

Women's Aid Submission on the Redevelopment of Senior Cycle SPHE

November 2022



Women's  Aid

Introduction

Women's Aid is a leading national organisation that has been working in Ireland to stop domestic violence against women and children since 1974. In this time, the organisation has built up a huge body of experience and expertise on the issue, enabling us to best support women and share this knowledge with other agencies responding to women experiencing domestic violence. More information on Women's Aid is available through our [website](#).

Women's Aid appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the NCCA on the important topic of the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. Given our remit, our focus is on the promotion of healthy relationships and the prevention of gender-based violence among young people.

Women's Aid Research

Women's Aid has recently carried out specific research on intimate relationship abuse and young people (18 -25). While the target group is slightly older than Senior Cycle students, we believe the findings are relevant for this group too.

Our research¹ has found that relationship abuse is common, particularly against young women:

- Three in five young people aged 18 to 25 years old have experienced, or know someone who has experienced, intimate relationship abuse.
- One in five (1:5) young women (aged 18-25) have suffered intimate relationship abuse, **with 51% of young women affected having experienced the abuse under the age of 18.**

This is compared with one in eleven (1:11) young men, indicating that this remains a significantly gendered issue, but one which can affect young men also.

¹Women's Aid (2020) *One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse in Ireland*. Available at: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/one_in_five_women_report_womens_aid_2020.pdf and Women's Aid (2021) *Yes It's Abuse: Young people's understanding of and attitudes to intimate relationship abuse*. Available at: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/yes_its_abuse_-_young_peoples_understanding_of_attitudes_to_intimate_relationship_abuse.pdf

- Of the 1 in 5 young women who experienced abuse:
 - 3 in 4 were sexually coerced, with 51% sexually assaulted and 27% raped.
 - 9 in 10 were subjected to emotional abuse. Sustained emotional abuse can have even more serious and long-term impacts than physical abuse.
 - 1 in 2 had been targeted with online abuse which was described as 'draining' and 'exhausting'. Over half (55%) were stalked and/or harassed.
 - 1 in 2 were threatened with physical violence. 1 in 2 experienced 'less severe' physical abuse e.g., slapping, shoving. 1 in 3 had experienced more 'severe' forms of physical abuse e.g., punching, choking, burning.
 - 84% said that the abuse had a severe impact, including loss of self-esteem, anxiety and depression, suicidal thoughts/attempting suicide, withdrawal from family and friends, giving up work or college, needing treatment for physical injuries, and living in fear.

Our 2021 research² (with the same cohort) focused on young people's understanding of relationship abuse, spotting the signs, awareness of legal protection and help seeking. It found that:

- Young people have some misconceptions around the causes of intimate relationship abuse. For example:
 - 29% of young people did not believe that women are most commonly victims of relationship abuse even though gendered patterns of abuse are internationally accepted and backed up by national findings.

²Women's Aid (2021) Yes, It's Abuse: Young people's understanding of & attitudes to intimate relationship abuse. Available at: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/yes_its_abuse_-_young_peoples_understanding_of_attitudes_to_intimate_relationship_abuse.pdf

- The majority (81%) of young people also believed that drug and alcohol misuse cause someone to act abusively towards their partner. While drugs and alcohol can exacerbate abuse – they are not the cause of abusive behaviours.
- There appears to be a high level of awareness among young people that the sharing of intimate images without consent is a crime, and that the threat to do so is also an offence. However, there remain concerns that sexting and image based sexual abuse remain a significant risk factor for young people.
- 50% of young people are NOT aware of relevant specialist support services.
- Moreover, while the majority of young people (86%) feel a responsibility to intervene if they are concerned a close friend might be experiencing intimate relationship abuse, many of them are not sure about how to do so.

National and International Research

Irish and International data confirms that teenage girls suffer high levels of gender-based abuse, including intimate relationship abuse, sexual harassment, and online abuse:

- A recent Irish report on young peoples' (15-17 years old) experiences of sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment during the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland found **high prevalence of digital harassment, including sexual harassment and abuse**, which increased during the pandemic. Girls and LGBTQ+ young people experience more online harms than boys and heterosexual young people³.
- Similarly a 2021 survey found that 80% of adolescents had been subjected to some form of sexual harassment, including **24% who had been subjected to physical or extreme forms of harassment** in the previous year, with higher prevalence experienced by girls and LGBTQ+

³Dr Debbie Ging and Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva, October 2022, Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations. DCU Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University

young people. The report also found that 16-17 years old were subjected to much higher levels of sexual harassment than teens aged 13-15⁴.

- In the USA one in eleven female high school students report having experienced physical dating violence and one in nine report having experienced sexual dating violence in one year⁵.
- A UK survey of 13 to 17-year-olds found that a quarter (25%) of girls and 18% of boys reported having experienced some form of physical violence from an intimate partner. Additionally, one in three girls (31%) and 16% of boys reported some form of sexual abuse within their relationships.⁶
- Young people experience severe abuse. They also experience high level of abuse through the use of digital technology, in particular social media.⁷
- Worryingly, research highlights that many young people may not understand what constitutes a healthy relationship and that sexual harassment and abuse is trivialized and normalised among teenagers⁸.

⁴RCNI, 2021, 'Storm and Stress' An Exploration of Sexual Harassment Amongst Adolescents available at <https://www.rcni.ie/wp-content/uploads/RCNI-Storm-and-Stress-FINAL.pdf>

⁵ [Preventing Teen Dating Violence](#), 2021

⁶ [Partner Exploitation and Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships](#), 2009

⁷ [Safe Young Lives](#), 2018

⁸ [Safe Young Lives](#), 2018

Updating the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum

Women's Aid warmly welcomes the updating of the SPHE and RSE curriculum for the Senior Cycle. Given the common prevalence of relationship abuse and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence experienced by young people as described above, Women's Aid believes that education and awareness raising are key forms of prevention. Schools have an essential role to play in promoting gender equality and preventing relationship violence. We make the following observations and recommendations regarding content and delivery of the new curriculum.

Content

- The curriculum should be based on the foundation that **gender-based violence is rooted in gender inequality**, and that we live in a gender unequal society whereby boys and girls are socialised to unhelpful stereotypes and attitudes, which are supportive of unequal gender roles and underpin and reinforce gender-based violence.
- Young people must be taught about healthy and unhealthy relationships in the context of **promoting greater gender equality, respect, and mutuality**. Relationships and Sexuality Education that supports young people, from young ages, to critically examine gender norms is essential to dismantle belief systems that justify and enable some men's violence.
- The Senior Cycle is delivered to young people at an age where many may start dating and exploring intimate relationships. It is therefore very important that there should be a **focus on healthy relationships and on consent in sexual relationships**.
- 1 in 6 young women and 1 in 13 young men have been subjected to **coercive control** by a partner or ex-partner⁹. Given the insidious nature of coercive control, and the difficulty in spotting the signs for victims/survivors and allies alike, it is essential that this topic is

⁹Women's Aid (2020) One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse in Ireland op. cit.

covered. It is also important for raising awareness among potential perpetrators in these very early intimate relationships that some behaviors can be considered coercive or controlling as opposed to normal or even 'romantic'.

- Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) should emphasise the right to refuse to engage in sexual acts and the right to engage in sexual acts without coercion, fear of violence, stigmatization and discrimination, and help students understand the **concept of consent**.
- **Online abuse** is also very common, and it affects mostly girls and LGBTQ+ young people. The RCNI report¹⁰ found that 42% of the sexual harassment reported was located online. The DCU report¹¹ found that "Girls experienced more digital harassment of a sexual nature than boys by a significant difference, including heightened experiences since COVID-19. Roughly twice as many girls (33.3%) as boys (17.4%) received unwanted sexual photos from friends, adult strangers, and people they know only online. 15.1% of boys and 32.2% of girls were asked to send sexual photos or videos of themselves online, and 36.7% of girls and 20% of boys said this increased since Covid-19 started". Interestingly, girls reported that this type of abuse is now nearly normalised, part and parcel of growing up as a girl, and that the workshops they attended as part of this study helped to de-normalise these behaviours and recognise them as abuse,¹² as well as unpack the double standards and victim blaming myths surrounding sexual harassment and abuse.
- The SPHE curriculum should also address the **impact of pornography** on children and young people, which is a commitment included in Action 1.3.7 of the national Zero Tolerance Strategy¹³. Pornography harms both girls and boys, by influencing expectations, normalising disrespectful sexual behavior and promoting a misogynistic,

¹⁰RCNI, 2021, op. cit page 12

¹¹Dr Debbie Ging and Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva, October 2022, op. cit., page 6

¹²Dr Debbie Ging and Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva, October 2022, op. cit., page 39

¹³Department of Justice, 2022, Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence Implementation Plan, available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a43a9-third-national-strategy-on-domestic-sexual-and-gender-based-violence/>

and often abusive and violent, model of sexual expectation. Women's Aid 2021 research found that over 3 in 5 of young people surveyed disclosed that they have viewed pornography, 75% of men and 50% of women, with the average age of starting at 14¹⁴.

- Further a new Women's Aid research study in 2022 found that young adults (18-25) are highly concerned about the harmful impacts of pornography, differing significantly from the next oldest cohort (26-34) in their attitudes. They are most concerned about pornography driving trends of rough/violent sex and undermining consent. A majority of people of all ages agreed that pornography undermines healthy sexual development for young people, makes children more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, undermines consent and increases sexual violence.
- This research also highlights a disconnect between where people think sexual education should ideally take place, through family and schools, and where it actually happens, online and through peers. Notably **the youngest cohort in the research (18-25) consider school (both primary and secondary) to be the preferred place to learn about relationships and sexual education**¹⁵.
- Mental health: Learnings on mental health should acknowledge the impact of gender-based violence, including relationship abuse, particularly on women's mental health.
- Finally, Women's Aid 2021 research found that the majority of young people would like to intervene if somebody they knew was experiencing intimate relationship abuse, but do not have the tools and knowledge to do so confidently¹⁶. Women's Aid believes that the

¹⁴Women's Aid, 2021, op. cit.

¹⁵Women's Aid, 2022, It's time to talk about porn Irish attitudes on the links between pornography, sexual development, gender inequality and violence against women and girls. Available here: https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/its_time_to_talk_about_porn_report_womens_aid_november_2022.pdf Full age disaggregation on views about sex and relationships education is not noted in the report but is available on request from Women's Aid.

¹⁶Women's Aid, 2021, op. cit.

SPHE curriculum should equip young people with the tools to safely support peers experiencing relationship, or other forms of abuse, and to challenge harmful attitudes and stereotypes.

- University College Cork runs the Bystander Intervention programme which seeks to enhance knowledge and understanding of sexual misconduct and violence among student populations and lead to attitudinal and behavioral change. The Bystander Intervention Programme has recently developed a second level pilot programme, training 140 teachers to deliver it in 45 schools nationwide. Women's Aid has contributed to the programme through its Too Into You project to teach young people about healthy relationships and intimate relationship abuse. The evaluation of this pilot should be considered by the Department and those developing this curriculum as a source of important information.

In summary the SPHE curriculum should include:

- Education on gender equality and harmful sexist gender stereotypes.
- DSGBV as a cause and consequence of gender inequality.
- The promotion of healthy/safe & equal/mutual relationships.
- How to identify unhealthy relationships, impacts, relevant legislation (in particular coercive control) and where to look for support.
- Relationships and sex education, with a focus on consent, sexist double standards and victim blaming myths.
- Online harm, including impact of social media, online harassment /stalking, image-based abuse, including relevant legislation and supports.
- Impact of pornography.
- Bystander intervention/supporting peers and challenging harmful attitudes.
- Specific focus needs to be placed on the experiences and needs of LGBT+ young people.

The curriculum should have an overarching intersectional lens, taking into consideration the experiences and barriers of people with a disability, people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, neuro-divergent people, and people from diverse ethnic communities.

As noted in the briefing paper, inclusion of these topic is recommended in Recommendation 27 of the Report on the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality and in Zero Tolerance, the Third National Strategy for Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) as well as being required under Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention.

Delivery

- Women's Aid notes with concern that many schools are currently not timetabling SPHE in the Senior Cycle and that there is no consistency in the implementation and duration of either SPHE or RSE, as noted in the NCCA background paper¹⁷. Education on healthy relationships, equality, mutuality, consent, sexual harassment, and abuse should not be withdrawn exactly at the time when young people are exploring intimate relationships and when sexual harassment and abuse significantly increase.
- Given the lifelong importance of the topics to be addressed in the revised curriculum, Women's Aid strongly believes that **all students** should have the opportunity to learn it, therefore timetabling of SPHE in Senior Cycle should be mandatory for all schools and should build on the foundation laid in the Junior Cycle. There should be a single Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum for students engaging in all Senior Cycle programmes. As mentioned, equality, mutuality, healthy relationships, consent, sexual harassment and online abuse are very topical for this age group.
- The successful delivery of SPHE, and more specifically of education on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Base Violence, depends on well trained teachers and relevant, appropriate, and engaging resources. Women's Aid recommends that specific training is provided to

¹⁷NCCA Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle SPHE

SPHE teachers, including on how to manage a safe space and respond to disclosures, and that specialist NGOs are consulted in the development of said training, in particular in relation to intimate relationship abuse and coercive control.

- The course should be evidence based, inclusive and objective and should not be influenced by the religious ethos of the school, so that all students have the opportunity to learn these important life lessons.
- The course should promote positive and equal sexuality and reproductive rights, including information on abortion and contraception.
- The DCU report¹⁸ mentioned above describes the benefits and challenges in delivering two workshops on gender-based violence to young people. It is noteworthy that young people appreciated the interactive format of the workshops, the realistic scenarios used which correlated with their lived experience, not shying away from difficult topics and the specific training of the teachers, which allowed them to lead with confidence and ease.
- Training and resources are essential and should be designed with the participation of relevant NGOs. In this regard, Women's Aid, as part of the Too Into You campaign, has developed a range of materials for young women experiencing abuse in their relationship and for young people worried about a friend's relationship. While targeted at an older cohort (18-25), many of these resources are relevant to those aged under 18 and can be used/adapted for a younger audience. They include:
 - How to spot the signs of intimate relationship abuse.
 - Stories from young women who have survived relationship abuse.
 - The difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships.
 - A relationship quiz.

¹⁸Dr. Debbie Ging and Dr Ricardo Castellini da Silva op. cit.

- Online safety guide.
- Guide for helping a friend you are worried might be experiencing relationship abuse.
- Research on intimate relationship abuse and young people aged 18 to 25 in Ireland.

These resources are available here: <https://www.toointoyou.ie/>

Please note that the instant messaging support service at [toointoyou.ie](https://www.toointoyou.ie/) is for young people aged 18+. For young people aged under 18, Women's Aid signposts to Teenline which is delivered by the ISPC.

- Our colleagues in the Dublin Rape Crisis Center deliver the 'Bodyright' programme (<https://www.drcc.ie/services/education-training/courses/bodyright-facilitator-training-programme/>) which has many excellent, well developed resources to draw on, and which also makes use of Women's Aid Too Into You materials.
- The European Women's Lobby report Feminist Sexuality Education¹⁹ is also an excellent model of what should be included in SPHE curriculum and we strongly endorse it.
- Culture Reframed further offers resources to support healthy and age-appropriate engagement with children and young people of all ages on the topic of pornography. They have a program for parents and are also developing an open-source resource for schools: <https://www.culturereframed.org/>

¹⁹[Feminist Sexuality Education](#), 2020