWG17). *"...depending on the severity of the experience, it can be life ruining. It can make you deeply suspicious, unable to form meaningful relationships. At best, it can make you afraid, shameful, suspicious. And at worst, like I said, it can be life ruining stuff"* (VAWG2)

Relatedly, it was felt that women are held accountable for their experiences, *"often women, I think, are made to feel it's their fault. That it's how they behave. It's what they do. That they bring this censure upon them. And that if they... if they were better themselves, if they behaved better, then these things wouldn't happen"* (VAWG19).

All women discussed the **Mental Health and Wellbeing** implications of experiencing violence, particularly how such experiences are *"...just totally disempowering. It erodes your self-confidence. It kills your dreams. It makes you unable to protect yourself. It makes you defenceless"* (VAWG3). Many women discussed their experiences with anxiety and depression, as well as complex feelings including *"The blame and the shame that you feel"* (VAWG12-15). The experience of violence can result in women feeling a *"Loss of connection to people around them. Feeling as though they are isolated and vulnerable all the time"* (VAWG7).

As some noted, *"it just got to the stage where I had obviously tried to take my own life. So it actually got the stage if I didn't leave I would lose... not that I would lose the kids, but I had to think of them"* (VAWG1); *"I myself have been suicidal on more than one occasion. It's literally make or break."* (VAWG14). Women's experiences of violence are seldom the same from one person to the next and so are the impacts of violence,

The impact of violence on physical health were also highlighted across interviews, with some describing it as *"...like being in a car crash!"* (VAWG12-15), with an understanding of the reality that *"... women can be eventually killed in the situation"* (VAWG9).

The extent of the impact of violence were also acknowledged as **Long Lasting**, *"It never leaves. It never, ever leaves you. And there's rarely a day when you don't think of it and you don't replay scenarios..."* (VAWG12-15 FG), *"And there's so many women that are just pushing that down and not dealing with it"* (VAWG17).

The experience of violence was discussed as **Diminishing Trust and Relationships with Others**; *"... there are some really obvious effects on women, that they might withdraw or they... it will cause some kind of mistrust in their relationships, whatever kind of relationships they have, whether that's with family or friends"* (VAWG7).

The experience of violence was also described as having a 'ripple effect' which also often reached women and their children in more ways than one. Indeed, some reflected on the impact on parenting and the potential implications of intergenerational trauma,

> *"But all our life experiences make us who we are. And especially we talked about being parents. You are parenting in a style that maybe is either opposite to how you were parented as a child, or similar, depending on your experiences. I think all those experiences, good and bad, feed into who we are ultimately as people. So whether it's conscious or otherwise".* (VAWG19)

> *"I wonder about the trauma handed down through generations which you absorb, and then that's how you behave later on yourself in situations. You'd have seen that as the norm as a child... biting your lip and just getting on with it or whatever. Or becoming depressed and maybe suicidal, but then recovering. So you sort of do that yourself, then, because that's the example you've been set".* (VAWG3)

But the experience of children is not always passive, many women acknowledged **Children as Victims** themselves, particularly when violence was prevalent in family homes: "*She had things where her two boys eventually said... explained what was happening to them. She thought it was only just happening to her. And how he would deliberately mark them or hurt them in places where it wouldn't be noticeable*" (VAWG18). The impact on children also extend to their mental health and well-being,

> *"...particularly in families with children involved, they come afraid and they are walking on eggshells. And they are constantly jumping. And they are in a heightened sense of panic all the time. And then that impacts school work because they can't settle in school because a row has happened and they can't concentrate. And that will filter on through life because they are not getting the education that they need for them to be able to escape and learn to their full potential."* (VAWG11)

> *"like a mum might think she's hiding it or might think she's coping with it really well, children have an innate ability to sense stuff and to know... and that of course impacts them. And then they, as we all know, then think it's their fault. And then that impacts on them"* (VAWG21)

The recognition of the impact on children was a motivating factor for some to leave their home and seek support, "*I mean violence against women in the home, when a child sees their mother being attacked, even just verbally, it's deeply damaging for children. It's the reason I left my husband*" (VAWG2).

THEME 4

DISCLOSING, REPORTING AND RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

"… I think the most prevalent question is, why didn't you leave? Sure you could have left" (VAWG26-34). This theme explores the factors which impact the likelihood of women disclosing or reporting their experience of violence.

Motivations Not to Report or Leave were mostly linked to fear of repercussion. This can include fear of retaliation from a perpetrator, *"…some might be fearing for their life that they're going to be killed or seriously hurt when they go home"* (VAWG1). Women may feel that sometimes the safest thing to do, is do nothing. As one person explained,

> *"I suppose part of me knows if I take that big step, he will stop being that nice person. So in those situations, I think… it doesn't matter where you are, but you can keep yourself safer by reacting in certain ways. Not necessarily putting yourself in the position", "…we look for, not the easier option, but the most peaceful option, to protect ourselves and our children as well"* (VAWG18)

Fear of the perpetrator can also stifle access to support information, particularly *"if you're in a domestic violent situation, you're not going to be liking or following domestic violence related social media pages, through fear that you'll get caught"* (VAWG16). Relatedly, not knowing what lies ahead for women if they leave violent homes, or the practicalities involved with this, is also a reason to stay,

> *"it's where do they go to? What is the support after? How do you know you and your kids will be safe? How do you know, if you go to a refuge… but then what happens after that? Who protects you then? Where is all that? So there's all those reasons why someone could maybe say to themselves, I'm better off staying here. Because at least I have that and that."* (VAWG21)

Some also discussed the social implications and backlash that women can face when disclosing experiences of violence, particularly the role of social media in this, *"because of the online element and the way women are shown up. And you look at some of the things you read about in the press and the media, and how women are attacked, by other women too. It's vicious, isn't it?"* (VAWG3). This backlash can also come from those closer to home, deterring women from speaking up and *"often not report things because they feel judged"* (VAWG7)

> *"I think the fear around it is, you are afraid to say anything because you don't want to have everybody against you. His whole family. Your family. What do you think you're doing? You have them kids to look after. You need that money. You need to keep that house going. And all the rest of it. You'll not be able to go to mass. You'll not be able to go to communion. You'll not be able to go to confession if you go that road"* (VAWG12-15)

Motivations to Report or Leave were frequently described as a crisis point, *"….She had to leave. She knew that she was in danger of her life and she had to go"* (VAWG12-15). Ultimately, for those interviewed, by keeping their children safe or ensuring *"that nobody experiences what I have experienced"* (VAWG9) was their reason for leaving or reporting. Nevertheless, **Barriers to Reporting** were multifaceted, not least the aforementioned hesitation of speaking with the police service.

The women also expressed *"The fear of your situation, and talking about it outside for the first time, was just… I had an awful fear, would people believe me? Will people take it seriously?"* (VAWG9). It was suggested that women would firstly lean towards confiding in friends or family as a way of 'testing the water' before considering official reporting,

> *"In the first instance, possibly just friends and family. I don't know in all cases that women would be a hundred percent thinking that this is an issue where you need to contact an outside agency like the police service or something like that. I would imagine in the majority of cases; the first port of call is just somebody else to try and make sense of what's happened. Make sense of their experience and try and fit together what did happen here. What could I say has happened to somebody in authority?"* (VAWG20)

This is an important step as there are times when women can feel they are in adverse situations but they 'can not escape' or that *"you get yourself caught up in a wee bubble and you convince yourself that it's OK. So you don't necessarily think or see that there's something wrong"* (VAWG16). As one woman noted, *"I know from my own experience, there have been incidents where I have just swept it under the carpet and I have never talked about it, because I haven't even necessarily realised that it's abuse or violence, to begin with"* (VAWG7).

During the interviews many also described how the **Type of Violence** may not be perceived as abusive until much later, *"but I have had previous things happen to me in my life that it would never have occurred to me that that was a violent act"* (VAWG17), or only when young girls have grown to women do they understand what has happened,

> *"mum had said to me, why didn't you tell us what was going on? I was like, mum, you don't have the words at four years of age to explain. And I don't know if you would now. But you wouldn't have had the language or the words to use, to explain what was going on"* (VAWG5)

Whether the experiences warrant reporting can also depend on the perceived 'severity' of the situation: *"You are comparing and thinking, well there's much worse cases out there. You don't want to take up the time by reporting your thing. All those thoughts that go through your head and just… well I'm fine"*. (VAWG17). Psychological and emotional harm was also deemed as *"Impossible to prove. And also, it's not taken as seriously as if you show up with cuts and bruises…"* (VAWG2).

> *"it's obviously different with physical, you can see the bruises. But when you're sitting there saying, oh he called me this or he said this, it's obviously your word against his. And that's the only evidence that they have, you know. So it's like, to me personally I would just think to myself, what's the point? Because they are not going to believe me or they'll say it's just name calling. Grow up. You know?"* (VAWG1)

Many women worried that when someone decides to report, they are required to be **The Perfect Victim**. Women often experience stigma when they disclose a mental ill health diagnosis or have a disability which can be perceived as diminishing their reporting credibility, *"I think it's going to be put down to the state of mind, and she's not reliable. I think there's that big thing there. Not reliable or you can't believe a word she says, or she's a fantasist or… too anxious… yeah. It somehow erodes her intelligence and so on"* (VAWG3).

The places and spaces where violence occur are seen as **Discrediting Women's Experiences**, *"let's say if I walked to Tesco, I got attacked, I think more easily to be believed. But if I'm at a night club… personally I don't drink, but if I drink, something happened, I think I am less likely to be believed"* (VAWG6). This is further exacerbated if alcohol or drugs are involved, as well as a general need for 'hard evidence' or an idealistic victim response,

THEME 4

DISCLOSING, REPORTING AND RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE *Continued*

"Because they think, well if I was drunk it wouldn't have happened, and nearly blame themselves. Embarrassed and ashamed of what's happening. And that stops the reporting of the situation. Thinks I can maybe sort it out myself, but can't. Fear that she would be judged if she reported. Wants to keep it hidden. Ignore it and it will go away" (VAWG9)

"I think it could have been proved. I think I would have felt I had to prove it. I think the fact I didn't fight for my life, kind of thing... part of me thinks that's what you have to do, to prove that you wanted to say no. How else? I suppose part of it is, you blame yourself anyway. So you don't know if you should report things" (VAWG18)

Reporting and Response to violence is often arbitrary for women, their experiences can be disregarded by those around them, further impacting on how they feel about themselves and the situation,

"I remember telling my aunt as well. And then I said and then he said... And I remember their advice was always like, tell him to catch himself on! And I was thinking to myself, no, you have no concept of what would happen if I told him to catch himself on. It would be World War Three. I would end up begging for forgiveness for days. The fact that that's your response, tell him to catch himself on, you have no concept of what I'm dealing with. And I can't even make you understand. And then when I eventually couldn't take it anymore and I did leave him, then the reaction I got from my family was, well you wanted him, you married him" (VAWG2)

"When she was back in work, she approached the school principal and he basically said, look, boys will be boys. So that's going back maybe about sixteen, seventeen years ago. And she was just... she was so angry. I think she was more angry about the response she got from the principal. You know, as a colleague, she didn't have backing. It wasn't addressed" (VAWG5)

"I have witnessed where members of the church have been protected, and the victims have then been shunned somewhat" (VAWG16)

Other women were described as at the helm of **Ostracising Victims** further, *"Other women silently blaming you"* (VAWG12-15), *"... like a lot of the judgement and harsh criticism of women comes from other women"* (VAWG2). While it's agreed that women should be supporting and empowering other women, unfortunately in some cases, *"They'll minimise it"* (VAWG5) or excuse the behaviour, *"…. You must have annoyed him. It was only a slap. Or... but he's a hard worker …"* (VAWG 12-15 FG).

Reporting to the **Police** was also described with a mix of responses. Mechanisms for reporting in person were described as less than optimal,

> *"That my experience of reporting to the police was standing in a public street at the wee box that they have at the front of the police stations. And somebody opened the window and, what are you here for? Kind of thing. And having to stand in the street and say that you want to report a crime, is really hard to do when you are in an open space and there's members of the public walking past you"* (VAWG4)

Challenges with reporting to the police extended beyond the initial contact, with some women recounting how they 'were not taken seriously', *"I was absolutely shocked and appalled by the police's actions and inaction"* (VAWG9). Such experiences act as a deterrent to reporting; *"...I think it definitely would hold them back in the future..."* (VAWG6). Conversely, some described how *"the police experience was brilliant"* (VAWG25) and exceeded initial expectations, *"So yeah, I've certainly got a positive feeling about if somebody did report it now, as opposed to how I thought it would have been dealt with whenever I was younger"* (VAWG18). These mixed reviews demonstrated perhaps some of the inconsistencies across police stations in how violence against women is dealt with and as to why some women prefer to speak about their experiences with others first,

> *"It depends on the officer. It really does depend on the officer that you get. Because you could get an officer who doesn't give a shite. They literally don't give a shite. They are not trained and they have no history. And they are just out of school. Or you could get someone who grew up with it, who is taking an interest in it, who knows what the craic is and who knows the dynamics of domestic abuse. It really depends. If you get a really good officer who's interested, who is invested and who has a wee bit of education on it, you'll get a better response, because they will push it..."* (VAWG26-34 FG)

"It depends on the officer. It really does depend on the officer that you get. Because you could get an officer who doesn't give a shite. They literally don't give a shite."

THEME 5

THE ROAD TO JUSTICE

The road to justice, including access to support, *"depends on the circumstances. And it depends on the individual"* (VAWG6). As previously noted, the type and nature of violence against a woman will influence the likelihood of reporting as well as the initial response from friends and family who often *"want to put it under the carpet because they want to think it's somebody else and whatever. Because of what they think will look alright on the surface"* (VAWG12-15 FG). There remains, even after a disclosure, *"...a lot of families and communities where they would rather what goes on behind closed doors, stays behind closed doors"* (VAWG19). This mentality can stop help seeking in its tracks, delaying any form of support, recovery, or justice for years and putting the onus on victims to deal with it themselves or pretend it didn't happen,

> *"oh, it won't go in the papers. That's what he was concerned with. That was his thing. I hope it doesn't go into the newspapers. You know, this whole mentality, keep it behind closed doors. And unfortunately, I suppose, if somebody goes to seek support that's seen as involving outside agencies. And it's almost like it's not their business getting involved. People don't want that. So that is the onus. And unfortunately, I suppose any kind of abuse, as I've learned, it's a secret. It perpetrates it..."* (VAWG5)

For those that continue in their journey to justice, many hurdles remain, including the onus being on women to **Evidence** their victimisation, *"it's almost on you to prove it"* (VAWG12-15 FG); *"...you have to prove he's guilty. It's not that you and your children are believed. It's you and your children are lying until you prove him guilty"*. (VAWG21). After all is endured, there remains an expectation on *"...woman to put things in place to protect herself, more than we actually look to the male or the potential perpetrator, to change their behaviour and change their outlook"* (VAWG8). Women are subjected to scrutiny regarding the credibility of their claims, and for those who are parents, there capacity to parent is often questioned,

> *"the women then are dealing for months and months and months of this social worker visiting. And it is impacting them negatively because you are just constantly living on your nerves. So there's so many ways it impacts, that it doesn't have on men"* (VAWG11)

Some women had discussed their encounters with those in '**Positions of Power**' and their lack of support. These encounters lead to further victimisation and trauma,

> *"...And the barrister actually said, oh you know, it's different. There's far worse cases. He actually said that to me when I was sitting in a room in the court...I just kind of hung my head down and was like, yeah, I know I'm worth nothing because you've just told me"* (VAWG5)

> *"I've never been in court. I've never done anything wrong. I have never been involved in anything. And he said to me at the start, I know you're likely to kick off, he said. Kick off, is what he said to me. But if you do kick off, just know that I'm going to bring the letter of the law right down on your head. He said that to me before I ever… and I'm a witness. I'm sitting in the witness box"* (VAWG9)

It's perhaps unsurprising, given all that victims endure that: *"…women go back into violent situations because they have tried to leave, they haven't got the support they need, and they revert back into it because they think, well better the devil I know, than the devil I don't know."* (VAWG9). Many women felt that **Pathways to Support are Fixed to a Legal System** that does not work for victims or meet their needs; *"as soon as I made the disclosure, then … services were available to us. But until we made that disclosure, every door was closed. And I remember thinking, that's a problem"* (VAWG2).

Issues within the criminal justice system was identified as one of the biggest issues, *"…the journey through that is a trauma in itself"*, *"…it also makes you feel like you don't matter. It's all about the perpetrator"* (VAWG10). Historical cases were perceived as being less important, as one person notes about the Public Prosecution Service, *"…I really didn't find that a good experience at all. Probably initially from … from I think being made to feel like… because it was an historical thing, that it wasn't as important. Not that that's what was said, but that's kind of what was inferred"* (VAWG9). Cases that have played out the public domain were also a deterrent for proceeding,

> *"You just have to look at the likes of rape convictions or sexual violence convictions, and it just is constantly… reiterating that it's not worth it. Like the Ulster Rugby rape trial. That woman was dragged over hot coals for months. And that was like… watching that there, this is why I didn't report. Because why? Because you are laughed at and you're dragged out…"* (VAWG11)

> *"…when you look at some of the statistics, even where rapes are reported, the number of rapes that … firstly the length of time it takes to go through the justice system. And secondly then, the number of, I suppose, successful outcomes, if you could call it like that… are very, very low numbers"* (VAWG22-24)

A Lengthy Judicial Process was experienced by most, with their lives at the mercy of the court: "At least then when it's done, that's it. New life, new start. But while that's lingering on, you can't really move forward, you know" (VAWG1),

> *"But then whenever it was moved across to the PPS, I heard nothing. I didn't have any contact. Didn't hear anything. It wasn't until I got a letter, then, a few years later"* (VAWG16)

> *"…And we went to the police and it was a three and a half year long process. Our lives were just on a hook for three and a half years. And eventually it went to court and it was a hung jury"* (VAWG2)

THEME 5

THE ROAD TO JUSTICE *Continued*

The outcomes for women are often not satisfactory, with the **Punishment Not Reflecting The Crime**,

> *"...for me personally, with what I went through and being suicidal on more than occasion, is there ever going to be any ... any sentencing that going to...? And I knew that from the off, that the punishment was never going to fit the crime. How can you punish somebody for somebody wanting to give up on life on more than one occasion? For affecting every aspect of their life?"* (VAWG4)

It is felt that victims are not taken seriously and lenient sentencing leaves many disheartened that justice can really be achieved,

> *"There isn't enough done. And it really is failing so many people. I know of other people who have been sexually... sexually assaulted, physically assaulted, verbally, mentally... and they won't report. And it goes... it hits in terms of the government because, when they are handing out lenient sentences, it's not a deterrent"* (VAWG4)

> *"Like if you phone the police and you press charges against him, I know for a fact, if you go to court you are not taken seriously, so nothing happens and they are walking away anyway. So you are thinking to yourself, what's the point? What's the point?"* (VAWG12-15)

Delays, lack of response to different forms of violence and lenient sentencing which do not discourage perpetrators are leaving women at risk, *"...there's no real conviction rates as such. Almost like maybe it's not being taken seriously. If these poor women are being killed, what's the patterns of behaviour before that? If they have sought help, maybe been taken seriously"* (VAWG5)

Ultimately there was a sense of hopelessness with regards to justice, many women are left feeling that, *"... the system is just so broken, the whole of the judicial and the policing system is broken. I think that social services is a broken system. And even more so now, post lockdown, when there just is not the resources"* (VAWG7).

Nevertheless, there are people, professionals and organisations that can and do **Support** victims on their journey. Some of those interviewed highlighted the positive role of their GPs, counsellors, coaches, health care visitors, university support services and solicitors. All women praised the amazing work of voluntary support organisations who *"...become advocates and a voice for those people in crisis"* (VAWG7). Many also praised those friends and family members who did believe them, stood with them and supported them on their journey. Feeling that you can be listened to, without judgment, can be the first major step for many,

> *"Well I think there's a lot of people don't speak to anybody, to start with. But I think for those who do, I think they will speak to a friend, a family member, someone who they trust. Someone who they feel will give them support, but not tell them what to do. Not march them off to the police station or Women's Aid. Somebody that they trust who will just listen, and really check out, am I imagining this? Is this maybe normal?"* (VAWG19)

THEME 6

RECOMMENDATIONS – KEEPING WOMEN AND GIRLS SAFE

All women interviewed were asked their opinions about how we, in Northern Ireland, could better support women and girls moving forward. This was daunting to answer for most, I wish I knew what to do to keep women safe (VAWG4).

There was an agreed sentiment that we need *"…to stop it from happening in the first place…"* but that unfortunately it *"…will take a lot of time"* (VAWG10); *"… But it doesn't mean to say we shouldn't start. And women did get the vote at one point. So things do happen. Things do change…"* (VAWG19).

Many of the women felt that it has to start with, *" a whole cultural change. I think women need to stand up, as well, and answer a call to action about it. Women need to be empowered somehow"* (VAWG3); *"it is seen as a social issue that involves all of us. Because we can all be part of the solution"* (VAWG7).

Importantly, for those who are experiencing any form of violence, the 'system' needs to **Act Fast and Protect**. Women fleeing their homes need to feel that they are protected and will be kept safe. Women need to feel that Non Molestation / Occupation Orders are 'worth the paper they are printed on'. Those who had gone through the criminal justice system also felt *"…better consequences for those that are actually violating or perpetrating"* (VAWG17) are needed, only when there are stronger sentences and penalties will violence against women be taken seriously by wider society.

For many women, their first engagement with the criminal justice system will be related to their victimisation. **Understanding the System**, knowing what's going on, and having some element of control is important given how much control has been taken away, *"…victims need to be treated as victims, not as criminals. Not as perpetrators"* (VAWG9),

> *"I think we need to give them more personal power. I think we need them to feel more protected. And I just want them to feel safe. And I want them to know that there's people there that you can either… you can ring, you can email, you can message. Just know there's people there to help you. Because it's very frightening when you're on your own…"* (VAWG5)

An ideal system is one that offers **Wraparound Care**, meeting the complex needs of victims following their experience;

> *"Ideally I would think it would be better if they have a team. You know, like a team, have multiple parties involved. Someone from the legal system, mental health system also and just general health system. Because in that way you can look after the victim from every angle… psychologically, physically and legally. So I think that would be ideal, but of course we are not in an ideal world!"* (VAWG6)

THEME 6

RECOMMENDATIONS – KEEPING WOMEN AND GIRLS SAFE Continued

If an ideal system is out of reach, a system which is supportive and meets the practical needs of women should be in place. For example,

> *"...from a benefits point of view, I think whenever a woman is a single parent, particularly if she has escaped a bad relationship, that there needs to be a bit more empathy and understanding around that. The trauma of that. The damage. The lasting damage that that does. And don't be... just be aware that that woman has left that situation for the health of her children. And then don't turn around and say to that woman, you need to get a job now and put those children into some kind of childcare facility. That's not a thing that she is able to do at that stage"* (VAWG2)

"Nobody should have to worry about these things" (VAWG5) and every woman should have *"somebody to say they believe you and that they are listening"* (VAWG4). All women across Northern Ireland should have *"an awareness for what it looks like to report and come forward about stuff"* (VAWG17). That said, not all victims of violence will want to pursue the criminal justice route but *"...having all that information would have helped. It would have helped me make a decision as to whether I would have reported or not..." (VAWG16).* Nevertheless, all women should have a **Choice in their Next Steps**; *"...I think you just have to make it easier to report as well. So who do I go to? Yes, OK, police are probably the main organisation, but I'm sure that there are other organisations out there too, that people maybe aren't aware of. So it's an education piece"* (VAWG22-24 FG).

"**There Needs to be Safe Places for Women to go to**" (VAWG22-24). Access to places that are considered safe was seen as key to keeping women safe, particularly those that perhaps have not yet had the opportunity to speak out or get to grips with their own experiences. *"...we need to work from the ground up"* (VAWG16) and women's centres were identified as a good way of doing this, meeting women on their journey wherever they are by providing space, safety and education. But these organisations and many others which meet the needs of victims are often charitable in nature, dependent on donations and grants which are not always consistent enough to allow for provision of the types of support women need, *"But it's the chronic under funding and withdrawal of services has caused a lot of the good ones to, through no fault of their own, miss people"* (VAWG11); *"It shouldn't be that way, you know"* (VAWG1).

Education for All was also seen as an essential tool for addressing the issue of violence against women and girls as well as being crucial to ensuring an empathetic response from those across the wider system. *"Education. I think education is never out of date, no matter how old they are."* (VAWG6)

Everyone interviewed recommended that there should be more of a focus on **Healthy Relationships** including sexual consent comprehension. *"Teaching young people in school what healthy relationships look like".* (VAWG1) *"I think it has to be just a huge cultural change. Programming in schools right from the start"* (VAWG2). *"I just do not understand why there isn't a compulsory, from primary school, education programme the whole way through. I do not understand why that's not ... that, to me, is fundamental. Number one"* (VAWG16). But as one person noted; *"...it has to start at home. It has to start with the parents. If you are starting to teach your children morals in school, it's too late. It has to start at home"* (VAWG2). Many women agreed on the important role of parents as educators and as those who reinforce key messaging regarding healthy relationships and therefore there is a need to *"...support for families"* (VAWG5) to start to have the conversation.

While it was unanimously agreed that healthy relationship education *"should be in every school…"* (VAWG26-34), awareness training on the issue of violence against women was also recommended for **Professionals**, *"The funding needs to be there for training of the likes of GPs or health visitors and social workers, so that they can recognise and signpost the person"*. (VAWG11). Additionally, training is recommended for *"not just the police, it's the whole legal system. Solicitors, judges, lawyers, juries"* (VAWG2) in order to ensure that that the experience of victims are understood.

Wider **Societal Awareness** of violence against women and girls in all its forms was also highlighted as an important future public campaign, *"…it's just more of an awareness and an understanding at the very, very base level, just for people to think, well no, this isn't acceptable and we should believe people"* (VAWG20),

"considering our background in Northern Ireland, it's a massive issue. Violence has always been a massive issue because we've used violence… or people have used violence because they felt there was no other way to… deal with their circumstances. But now that we've established that that didn't work, I think we need to now say… and it doesn't work in a family situation either. it doesn't work at all, in any situation, to use violence" (VAWG8)

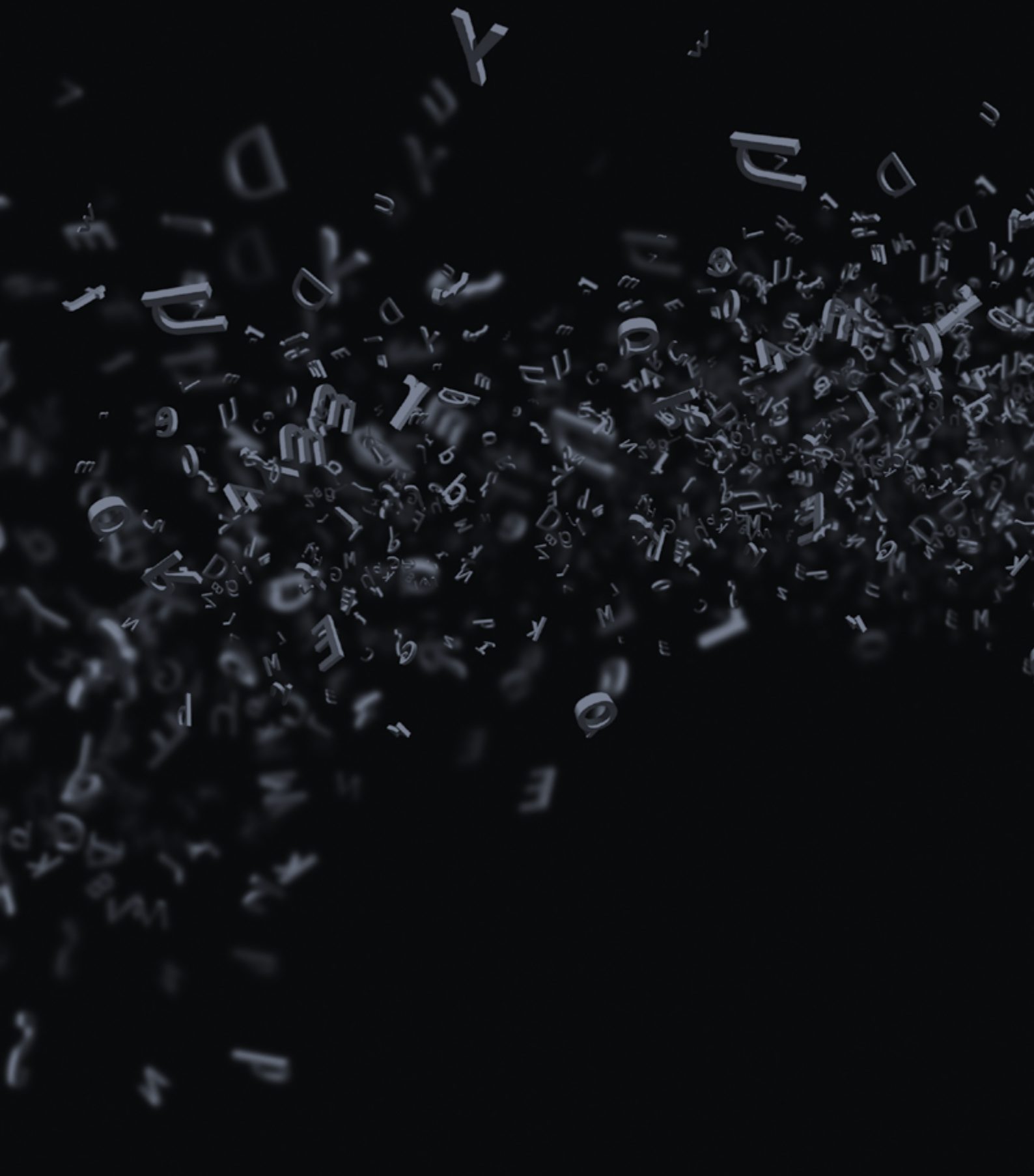
The challenges of reaching the entire public of Northern Ireland were acknowledged but described as 'what is 'required', *"It's like turning an oil tanker to be honest. So it's really just a case of where do you begin?"* (VAWG22-24). Those interviewed had many great suggestions for supporting awareness, this included encouraging workplaces to be safe spaces, posters, and coasters with key messaging about issues and support, wardens in parks so women could walk or run with a sense of safety and bystander training for front facing service staff, *"… Something even small. I'm thinking of… I don't know if it's actually part of a law… but there is talk around any clubs, pubs, night venues, if they want to renew or get a liquor licence, making sure their staff have mandatory bystander intervention training."* (VAWG22-24)

Resource and Government Leadership was discussed as essential to tackling the issue of violence against women and girls. While *"the government putting this strategy together is a step in the right direction"* (VAWG19), it was felt that there was much more to be done. *"There's a huge responsibility on our government to help shape our communities. They are the ones at the top. Helping to shape what goes out and what policies we have in place. And they need to get back and get these policies out"* (VAWG16).

Campaigns and support services need resource and investment at multiple levels, *"They found the money during Covid. I don't mean that in a bad way. They had to find the money. But this is an epidemic as well. This is a pandemic as well. It's really getting out of hand. It really is."* (VAWG12-14 FG). We can no longer *"… depend on the voluntary sector to pick up the pieces when things do go wrong for women"* (VAWG19),

> *"…I know they love their economic arguments. I can put economic argument to them. Think of the consequences of not dealing with it. The consequences can be psychological, can be long term mental health issues. Mental health issues cost money to solve it. Not involve NHS mental health professionals. And in some case, might end up in… you know… let's say if they are too traumatised, they can't go to work. Benefits cost government money as well. So there can be big economic arguments made for them"* (VAWG6)

CONCLUSION



We spoke with 34 women and surveyed over 540 more to get a better understanding of violence against women living in Northern Ireland with a goal of providing a voice to those that often feel they have been silenced. We are indebted and in complete admiration of every woman who has taken the time to complete the survey and to speak with us in person, sharing their experience, insight and recommendations for the future. Without you, this research is not possible. For those women we spoke to directly, their motivation to engage in this research was to help with the process of change, to ensure that, "hopefully in a generation, it's something that won't be an issue to the same extent that maybe it is currently and has been in the past (VAWG20).

The findings of this research report have demonstrated the extensive nature of violence against women and girls living in Northern Ireland. Women are being exposed to a variety of harmful behavior from childhood right through to adulthood with significant implications for their mental health as well as their social functioning. Furthermore, insights gained from individual interviews further demonstrate that the issue of violence is often the result of a variety of interconnected factors and failings. Social norms and structural inequalities have an important role to play in violence against women and girls which is rooted in gender inequality. The social ecology of a particular region may be the very factor that is sustaining harmful behaviours through tolerance and weak legal and institutional frameworks (Haylock, Cornelius, Malunga, & Mbandazayo, 2016).

Research findings clearly demonstrate that our women deserve better, our services need help, and our criminal justice system requires reform. Women hold a central role in shaping society and the generations to come. Violence against women and girls does not end with women and girls, the impacts are far reaching including significant impacts on our young boys and men. The evidence from this report and many others have demonstrated that we need to respond now, **We Have a Duty Of Care** to ensure that this issue no longer remains behind closed doors nor the repeat item on the agenda for change. This is our call to action.

"The findings of this research report have demonstrated the extensive nature of violence against women and girls living in Northern Ireland. Women are being exposed to a variety of harmful behavior from childhood right through to adulthood with significant implications for their mental health as well as their social functioning."

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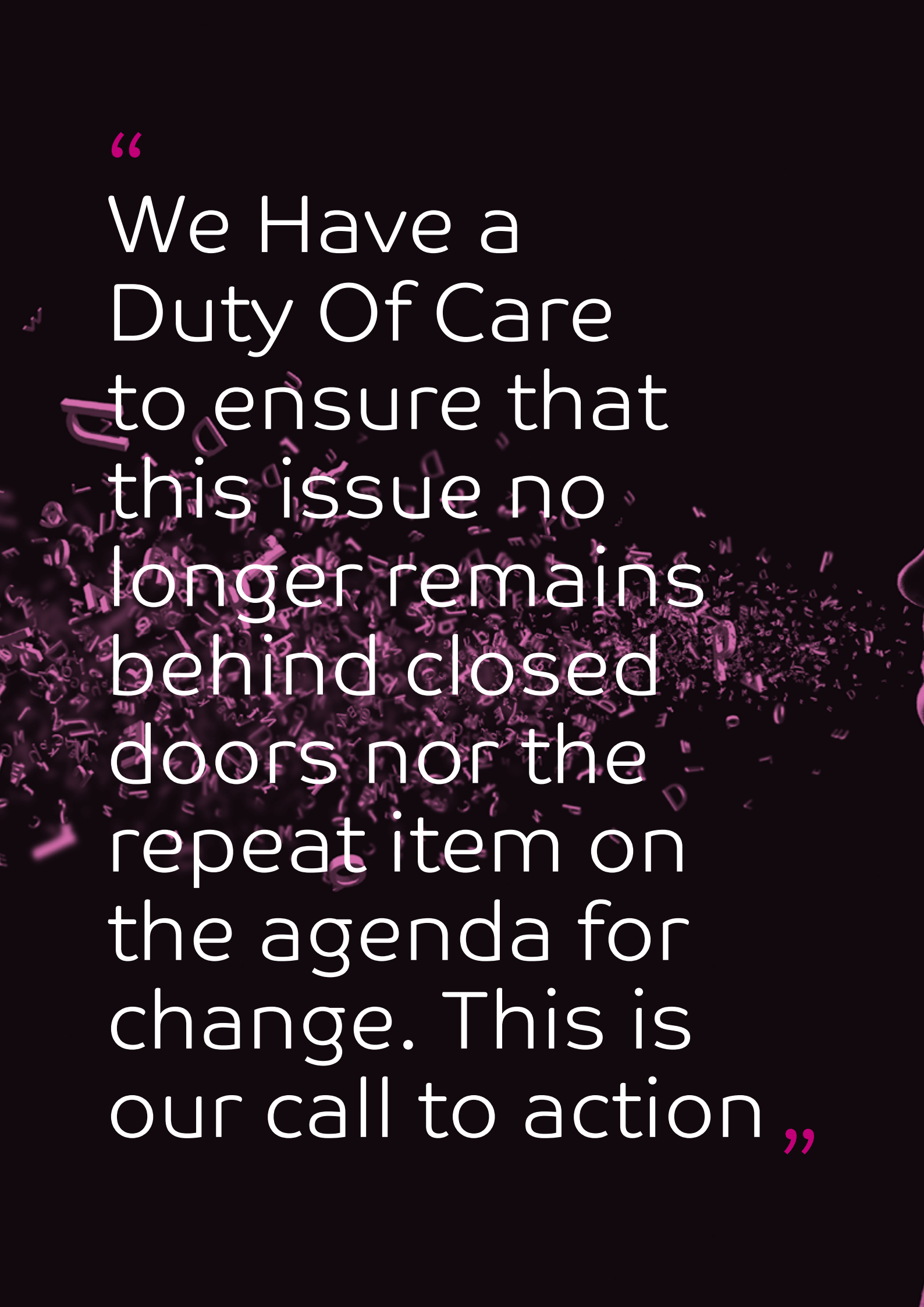
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ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN & GIRLS





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