

one in five

young women suffer intimate
relationship abuse in Ireland.

**TOO
INTO
you**

Women's  Aid

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FOREWORD



I am delighted to welcome you to Women's Aid's new report about intimate relationship abuse as experienced by young people in Ireland. This report builds on Women's Aid awareness work through our 'ToolIntoYou' campaign, which has been running since 2011.

We have known for some time however, that more is required to better prevent and combat abuse in intimate relationships among our young people. There is very limited research to help us even understand the prevalence and nature of what we are dealing with in Ireland. With this in mind, Women's Aid was delighted to collaborate with Red C in order to try and fill in our knowledge gaps and make the strong case for a greater focus on young people's, and particularly young women's, experiences of abuse at the hands of their current or former intimate partners. This report reveals stark and disturbing findings, and we believe acts as a clear warning that we need to learn more, and do more to protect and support young people from abuse and violence.

Our research comprised a survey among a robust, nationally representative sample of 500 young people aged 18 to 25 years, 51% male and 49% female. The survey also captured experiences of abuse which occurred below the age of 18. Four focus groups were then conducted to further explore some of the key findings from the survey.¹

Prevalence of Intimate Relationship Abuse

Our research found that abuse from a current or former partner is common among young people. We found that **3 in 5 young people** have either personally experienced or know someone who has experienced abuse in a current or former intimate relationship under the age of 25. It is a heavily gendered phenomenon: it is particularly women who suffer at the hands of male current or former partners. A startling **1 in 5 young women** surveyed have experienced intimate relationship abuse, and 100% of them were abused by a current or former intimate male partner². Even more troubling was the fact that **51% reported that the abuse had begun when they were below the age of 18**, with just 18 years old being the average age for young women who have been subject to abuse.

1 Three were with women and one with young men aged 18 to 25. Among the women's groups one group all have personal experience of abuse, in another all participants knew someone who had been abused, and in the third participants neither had personal or second hand experience. In the men's group there was a combination of those who had no experience or who knew someone who had experienced abuse.

2 1 in 11 young men had experienced abuse from a current or former intimate partner. The overall sample is very low for statistical analysis purposes n.23. 88% of these respondents had experienced abuse from a female partner and 22% from a male partner (current or former).

Although physical abuse may be the most visible form of abuse, and most commonly discussed in public discourse, this survey further highlights the prevalence and impact of emotional abuse with **9 out of 10** of women who suffered abuse reporting this experience. As Women's Aid know from our decades of frontline work, this can have devastating impacts, but as it does not leave a visible mark it can be both difficult to identify and also difficult to seek assistance and support for. Indeed, some emotionally abusive tactics can be mistaken for passion or infatuation in the early stages of a relationship.



In addition to emotional abuse, this report further details the worrying experiences and impacts of all forms of abuse reported to us, including sexual coercion, rape, physical abuse and coercive control.

Online Abuse

One form of abuse we particularly wanted to learn more about was online abuse using digital technology. Alarming, **1 in 2 women** who had suffered intimate relationship abuse **experienced abuse online using digital technology**. This mechanism that perpetrators use to abuse is particularly devastating due to the 'always on' nature of life online. It is draining and can often feel inescapable as it can be difficult to completely block the abuser from making contact. Neither is it a reasonable solution to ask a young person to 'opt out' or switch off their own social media presence, as this is so deeply integrated into their social lives. The victim should not suffer further for another person's abusive actions.

Gaps in the Law

In Ireland, regulation and legislation has fallen badly behind the fast-paced digital world. Legal remedies are urgently needed to combat intimate relationship abuse occurring online and to tackle the vast amount of violence that women are subjected to everyday on the internet. We recommend that the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017 be passed and enacted immediately and that the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2019 is enacted as soon as possible with the appointment of an Online Safety Commissioner. Civil legal remedies to have distressing and abusive images removed from online platforms quickly are also desperately needed.

Harmful Impacts

The impacts of the abuse on young women are multiple and severe, with the majority reporting suffering low self-esteem and many experiencing anxiety and depression as well as isolation from family and friends. Some disclosed that they had attempted suicide or been hospitalised as a result of the abuse. And yet so many still suffer in silence.

When asked, 32% of young women had never spoken to anyone about their experience or sought help.

They said that fear was most likely to hold them back from speaking out followed by embarrassment and shame. These are critical challenges to overcome.

More Action Needed

More in-depth research into intimate relationship abuse among young people is urgently needed so that we can develop an even clearer picture of the level and nature at this kind of abuse, and the impacts it is having on those subjected to it.

Awareness-raising with regards to intimate relationship abuse is also vital so that young people know how to recognise this kind of abuse and what to do if it occurs. And finally, a constant message that we need to promote in society is that it is never your fault, that you will be believed, and that there is support there - for anyone who suffers in this way.



Sarah Benson
CEO, Women's Aid

25 November 2020



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's Aid research on intimate relationship abuse and young people (18 to 25 years old)

Key Statistics

- **3 in 5 young people have experienced, or know someone** who has experienced, intimate relationship abuse.
- **1 in 5 young women and 1 in 11 young men** have suffered intimate relationship abuse.
- **1 in 6 young women and 1 in 13 young men** have suffered coercive control by a partner or ex-partner.
- **51% of young women** affected experienced the abuse **under the age of 18**.
- Of the young women who had suffered abuse, **1 in 2 experienced online abuse**.
- Young men were **more likely to speak to someone** about what was happening to them. **84% of young men sought help compared to 68% of young women**.

Types of Abuse

Of the **1 in 5 young women** who experienced intimate relationship abuse:

- 92% experienced **emotional abuse**.
- **Physical abuse:**
 - 56% were **threatened** with physical violence.
 - 58% experienced **'less severe'** physical abuse (e.g., slapping, shoving, etc.).
 - 32% experienced **'severe'** physical abuse (e.g., punching, strangulation, burning, etc.).
 - 24% experienced physical abuse **with a weapon or threat of a weapon** to cause or threaten to cause serious injury.

- **Sexual Abuse:**
 - 75% experienced **sexual coercion**.
 - 51% were **sexually assaulted**.
 - 27% were **raped**.
 - 77% experienced **coercive control**.
- 28% experienced **financial abuse**.
- 55% experienced **stalking and/or harassment**.
- 49% experienced **online abuse using digital technology**.

Impacts of intimate relationship abuse on women:

- Losing self-esteem.
- Suffering anxiety and depression.
- Withdrawing from family and friends.
- Stopping attending work or college.
- Suicidal thoughts/attempting suicide.
- Needing treatment for physical injuries.
- Living in fear.

Common barriers to seeking support for young women:

- Losing trust in own judgement.
- Fearing for safety.
- Feeling ashamed.
- Unsure where to turn.

Awareness of Laws and Support Services:

We asked *all respondents* about their awareness of a number recent legal developments and of their familiarity with specialist support services in this area. We found that:

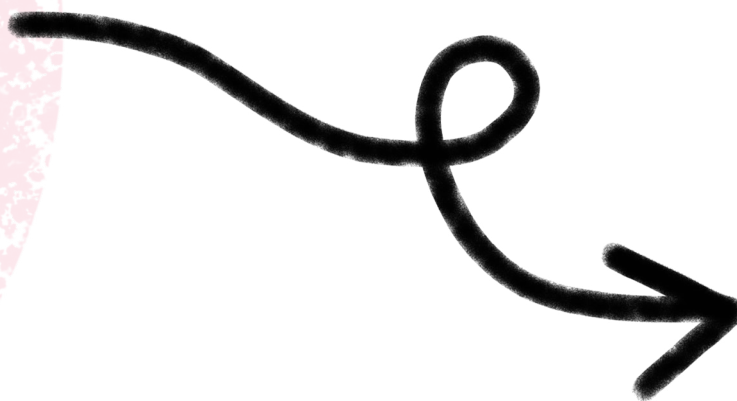
- Young men were **more aware that non-cohabiting partners could seek legal protection** under the Domestic Violence Act 2018. 62% of young men were aware compared to 55% of young women.
- Young men were **more aware that coercive control is a crime** under the Domestic Violence Act 2018. 40% of young men were aware compared to 33% of young women.
- Young men and young women **had similar levels of awareness of specialist support services** for people experiencing abuse in an intimate relationship. 44% of young women knew of support services while 40% of young men were familiar with such services.

Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1** – further in-depth research is needed to understand the level of intimate relationship abuse experienced by young people aged 18 to 25 from a larger sample size to learn more about the prevalence, types of abuse that they are experiencing and the impacts of the abuse. Research is also needed in relation to the prevalence of intimate relationship abuse amongst under 18s taking into account all ethical concerns in relation to research that is conducted with minors.
- **Recommendation 2** – further awareness-raising and education is needed from primary school level and up in relation to promoting healthy and identifying unhealthy relationships amongst young people. This should be done in the context of promoting greater gender equality, respect and mutuality. Teaching on intimate relationship abuse should be part of all learning in relation to Relationships & Sexuality Education. Highlighting sexualised abuse and other forms of abuse, and the importance of consent should be included in age-appropriate ways at all levels.
- **Recommendation 3** – Fully resourced general public awareness-raising is needed to encourage increased recognition of the signs of intimate relationship abuse and to combat the fear, stigma and shame that stops victims seeking support. Awareness-raising is also needed to let young people know that there are laws to protect them from intimate relationship abuse and that specialist organisations are there to support them.
- **Recommendation 4** – The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017 should be urgently progressed and enacted to provide for criminalisation of image-based sexual abuse and other forms of online harassment. The Online Safety Commissioner should be established, as proposed in the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2019. This Bill should also provide for fast and cost-free civil legal remedies (such as take-down orders) to have distressing and abusive images removed from online platforms quickly.



SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND



In recent years, the conversation surrounding violence and harassment against women and girls has been brought to the fore. The **#MeToo** movement sparked a global debate about the sexual abuse and harassment that women are all too frequently subjected to. In Ireland, the **#IBelieveHer** movement saw Irish people rally together to support the young Irish woman at the centre of the Belfast rape trial. Dr. Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin sparked an important conversation on the issue of harassment in third level education after she was harassed by a colleague at her work. This echoes the important work of the **It Stops Now** campaign lead by the National Women's Council of Ireland that has been working to end sexual harassment and violence in third level education since 2016.

Most recently, during the summer, Irish women took to social media to discuss instances of **humiliating sexualised abuse that they had been subjected to within the Irish comedy and traditional music scene.** The growing issue of online abuse against women and girls has also been brought into focus with the frequent targeting of women who are public figures and women in politics. Women who have gone public with their abuse and chosen to share their stories show immense bravery and strength and help make visible an issue that hides behind fear, embarrassment and shame, leaving victims feeling isolated and utterly alone.

At Women's Aid, our focus is on domestic violence or domestic abuse as it is sometimes called. Domestic violence is a series of abusive behaviours perpetrated by current or former intimate partners. This abuse can be experienced as emotional, physical, sexual and or financial. Coercive control is also a common feature of abusive intimate relationships. **More than 1 in 3 women globally report having experienced physical and/or sexual partner violence, or sexual violence by a non-partner.**³ Domestic violence is serious and insidious. While we shine a light on the abuse women suffer at the hands of acquaintances, friends, family members, colleagues and strangers, women who have experienced domestic violence need visibility and a voice in the conversation and the fight for prevention, protection and support.

3 World Health Organisation (2013) Available at: https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/85239/9789241564625_eng.pdf;jsessionid=AC2F3E9B5B36C6320BCF772EB19AD65F?sequence=1 (Accessed 22 November 2013)

1.1 Intimate Relationship Abuse

For this report we have adapted the terminology commonly used to describe this kind of abuse based on new research. Here, we use the term **intimate relationship abuse** in order to better describe the life-stage and experience of young women aged 18 to 25 and younger who may suffer abuse outside of a traditional domestic setting.

Women's Aid have been running the **Too Into You National Public Information and Awareness Campaign** since 2011 adapting to the ever-changing terrain of young women's lives, to ensure that we are reaching them at whatever life stage they are at. The campaign strives to increase awareness around the fact that intimate relationship abuse does happen to young people and **it is common, it is serious, and can have a severe impact on the person who is subjected to it.** We also want to ensure that young women know that they are protected by law if they experience intimate relationship abuse and that support, advice and information is available at Women's Aid or one of the other specialist support organisations working to protect women from intimate relationship abuse.

Our new research carried out with 18 to 25 year olds tells us that **1 in 5 young women have experienced intimate relationship abuse by a current or former male partner. Emotional abuse, online abuse and sexual coercion are particularly common** amongst young women. We found that it is **difficult for them to reach out for help primarily because they are afraid but also because they are made to feel embarrassed and ashamed of the abuse.** Emotional abuse is identified as difficult to recognise and 'prove' while online abuse is at risk of becoming normalised and common place in the everyday lives of young women engaging in the digital world.

1.2 The International Context

International evidence shows that intimate relationship abuse among young people is common and that it starts early, frequently **before they are 18.** Internationally, young women experience intimate relationship abuse at rates that are similar and often higher than that of older women.

Research carried out by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights shows that **47% of women aged 18 to 29 in the EU had experienced psychological violence by a partner since age 15.**

It also found that 6% of women aged 18 to 29 in the EU have experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner in the 12 months prior to interview which is the highest rate amongst all age groups. The study also indicated that **20% of women in the EU aged 18 to 29 have experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner since age 15.**⁴

⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012). Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/survey-data-explorer-violence-against-women-survey> (Accessed 16 October 2020)

In the USA, young women between the ages of 18 to 24 experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence, almost double the national average.⁵ Research also shows that a significant number of college women are victims of 'dating violence' and abuse. Shockingly, 43% of college women report experiencing violent and abusive behaviors within an intimate relationship including physical, sexual, digital, verbal or controlling abuse.

Research also shows that many college students simply do not know how to find support for themselves or how to help a friend when it comes to abusive relationships. **58% of college students say they don't know what to do to help someone who is a victim of intimate relationship abuse** and **38% say they wouldn't know how to get help for themselves if they were a victim of intimate relationship abuse.⁶**

Another study revealed that **the majority of women who were victims of contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner first experienced these or other forms of violence by that partner before age 25 (71.1%).** One in four female victims (25.8%) first experienced intimate partner violence prior to age 18.⁷

Another study on youth risk behaviour surveillance in the USA found that **1 in 11 female and about 1 in 15 male high school students report having experienced physical dating violence. About 1 in 9 female and 1 in 36 male high school students report having experienced sexual dating violence in one year.⁸**

1.3 The Irish Context

Although there is not much research carried out in this area in Ireland, the available data shows that:

39% of women aged 18 to 29 years old in Ireland reported psychological violence by a partner from the age of 15. It was also found that 16% of women aged 18 to 29 have experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner from

39%

of women aged 18 to 29 in Ireland have experienced psychological violence since the age of 15

5 Break the Cycle (2017) https://www.breakthecycle.org/sites/default/files/Dating%20Statistics%20Fact%20Sheet_National_updated%2012.4.2017.pdf (Accessed 16 October 2020)

6 Knowledge Networks (2011) https://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/College_Dating_And_Abuse_Final_Study.pdf (Accessed 16 October 2020)

7 Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (2018). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2015. Data Brief—Updated Release. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/2015data-brief508.pdf> (Accessed 16 October 2020)

8 Kann L, McManus T, Harris WA, Shanklin SL, Flint KH, Queen, B., et al. (2018). Youth risk behavior surveillance— United States, 2017. MMWR Surveillance Summaries; 67(SS-8):1-114.

the age of 15 with 5% having experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner in the 12 months prior to interview.⁹

A 2020 survey carried out by the Union of Students Ireland shows that **44% of third-level students in Ireland reported experiencing non-consensual behavior such as sexual touching, attempted or completed, oral, vaginal or anal penetration.** Most students who reported sexual abuse said that the perpetrator was known to them as an acquaintance, friend, romantic or former romantic partner and **98% of women students said that the perpetrator was a man.**¹⁰

Women's Aid have been tracking Femicide (the killing of women and girls by men) in Ireland **since 1996** and we know that since 1996 up until 2019, 40 women aged 18 to 25 years old have been murdered in the Republic of Ireland. Of the resolved cases, 52% are known to have been murdered by a current or former partner.¹¹

Since 1996 until 2019

40
women

aged 18 to 25 years old have been murdered in the Republic of Ireland

Of resolved cases:

52%

are known to have been murdered by a current or former partner

1.4 Online Abuse Using Digital Technology

More and more of our lives are moving into the online sphere and this is particularly true for young people. As they spend more time online learning, connecting and finding community on the internet, **the dark side of digital life has become increasingly apparent.** Technology has brought the level of relationship abuse amongst young people to new heights and the impacts on young women in particular are far-reaching and severe, in ways that would have been hard to imagine before the onset of social media.

Many of the social media platforms that young people use to connect with one another are being used as tools by partners and ex-partners to abuse and harass young women leaving them fearful for their safety both on and offline.

In the EU, 10% of women aged 18 to 29 reported cyber stalking since the age of 15, this is the highest rate of cyber stalking of any

9 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012). Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/survey-data-explorer-violence-against-women-survey> (Accessed 16 October 2020)

10 Union of Students Ireland (2020) Sexual Experiences Survey 2020. Available at: <https://www.nuigalway.ie/media/smartconsent/Sexual-Experiences-Survey-2020.pdf> (Accessed 28 October 2020)

11 Women's Aid (2019) Femicide Watch 2019 Republic of Ireland, A Legacy of Loss for Women Family and Community. Available at: <https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/157593017348186301.pdf> (Accessed 29 October 2020)

age group.¹² A multi-country study carried out in 2020 by Plan International found that **more than half of the girls and young women surveyed aged 15 to 25 have been harassed online.**

The study also found that **one in four girls that have been abused online feel physically unsafe as a result** and **that 11% of the perpetrators of this online abuse are current or former intimate partners.**¹³

Similarly, **a US study found that nearly half of female and high school students who report experiencing sexual or physical abuse by a dating partner, have also been bullied electronically.**¹⁴

In the UK **one in three or 38% of the young people supported by Young People's Violence Advisors (YPVAs) or other specialist practitioners were identified as at risk of experiencing online intimate partner abuse.**¹⁵

Another 2020 study that took place across more than 20 countries with women and girls aged 15 to 25 found violence against women and girls to be 'flourishing' with **58% of respondents having been exposed to a spectrum of online violence.** The abuse includes explicit messages, pornographic photos and cyberstalking. Although just **16% named the perpetrator as a friend or an ex-partner**¹⁶, it is clear that intimate relationship abuse that is carried out digitally is part of a wider culture of the normalisation of abusive behavior towards girls and women online.



12 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012). Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/survey-data-explorer-violenceagainst-women-survey> (Accessed 16 October 2020)

13 Plan international (2020), Free to be online? Girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline> (Accessed: 16 October 2020).

14 Vagi, K. J., Olsen, E. O. M., Basile, K. C., & Vivolo-Kantor, A. M. (2015). Teen dating violence (physical and sexual) among US high school students: findings from the 2013 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 169 (5), 474-482, quoted in Quoted in Dating abuse statistics, Break the cycle factsheet. Available at: https://www.breakthecycle.org/sites/default/files/Dating%20Statistics%20Fact%20Sheet_National_updated%2012.4.2017.pdf (Accessed: 16 October 2020)

15 SafeLives Young people experiencing or at risk of online abuse. Research briefing for professionals working with young people. Available at: <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/SafeLives%20research%20briefing%20-%20young%20people%20and%20online%20abuse.pdf> (Accessed: 16 October 2020)

16 The Guardian (2020) 'Online violence against women 'flourishing' and most common on Facebook survey finds'. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/oct/05/online-violence-against-women-flourishing-and-most-common-on-facebook-survey-find> (Accessed: 28 October 2020)

1.5 Too Into You

Too Into You is a Women's Aid campaign and resource for young women to learn about their intimate relationships and seek support and advice if they are suffering or fear they may be suffering intimate relationship abuse. Friends, classmates, colleagues, family members and professionals can also access information about intimate relationship abuse here. The campaign highlights the hidden reality of many young intimate relationships. The reality is that a partner's attention can often be overwhelming at the early stages of a relationship and what felt like positive attention and attentiveness at the beginning can slowly turn into negative, controlling behaviour as the relationship continues. At this point it can often become more difficult for the woman to leave the relationship or to seek help.

The campaign aims to help young women recognise intimate relationship abuse by highlighting the **'10 Key Danger Signs of Intimate Relationship Abuse'** such as constantly texting someone, critiquing their appearance, rejecting their friends as well as physically hurting them or forcing them to do things sexually that they do not want to do. Site visitors at **Toointoyou.ie** can take a quiz in order to determine whether their relationship is healthy with information on what to do if you are experiencing intimate relationship abuse.




Since the campaign began in 2011, we have had over **150,000 visits** to the Too Into You website with the majority of visitors taking the Relationship Health Check quiz. In 2019, there were **34,609 visits** to the Too Into You website.

'Protect Yourself Online' is a Too Into You resource that provides information on **online stalking and digital abuse**, what the signals are and how it can make you feel, with links to a variety of resources for protection and prevention including **'Social Media Safety'**, **'Phone Safety'** and what to do if **'you have experienced image-based sexual abuse'**.

The Women's Aid **'The Law Is on Your Side', a guide to Safety Orders** aims to raising awareness of the law changes under the Domestic Violence Act 2018, meaning that those in intimate relationships who are not married or cohabiting can apply for Safety Orders. The guide outlines the process to apply for a Safety Order.

Young women's **personal stories of intimate relationship abuse** have been an important part of the Too Into You campaign. Stories from Denise, Clare and Debbie (names changed to protect their identity) are available on Toointoyou.ie. Their stories convey **the reality of intimate relationship abuse** from threats, name-calling and harassment to physical abuse and the toll that it took on them emotionally and physically.



We hope that young women, if informed, might get help before the relationship becomes more established, and it is harder to leave or get support. We also hope that if a young woman is uncomfortable or worried about any aspect of her relationship with her partner, and hears or sees one of our advertisements, she will contact the **Women's Aid 24hr National Freephone Helpline 1800 341 900**, reach out on our **Instant Messaging Support Service** or **talk to someone she trusts**.



Young women experiencing intimate relationship abuse have access to all of the Women's Aid services detailed at the end of this report including the **24hr National Freephone Helpline**, the **Instant Messaging Support Service**, the **One to One Support Service**, **Court Accompaniment**, the **Women's Aid Law Clinic** and the **Dolphin House Support and Referral Drop-in Service**.¹⁷

With our new research conducted during 2020 we wanted to gain an even deeper understanding of the lived realities of young people aged 18 to 25 years old; in order to gauge the prevalence and nature of intimate relationship abuse amongst young people so that we can develop and enhance our responses through **protection, prevention and awareness-raising**.



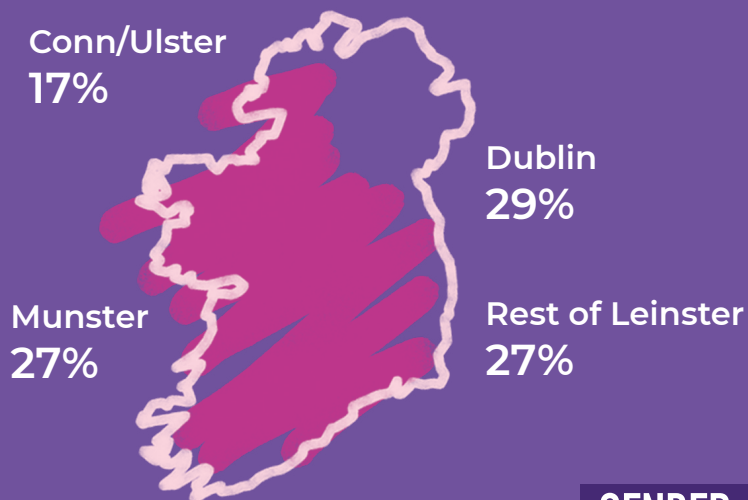
¹⁷ Where a young person experiencing abuse discloses that they are under 18 we may explore their options with them if appropriate to their age; we may refer to a service for young people/children if appropriate. We will respond in accordance with Children First Guidelines.

SECTION 2: WOMEN'S AID RESEARCH ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP ABUSE AGAINST YOUNG PEOPLE (AGED 18 TO 25 YEARS)

2.1 Quantitative Research: Online Survey

Five-hundred 18 to 25 year olds took part in an online survey from the 8th to the 15th of September 2020. The data collected was then weighted across gender, region and social class to ensure a nationally representative sample based on the latest projections from the Central Statistics Office. This means that the data was weighted according to the national gender divide which is 49% women and 51% men and a geographical split of 17% Connacht/Ulster, 29% Dublin, 27% rest of Leinster and 27% Munster. Data was also weighted according to social class: 44% class A,B, C1, 50% class C2,D, E and 6% class F.¹⁸

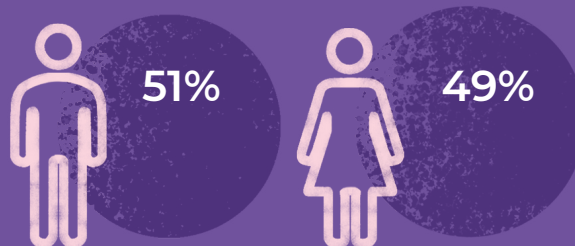
REGION



SOCIAL CLASS



GENDER



¹⁸ In accordance with the Association of Irish Market Research Organisations (AIMRO) Guide to Social Class Grading on Occupation.

2.1a Main Findings¹⁹

Prevalence of Intimate Relationship Abuse

The online survey showed that **3 in 5 young people have either personally experienced or know someone who has experienced current or former abuse in an intimate relationship.** We also found that **young women are significantly more likely than young men to have personally experienced intimate relationship abuse** and slightly more likely to know someone who has experienced intimate relationship abuse. We found that **1 in 5 women surveyed had experienced intimate relationship abuse with 1 in 11 men surveyed having experienced intimate relationship abuse.**

3 in 5

young people have experienced or know someone who experienced abuse in an intimate relationship

1 IN 5 WOMEN



1 IN 11 MEN



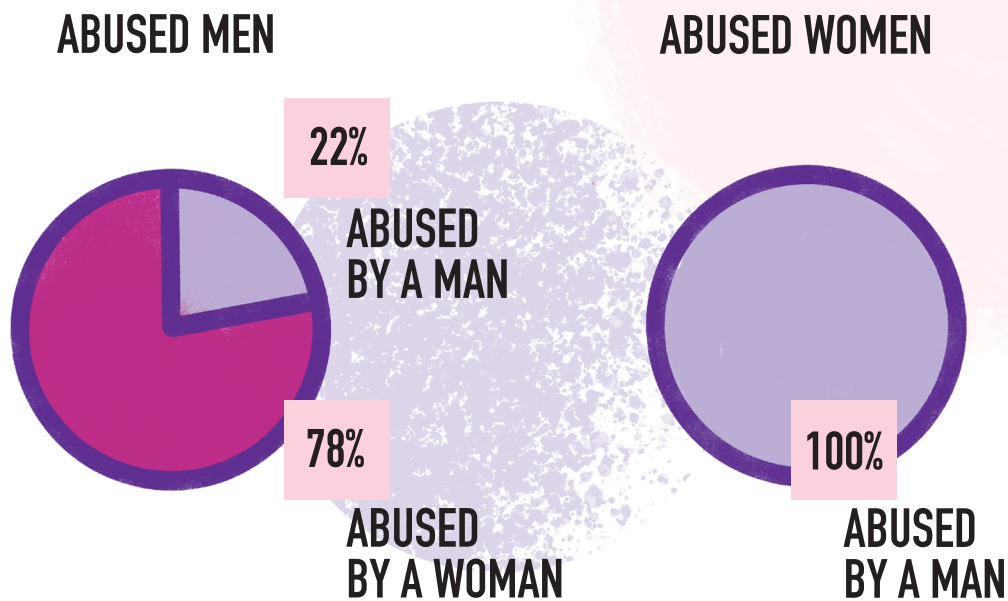
Perpetrators

Our research found that in all cases where women were abused, this abuse was perpetrated by a current or former intimate male partner.

When we asked young men, **78% who were abused in a current or former intimate relationship said they were abused by a woman with 22% having been abused by a male former or current intimate partner.**²⁰

¹⁹ Please note that the findings below are just a snapshot into intimate relationship abuse amongst young people in Ireland. The online survey was taken by 500 young people across Ireland however many of the statistics are taken from the proportion of young women and men who had personally experienced intimate relationship abuse out of that 500. This means that statistics referring to personal experiences of abuse are based on a small number of young women (n=66) and men (n=36). The survey indicates the need for more in-depth research into intimate relationship abuse and it's effects on young people in Ireland.

²⁰ Please note that this is based on a small sample size of n=23.



Prevalence of Coercive Control

We provided survey participants with the definition of coercive control and asked **all** respondents whether they had experienced this type of abuse.

1 in 6 female survey respondents had experienced coercive control by an intimate partner and 1 in 13 male survey respondents had experienced coercive control by an intimate partner.

Coercive control is a persistent pattern of controlling, coercive and threatening behavior including all or some forms of domestic abuse (emotional, physical, financial, sexual including threats) by a partner or ex. It traps people in a relationship and makes it impossible or dangerous to leave.

Experience of Seeking Help

3 in 4 people who have experienced intimate relationship abuse, have sought some form of support. Men are more likely to reach out for support than women. The main sources of support are family and friends. 32% of women and 16% of men never spoke to anyone about the abuse.

Support Sought	Female	Male
Any Support	68%	84%
Friends	39%	66%
Family	27%	54%
Counselling	24%	–
Guidance Counsellor/Support Worker/ Student Officer (college or university)	15%	9%
GP	8%	17%
Gardaí	4%	12%
Co-worker	4%	4%
Specialist domestic violence service	4%	4%
Teacher (Secondary School)	3%	9%
Legal Professional	3%	4%
Other	2%	–
Never talked to anybody	32%	16%

Table 1: Experiences of seeking help

Awareness of the Law

We also wanted to know **all** survey respondents' levels of awareness and knowledge of the laws related to intimate relationship abuse. Here, we found that **55% of female survey respondents were aware that individuals who had experienced current or former intimate relationship abuse could seek protection through the courts with 43% not knowing whether this was the case and 2% not sure.**

	Aware	Unaware	Not Sure
Women	55%	43%	3%
Men	62%	36%	2%

Table 2: Awareness of New Legal Protection for Intimate Partners Under Domestic Violence Act 2018

Interestingly, we found young men to be more aware of laws in relation to intimate relationship abuse with **62% of male respondents saying that they were aware that individuals who had experienced current or former intimate relationship abuse could seek protection through the courts with 36% saying that they did not know and 2% who weren't sure.**

33% of female survey respondents said that they were aware that coercive control is an offence under the Domestic Violence Act 2018 with 61% not aware and 6% unsure. **40% of male respondents said that they were aware that coercive control is an offence under the Domestic Violence Act 2018** and 54% said they were not aware with 6% saying they were unsure. There is a clear need for greater public awareness about the law in this regard.

	Aware	Unaware	Not sure
Women	33%	61%	6%
Men	40%	54%	6%

Table 3: Awareness of new Crime of Coercive Control under the Domestic Violence Act 2018

Awareness of Support Services

We wanted to know all survey respondents level of awareness of support organisations. 2 in 5 young people are aware of organisations that provide specialist support to people experiencing abuse within an intimate relationship. Levels of awareness of broadly similar among men and women.

	Aware	Unaware	Not sure
Women	44%	40%	16%
Men	40%	43%	17%

Table 4: Awareness of Specialist Support Services



2.1b Young Women's Experiences of Intimate Relationship Abuse²¹

18

is the average age of the woman when the abuse first started

Age of the Woman

Age	Percentage
18 - 25	49%
Under 18	51%

Table 5: Age of the woman when the abuse first started

Age of the Perpetrator

Female survey respondents told us that the average age of their abuser when the intimate relationship abuse started was 21.

21 years

is the average age of the abuser when the abuse started

When we asked young women how old the abuser was when the abuse started in the intimate relationship **30% told us that the abuser was under 18** when the abuse started, **56% told us that the abuser was aged 18 to 25** when the abuse started. **11% told us that the abuser was aged 26 to 34** and **3% said that the perpetrator was over 35 when the abuse started.**

Duration of Abuse

Young women who had been abused by a current or former partner told us that the abusive behaviors lasted an average of 1.4 years.

The abuse lasted less than 6 months for 24% of young women and lasted 6 months to a year for 26%. Thirty-three percent said that the abusive behaviors in the relationship lasted 1 to 2 years, 9% said that the abuse lasted 2 to 3 years and 2% said that it lasted 3 to 4 years. Three percent of young women said that the abuse in the intimate relationship lasted 4 to 5 years and 3% said that the abuse lasted more than 5 years.

²¹ Only a small number of men responded to our survey saying that they had experienced intimate relationship abuse (23 men) and so we did not have an adequate sample size to comparatively examine abuse amongst young men and women. This report also places a strong emphasis on young women's experiences of intimate relationship abuse as Women's Aid is primarily an organisation that supports those that identify as women in relation to intimate relationship abuse. We do however support a small number of men and also refer to domestic violence services that support those that identify as men specifically.

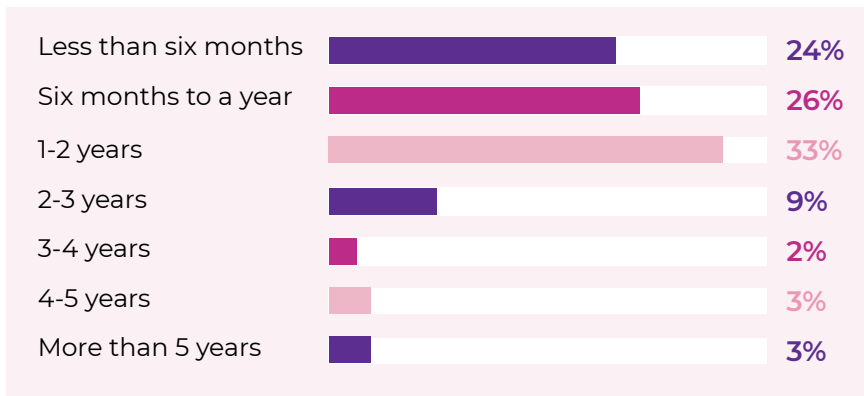


Figure 1: Length of time for which abusive behaviours took place

Ethnicity and Cultural Background

When we asked the young women we surveyed who had experienced intimate relationship abuse about their **ethnic or cultural background** 84% told us they were white 3% told us they were black. 5% told us they were Asian. 6% said they were from another ethnic or cultural background and 2% did not want to provide details on their ethnic or cultural background.

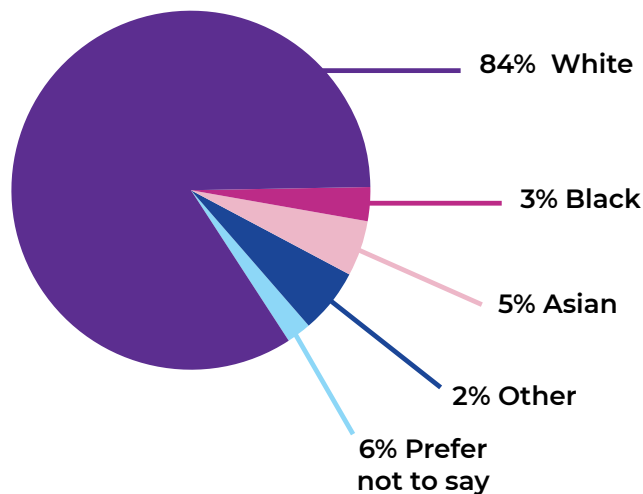


Figure 2: Ethnicity and cultural background of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse.

Types of Abuse

Of the **1 in 5 young women** who experienced intimate relationship abuse, they experienced a wide range of abuse and they often experienced different forms of abuse during the same relationship at the same time.

Types of Abuse	Percentage
Emotional Abuse	92%
Physical Abuse 'less severe'	58%
Physical Abuse 'more severe'	32%
Physical Abuse with a weapon or threat of a weapon	24%
Threat of Physical Abuse	56%
Coercive Control	77%
Stalking/Harrassment	55%
Rape	27%
Sexual Assault	51%
Sexual Coercion	75%
Financial Abuse	28%
Other	14%

Table 6: Types of Abuse Experienced by Young Women

Emotional Abuse

9 out of 10 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse is a highly effective means of establishing a power imbalance within a relationship. It is often unseen or intangible to those within and outside the relationship. **Sustained emotional abuse can have even more serious and long-term impacts than physical abuse.** Emotional abuse can include being put down, constantly criticized and monitored.

It can also include threats of violence against the person, their family or the abuser themselves. Other tactics of emotional abuse include the destruction of property, the use of derogatory language, the restriction of mobility through monitoring and constantly following someone around so that they are never alone. It can also include sexual coercion and threats of sexual violence. However, this is not an exhaustive list of emotional abuse tactics and there are many other behaviors that could be defined as such.

We found that 92% of young women who had been subjected to intimate relationship abuse had experienced emotional abuse with and 63% reporting it happening on a daily or weekly basis.

92%

of young women
had experienced
emotional abuse

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is perhaps the most recognisable form of abuse. It can result in physical injury, and in some cases, it can be life threatening. **It doesn't always leave visible marks or scars.** Having your hair pulled is physical abuse. Over time it often gets worse. Physical abuse includes but is not limited to being pushed, punched, slapped or stabbed. It also includes being beaten with or without a weapon or object. Physical abuse can also mean being spat at or urinated on or being gagged to stop screaming. Biting, hair pulling, or banging someone's head off of something such as a wall or a car dashboard is also considered physical abuse. In this section we asked survey participants about the occurrence of physical abuse in a number of ways.

We asked about threats of physical abuse, physical abuse that is 'less severe' (e.g. slapping, shoving etc.) and 'more severe' (e.g. punching, choking, burning etc.). We also asked survey participants about physical abuse that had been perpetrated using a weapon causing serious injury, and about threats to use a weapon with the intention of causing serious injury.

Physical Abuse - 'Less Severe' (slapping, shoving etc.)

1 in 2 women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced 'less severe' physical abuse

We found that 58% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced 'less severe' physical abuse with 39% having experienced 'less severe' physical abuse more than once and 19% having experienced it on a daily or weekly basis.

Physical Abuse - 'Severe' (punching, choking, burning etc.)

1 in 3 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced more 'severe' forms of physical abuse.

We found that 32% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced 'severe' physical abuse with 26% having experienced 'severe' physical abuse more than once and 5% having experienced it on a daily or weekly basis.

Physical Abuse with a weapon or threat of a weapon to cause or threaten to cause serious injury

1 in 4 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had been assaulted with a weapon or had been threatened with serious harm using a weapon.

56%

of women had been threatened with physical abuse

13%

have been threatened on a daily or weekly basis

58%

of young women had experienced 'less severe' physical abuse

32%

of women had experienced 'severe' physical abuse

26%

have experienced severe physical abuse more than once

24%

of young women had experienced physical abuse with a weapon or threat of a weapon

We found that 24% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced physical abuse with a weapon, or received threats to use a weapon with the intention of causing serious injury. 12% experienced this more than once and 4% experienced it on a daily or weekly basis.

Threat of Physical Abuse

1 in 2 women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had been threatened with physical abuse.

We found that 56% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had been threatened with physical abuse with 42% having been threatened more than once and 13% having been threatened on a daily or weekly basis.

Sexual Abuse

Where there is a dynamic of control and abuse in an intimate relationship, the likelihood of sexual coercion and abuse is high.

It is harder for women who are being abused by their partner to negotiate a free and equal sexual relationship with that partner.

Sexual abuse includes but is not limited to raping someone, forcibly stripping them, telling someone that it is their duty to have sex with them. Sexual degradation including the enforced use of pornography is also a form of sexual abuse. In older couples raping someone in front of their children or when they are particularly vulnerable, for example after childbirth are common sexually abusive behaviors.

In this section we asked about three separate forms of sexual abuse, **sexual coercion**: which can be defined as pressuring someone into having sexual contact with you, **sexual assault** which includes any form of unwanted or non-consensual sexual contact and **rape**.

Sexual Coercion

3 out of 4 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced sexual coercion.

We found that 75% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced sexual coercion with 58% having experienced it on more than one occasion and 29% having experienced it on a daily or weekly basis.

75%

of young women had experienced sexual coercion.

Sexual Assault

1 in 2 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had been sexually assaulted.

We found that 51% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had been sexually assaulted with 28% having experienced it on more than one occasion and 12% having experienced it on a daily or weekly basis.

Rape

1 in 4 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had been raped.

We found that 27% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had been raped with 15% having been raped once, 12% having been raped more than once and 7% having been raped on a daily or weekly basis.

Coercive Control

3 in 4 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced coercive control.

We found that 77% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced coercive control. Coercive control is a persistent pattern of controlling, coercive and threatening behaviour by a current or former partner or spouse.

Financial Abuse

Almost 1 in 3 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced financial abuse.

Financial abuse, sometimes also referred to as economic abuse, is a form of domestic violence in which the abuser uses access to money or other resources as a means of controlling their partner. It is a tactic that abusers use to gain power and dominance over their partners and is designed to create a situation of complete financial dependence. **By controlling a woman's access to financial resources, an abuser ensures that she may find herself forced to choose between staying in an abusive relationship or facing extreme poverty.**

Financial abuse includes but is not limited to controlling the family finances: taking away all bank cards and emptying joint accounts and not allowing the victim to have an independent income, or spend money on personal items. The abuser may also force their partner to account for all spending in great detail and deny money to pay for household bills and expenses. Other forms of financial abuse include coercing sex in return for even basic household items or personal necessities and using financial issues to justify abuse.

We found that 28% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced financial abuse with 23% having experienced it on more than one occasion and 9% having experienced it on a daily or weekly basis.

Stalking or Harassment

1 in 2 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced stalking or harassment.

We found that 55% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced stalking or harassment with 36% having experienced this more than once and 21% having experienced it on a weekly or daily basis.

55%

of young women who had experienced abuse had experienced stalking or harassment

Other forms of abuse

1 in 7 young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced some other form of abuse other than those mentioned above.

We found that 14% of young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse had experienced some other form of abuse other than those mentioned with 14% having experienced this more than once and 9% having experienced it on a weekly or daily basis.

Online abuse using digital technology

1 in 2 women had experienced online abuse using digital technology

When we asked young women what the online abuse using digital technology entailed, 47% said that they had been harassed by phone, text email or by direct message. 25% had their abuser demand their passwords to their device and or social media accounts. 22% of women had been monitored or stalked through online platforms. 20% had images or videos taken of them without their permission with 15% having been threatened with sharing sexually explicit intimate photos and or videos and 17% having actually had sexually explicit or intimate videos or images shared without their consent. 8% had their social media accounts hacked with messages or materials posted without their consent. 11% had GPS tracking installed on their device and 3% had Spyware software installed on their device.

47%

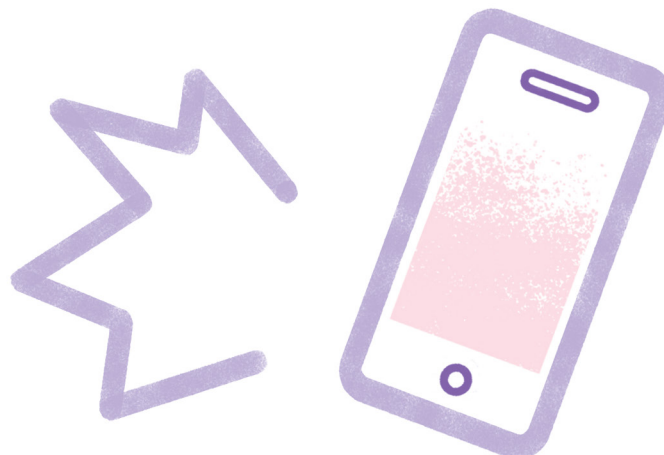
said they had been harassed by phone, text email or by direct message

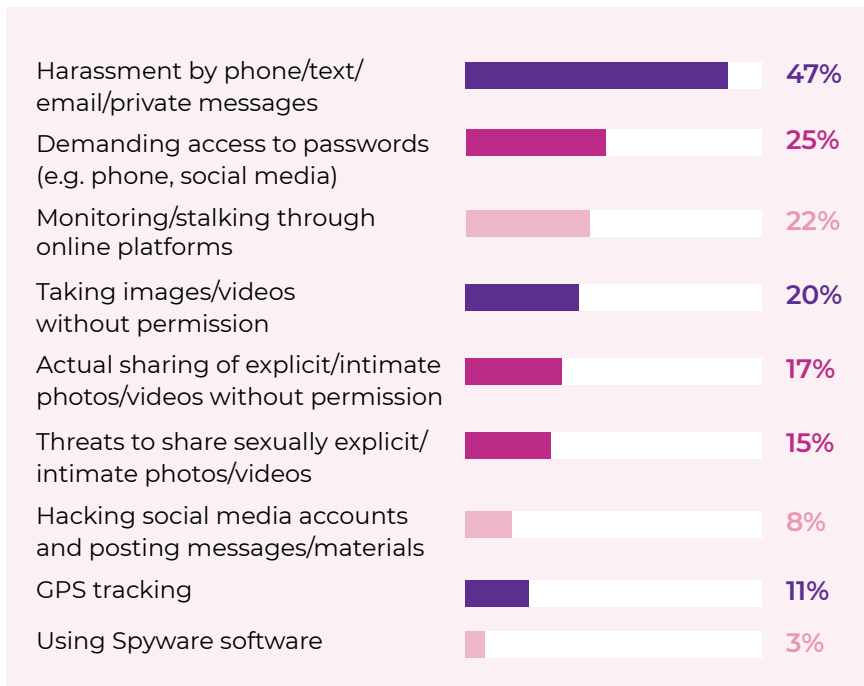
20%

had images or videos taken of them without permission

15%

had been threatened with having intimate photos or videos shared





17%

actually having intimate images or videos shared

Figure 3: Young Women's Experiences of Online Abuse Using Digital Technology

The Impact of Abuse

When we asked young women what the impact of the intimate relationship abuse had on them, **84% said that the abuse had a severe impact**, 14% said that the abuse had a medium impact and just 1% said that the abuse had a minor impact on them. No one said that the abuse did not have an impact on them.

The impacts of intimate relationship abuse can be severe and far-reaching regardless of the age that it occurred. The ultimate cost, in some extreme cases, can be fatal. It is important to recognise that, **young women are at risk of impacts that may be severe, long lasting and life changing**. This may be the case even for relationships which, to older people, may seem relatively short in duration.

84%

said that the abuse had a severe impact



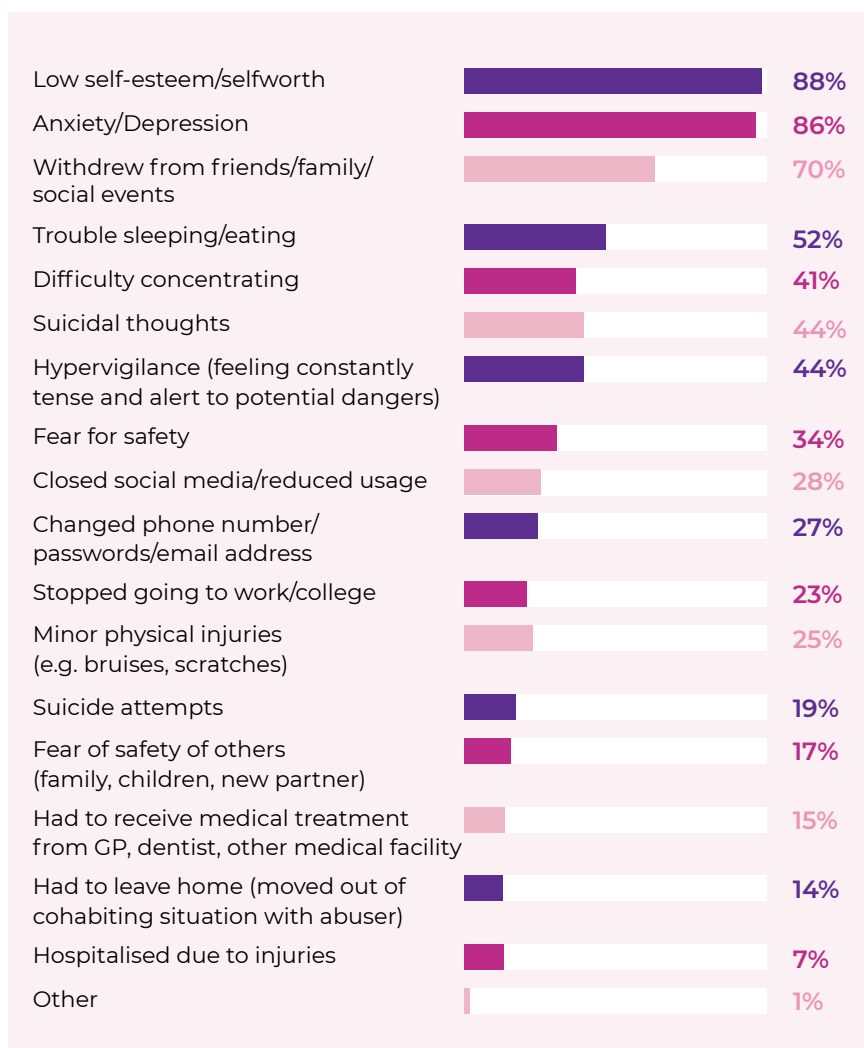


Figure 4: The Impacts of Intimate Relationship Abuse on Young Women

Abusive partners can prey on vulnerabilities and as young women start to make their way in their world, a controlling or violent partner can be a huge setback at the beginning of their adult life. Young women may not have had many other intimate relationships to compare a potential or actually abusive relationship with and therefore find it difficult to read the signs.

2.2 Qualitative Research: Focus Groups

We built on the survey findings by conducting a number of focus groups in order to gain a deeper understanding of the information unearthed in the survey. Four separate focus groups were held: one with women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse personally, one with women who knew someone who had experienced intimate relationship abuse, one with women who had no experience of intimate relationship abuse either personally or through someone else and one with men, half of whom knew someone who had experienced intimate relationship abuse and half of whom did not know anyone or have any personal experience of the issue. All participants were aged between 18 and 25 and were recruited from the online survey and the Red C recruiter network.²²

The focus groups were based around 4 key themes:

DESCRIBE



Describing the kind of abuse that happens in intimate relationships between young people. This included a discussion around terminology, the behaviors most commonly associated with intimate relationship abuse between young people and areas of clarity and uncertainty when it comes to describing this kind of abuse.

DISCUSS

Discussing intimate relationship abuse amongst young people involved taking a look at the most common forms that this kind of abuse takes as well as a more in-depth discussion around specific types of abuse such as psychological abuse and digital or online abuse.



DISCLOSE



The groups also discussed **disclosure** when it comes to intimate relationship abuse between young people. They talked about who you might talk to if you experienced this kind of abuse and why.

DRIVE

The fourth theme looked at what was **driving** levels of intimate relationship abuse amongst young people looking at the barriers to seeking help and levels of awareness in society about the issue.



²² Please note that all names have been changed to protect the identify of focus group participants.



Types of Abuse

The groups discussed the various forms of abuse that can take place in relationships, those that are explicit and those that are more hidden.

There is strong awareness of the extensive forms abuse that can be perpetrated, with many of these being “under the radar” behaviors that require active recognition.

The groups felt that **sexual and physical abuse are the most publicly discussed forms of intimate relationship abuse.** It was felt that the media tend to sensationalise and report cases involving sexual and physical abuse. There was a belief within the groups that sexual and physical abuse are more ‘black and white’, easy to identify and for this reason, these kinds of abuse are more straightforward to identify as wrong and to call out. The groups generally felt that these more explicit forms of abuse are more likely to be part of public discourse about relationship abuse.

However, the groups agreed that **psychological and emotional abuse are actually more likely to be talked about with peers privately.** Although these kinds of abuse are less publicly reported, there was a sense that this type of abuse is actually more prevalent in relationships amongst young people than physical abuse. Emotional abuse was found to be discussed more freely amongst female friends. The groups discussed the fact that these less explicit forms of abuse are typically avoided in the media as they may be seen as subjective and are perceived as being hard to ‘prove’.

The participants clearly differentiated between in-couple conflict which can form parts of the ups and downs in any relationship and intimate relationship abuse, with the majority understanding intimate relationship abuse to be **a pattern of repeated behaviors, whereby one person increasingly exerts their power and control over the other over a period of time.**

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is widely recognised as the most common form of relationship abuse. In 2019, 68% of all domestic abuse disclosures to Women’s Aid were related to emotional abuse, an increase of 15% on the previous year.²³

Emotional abuse was identified by the focus groups as **the foundation for all abuse within intimate relationships.** It was recognised that although it can lead to physical abuse, this is not always the case. The focus groups defined emotional abuse as the most **common** form of abuse within intimate relationships, it is seen as **easy to perpetrate but difficult to recognise and identify.** The groups felt that a range of behaviors and actions could fall under this descriptor and that because this kind of abuse

²³ Women’s Aid (2020) Annual Impact Report 2019. Available at: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_aid_annual_impact_report_2019_-_embargoed_29820.pdf (Accessed: 27 October 2020)

is not singular and can take on so many different forms, spotting the pattern and **identifying emotional abuse is difficult**. It is also seen as a more subjective form of abuse in that it is not as 'black and white' as other abusive behaviors and can therefore go unchallenged more easily.

Emotional abuse is also seen as a form of abuse that is **more easily excused** in Ireland because of a culture of 'slagging' and the way that swearing and the use of derogatory language is often seen as acceptable and part of an Irish person's vernacular. The **unseen impact** of emotional abuse was also noted whereby the effects or aftermath are often not very explicit or easily identified. This can mean the person experiencing the abuse is constantly questioning whether or not the abuse is in fact happening or not. This is despite the fact that emotional abuse is perceived to have more **long term impacts** on the person who has experienced it with regards to their **mental health, wellbeing, personal value, personal relationships and the level of trust they place in others** in comparison with other forms of abuse.

The availability of legal recourse and protection from the law when it comes to emotional abuse is also perceived as limited.

'Words can be unsaid by sweeter words. Things can be said in the heat of the moment, but you can molly coddle them with something nice and it can be forgotten'

- Evie, no experience of abuse,
personally or otherwise

It is clear that there is a general **lack of clarity around what constitutes abuse** within an intimate relationship. Those experiencing the abuse may be felt to be unaware that they are experiencing emotional abuse and this presents a challenge with regards to addressing the abuse for both them for the person experiencing it and others who may want to support that person. Young male participants for instance, felt that it was difficult to be an ally to those experiencing emotional abuse because of a concern that they may be wrong about what they think is happening and be seen as intruding or mis-speaking.

'It's risking your relationship with that person by saying that some certain behavior is wrong'

- Fionn

While awareness of emotional abuse exists, it is clear that better education is required to enable detection of and encourage those who suffer to seek support.



Online Abuse Using Digital Technology

Online abuse was seen as a key platform of abuse amongst younger cohorts. Some forms of abuse may be more or less common at different life stages. Financial abuse was, for example considered more likely amongst those in their 40s+, while **online/digital technology abuse was thought by the groups to be more common in those from early teens up to 30s.**

Online abuse was recognised in all of the focus groups as a significant means by which to perpetrate a wide range of abusive behaviours, including abuse of a current or former intimate partner, and also by individuals who may want an intimate relationship which is not reciprocated and who then attack, harass and stalk. **Online abuse is seen as difficult to both address and escape due to the constant nature of life online.** With the increased pressure to be accessible at all times and online at almost any time day or night, digital technology is the ideal tool for perpetrators to harass, control and abuse victims. The effects of this kind of abuse was described as **'draining' and 'exhausting'** while at the same time difficult to prove with no obvious signposts for seeking support or protection.

In addition, the creation of new and fake accounts is straightforward for perpetrators so there is more opportunity for repeated and longer term abuse. There appeared, among the groups to be, a lack of awareness around how to "block" on Instagram specifically.

'It can be particularly draining. You're always expected to be reachable, and if not you are doing something wrong. I think people can be more dismissive of it too, why don't you just get off that platform?'

- Roisín, Personal Experience

The platforms where this kind of **abuse is most likely to take place are those with a direct messaging function. Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and WhatsApp were felt to be most exposed when it comes to intimate relationship abuse.** Tiktok is perceived to be for younger users (i.e. under 18) and more public in its commentary. **Snapchat was noted as particularly problematic** as "proof" can be difficult to obtain due to the fact that content is only available for a limited amount of time. **Screen shotting was also cited as an issue on snapchat** with perpetrators of online abuse capturing and sharing intimate images without consent. **All-male WhatsApp groups were perceived amongst women to be a breeding ground for abusive and 'toxic' behavior;** however the male group felt that WhatsApp was less harmful because you need a contact number to register and thereby get in touch with the person.

Online abuse using digital technology is also seen as an issue that is **hard to raise and address.** Many recognise that from the outside looking in there is no "clear fix" when it comes to this kind of abuse, however they do

not want to give up social media or their online presence. There is a sense that this form of abuse is not taken seriously enough within society or from a legislative or policy perspective when compared with other forms of intimate relationship abuse. **Overall, the groups expressed that there is a reluctance to raise online abuse issues or to seek help by younger people.**

It is clear that victims of online abuse need to be supported in speaking up about this kind of abuse and seeking support. Legislative changes to ensure that online/digital (including image-based sexual abuse) is clearly identified as a crime is needed. Legal recourse for victims and penalties for perpetrators should be easily identified and employed by the authorities. More awareness of online and digital abuse including sexualised abuse is needed and should be part of school curriculums as part of sexual health and relationships and digital literacy modules.

Barriers to Seeking Help: Shame, Embarrassment and Fear

A lack of recognition that what is happening is actually abuse is seen as a common barrier to seeking help and support. Focus group participants identified that this can be a particular issue for women, due to persistent gendered social norms. There was a sense within the groups that women may be more likely to stay in an intimate relationship that is abusive than a man, as **women are more likely to have been socialised to tolerate these kinds of behaviors** but also to believe that through perseverance and dedication the abusive person could be 'fixed' and their behavior changed.

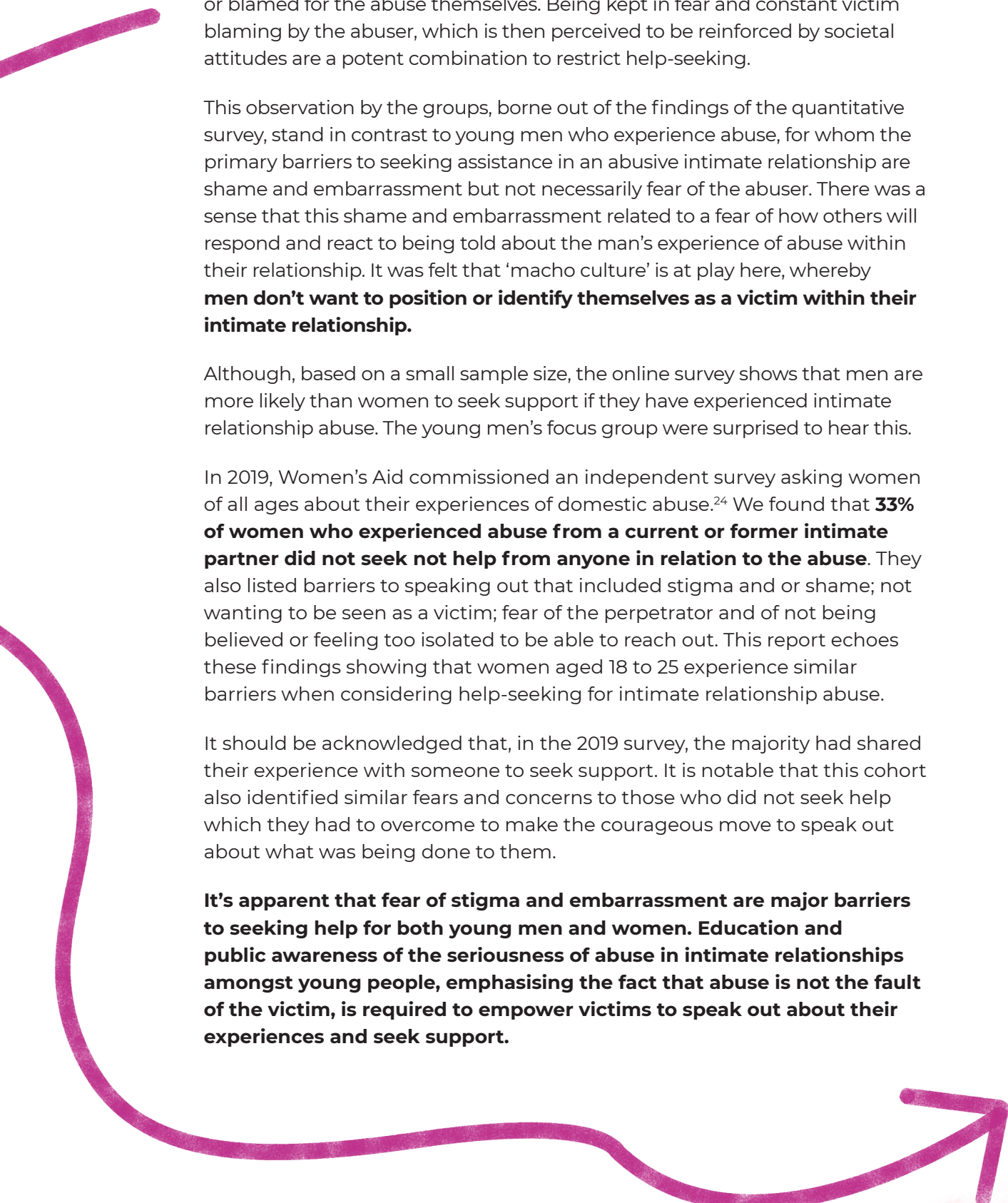
'Women have been conditioned to put other people first; there's still an element of that and it's built into the system.'

- Stephanie, No Experience

'If a man cheats, the woman is meant to stay and keep the family together. This hasn't left our generation yet. Girls are more likely to tolerate it'

- Niamh, Personal Experience

Once victims can identify themselves as being in an abusive situation, there are a number of other barriers to overcome: shame, embarrassment and predominantly fear. **The main perceived barrier to accessing support for young women is fear of the perpetrator.** Followed by fear, **shame and embarrassment were also perceived as likely barriers to young women seeking assistance** in relation to an abusive intimate relationship. These primary barriers to seeking support create a potent combination for young



women. Young women may be simultaneously concerned for their health and safety, as well as fearing that they will not be believe, or be be judged or blamed for the abuse themselves. Being kept in fear and constant victim blaming by the abuser, which is then perceived to be reinforced by societal attitudes are a potent combination to restrict help-seeking.

This observation by the groups, borne out of the findings of the quantitative survey, stand in contrast to young men who experience abuse, for whom the primary barriers to seeking assistance in an abusive intimate relationship are shame and embarrassment but not necessarily fear of the abuser. There was a sense that this shame and embarrassment related to a fear of how others will respond and react to being told about the man's experience of abuse within their relationship. It was felt that 'macho culture' is at play here, whereby **men don't want to position or identify themselves as a victim within their intimate relationship.**

Although, based on a small sample size, the online survey shows that men are more likely than women to seek support if they have experienced intimate relationship abuse. The young men's focus group were surprised to hear this.

In 2019, Women's Aid commissioned an independent survey asking women of all ages about their experiences of domestic abuse.²⁴ We found that **33% of women who experienced abuse from a current or former intimate partner did not seek not help from anyone in relation to the abuse.** They also listed barriers to speaking out that included stigma and or shame; not wanting to be seen as a victim; fear of the perpetrator and of not being believed or feeling too isolated to be able to reach out. This report echoes these findings showing that women aged 18 to 25 experience similar barriers when considering help-seeking for intimate relationship abuse.

It should be acknowledged that, in the 2019 survey, the majority had shared their experience with someone to seek support. It is notable that this cohort also identified similar fears and concerns to those who did not seek help which they had to overcome to make the courageous move to speak out about what was being done to them.


It's apparent that fear of stigma and embarrassment are major barriers to seeking help for both young men and women. Education and public awareness of the seriousness of abuse in intimate relationships amongst young people, emphasising the fact that abuse is not the fault of the victim, is required to empower victims to speak out about their experiences and seek support.

²⁴ Research carried out by Women's Aid to better understand the support needs of women experiencing abuse from current or ex-intimate partners and identify the gaps that currently exist. 937 people took part in the survey, 928 of whom were women.



'ON INSTAGRAM IT'S EASY TO STEP OVER THE LINE. OVER LIKING PHOTOS, SENDING DIRECT MESSAGES, MAKING UP MULTIPLE ACCOUNTS. IT'S HARD TO BLOCK PEOPLE ON INSTAGRAM TOO.'

- AOIFE, KNOWS SOMEONE WITH EXPERIENCE



'IT'S VERY EASY TO CREATE A NEW EMAIL INSTAGRAM ACCOUNT IN LESS THAN 30 SECONDS AND THEN YOU HAVE AN ANONYMOUS ACCOUNT [...] THERE SHOULD BE MORE ACCOUNTABILITY AND MORE RIGID CHECKS TO CREATE A SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT'.

- CONOR

SECTION THREE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This new research makes clear the high level of intimate relationship abuse among 18 to 25 year olds in Ireland. Most significant is the abuse of young women by young men who are current or former intimate partners. **An extremely worrying finding was the level (51%) of the abuse experienced by young women began under the age of 18** which should be a cause for urgent concern. **Young women are experiencing a wide variety of abusive behaviors** with the most prominent form of abuse being emotional abuse. Young women are finding it difficult to identify the abuse, and even when they do identify their situation as abuse, they are experiencing high levels of fear, of both the perpetrator and of stigma as a barrier to seeking assistance or support from anyone. This includes family and friends. It is also notable that **although sexual and physical abuse are prominent in the public sphere and in the media, it is not the most prominent form of abuse experienced or talked about with peers by young women.**

Recommendation 1 – further in-depth research is needed to understand the level of intimate relationship abuse experienced by young people aged 18 to 25 from a larger sample size to learn more about the prevalence, types of abuse that they are experiencing and the impacts of the abuse. Research is also needed in relation to the prevalence of intimate relationship abuse amongst under 18s taking into account all ethical concerns in relation to research that is conducted with minors.

Recommendation 2 – further awareness-raising and education is needed from primary school level and up in relation to promoting healthy and identifying unhealthy relationships amongst young people. This should be done in the context of promoting greater gender equality, respect and mutuality. Teaching on intimate relationship abuse should be part of all learning in relation to Relationships & Sexuality Education. Highlighting sexualised abuse and other forms of abuse, and the importance of consent should be included in age appropriate ways at all levels.

Recommendation 3 - Fully resourced general public awareness-raising is needed to encourage increased recognition of the signs of intimate relationship abuse and to combat the fear, stigma and shame that stops victims seeking support. Awareness-raising is also needed to let young people know that there are laws to protect them from intimate relationship abuse and that specialist organisations are there to support them.

We found online abuse to be significantly prevalent amongst the young women we surveyed, **with nearly half of all young women who had experienced intimate relationship abuse having experienced online abuse** through the use of digital technology. As young people's lives become more and more focused on the online world, legislation is needed to protect against and prevent online abuse. **Online service-providers without sufficient regulation are handing perpetrators the perfect tool to abuse young women with.** It is an exceptionally insidious form of abuse that infiltrates their safe spaces, their bedrooms, classrooms, workplaces so that the escape routes normally available aren't there and the abuse becomes all-encompassing. In many ways online abuse has become normalised. This should be a cause of deep concern given its **potentially devastating impacts on those targeted** either in the context of an intimate relationship, or through bullying, cyberstalking and harassment particularly of women in general.

Policy-making and legislation is lagging as the global digital sphere continues to quickly evolve and adapt to the global societal landscape. There is a huge gap in both criminal and civil legislation in Ireland in relation to online abuse and image-based sexual abuse which makes it very difficult to address these forms of abuse both in the criminal and civil courts.

Legislation to criminalise image-based sexual abuse is urgently needed as well as civil legal remedies to have distressing and abusive images removed from online platforms quickly.

Recommendation 4 – The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017 should be urgently progressed and enacted to provide for criminalisation of image-based sexual abuse and other forms of online harassment. The Online Safety Commissioner should be established, as proposed in the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill 2019. This Bill should also provide for fast and cost-free civil legal remedies (such as take down orders) to have distressing and abusive images removed from online platforms quickly.

SECTION 4: ABOUT WOMEN'S AID

Women's Aid is the leading national organisation that has been working in Ireland to stop domestic violence against women and children since 1974. We work to make women and children safe from domestic violence by offering support to women and their families and friends, providing hope to those affected by abuse and working for justice and social change.

24hr National Freephone Helpline 1800 341 900

Our 24hr National Freephone Helpline provides a listening ear, emotional support and practical information to women experiencing abuse from their current or former partners. It is the only free, national, domestic violence helpline with specialised trained staff, fully accredited and quality assured by The Helplines Partnership. It has a Telephone Interpretation Service facility covering 170 languages for callers needing support in their own language. We also provide a text service for deaf and hard of hearing women. The Helpline is a gateway into our Dublin based face to face and court support services and to other local independent support services and refuges around the country

Instant Messaging Support Service

The Women's Aid National Helpline Instant Messaging Service is a free, confidential and secure service where women can seek support and advice from fully trained and accredited staff through instant messaging. The service is open daily and can be accessed through [Womenaid.ie](https://www.womenaid.ie). The service is more easily accessible to women who feel they are at risk of being overheard by their abuser.

One to One Support

The Women's Aid One to One Support Service provides in-depth information and support to women experiencing domestic violence in locations across Dublin city and county. This ongoing face to face support can include Safety Planning with the woman and we can offer the woman a wide range of advocacy and referral support to external organisations and agencies such as Refuges, Housing, Social Welfare, Immigration, Gardaí, Family and Criminal Courts, Social Services and Health agencies. Our advocacy and referral work includes accompanying women to the local Gardaí to make statements; assisting women to make Legal Aid applications; supporting a woman to regularise her immigration status because of domestic abuse; advocating to Housing Authorities for women who are no longer safe in their homes or supporting a woman to access local refuges. It also includes accompaniment to family and criminal courts.

Court Accompaniment

The Women's Aid Court Accompaniment Service provides support for women availing of legal options regarding abuse by a current or former spouse or partner. Women's Aid Support Workers have expert knowledge and understanding of the family law system and of the legal options open to women living with domestic violence. We provide emotional support, both before, during and after the court proceedings; support women as they face their abusive partners, clarify legal terminology, safety planning and explore further options. We support women with the following applications and hearings in the context of domestic abuse: Domestic Violence Orders, Access, Maintenance, Divorce and Separation.

Dolphin House Support and Referral Drop In Service

Based in the Dolphin House Family Law Court, the Support and Referral Service is a free and confidential drop in service for women who are experiencing domestic violence. This can include emotional, physical, sexual or financial abuse. The service provides support and information on legal options, safety planning and links women in with domestic violence services for ongoing support. Women's Aid runs this service in partnership with Inchicore Outreach Centre.

High Risk Support Project

The High Risk Support Project provides a multiagency response to women at high risk of ongoing abuse and homicide from their ex-partners. Women's Aid partners with An Garda Síochána and local domestic abuse services to deliver a co-ordinated rapid response system for women and families, which is generously supported by the Vodafone Foundation and the Department of Justice.

Women's Aid Law Clinic

Our confidential and free legal information and assistance clinic supports women experiencing domestic violence who are representing themselves in domestic violence and family law proceedings. The clinic is staffed by volunteer lawyers from McCann Fitzgerald whose services are provided free of charge.

Specialised Training

Women's Aid is a Centre of Excellence for Training and Development of professional and organisational responses to women and children experiencing domestic violence. We provide support to local and national organisations throughout Ireland, both statutory and non-statutory, to promote best practice responses to women and children experiencing domestic violence. All Women's Aid training is informed and guided by over 45 years of experience of direct work supporting women and by international models of best practice.

Public Awareness and Campaigns

Women's Aid leads the way in raising awareness and providing information on domestic violence to women experiencing abuse, their families and friends, their communities and wider society. Our annual public awareness campaigns and communications activity are a vital way to highlight the prevalence, nature and impact of domestic violence, intimate relationship abuse and Femicide. We also engage with the media to promote the 24hr National Helpline and our other support services. The Women's Voices testimony project encourages and facilitates survivors of domestic violence to tell their stories in a safe way to create better awareness and change for women in similar situations.

Influencing Government and Policy

Women's Aid provides solutions based recommendations on improving legal responses, systems and protections for women and children experiencing abuse and we bring the concerns of women experiencing abuse to a number of national and local forums. We make submissions and meet with Government ministers, policy makers and members of the Oireachtas to discuss a range of issues and collaborate with other agencies and organisations to bring about political and social change.



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