

**TOO  
INTO  
you**

# Yes it's Abuse

Young people's understanding of and attitudes to intimate relationship abuse.

Women's  Aid







## Executive Summary

Women's Aid, in collaboration with RedC Research and Marketing, recently completed a nationally representative study of 500 young women and men in Ireland (aged 18-25), followed by a series of focus groups. The study explored their understanding of intimate relationship abuse including coercive control; their awareness of available supports including legislation; and their attitudes to intervening if they thought someone they knew was experiencing abuse.

We found that in 2021, intimate relationship abuse is prevalent amongst young people in Ireland, and is experienced in particular by young women. While the majority of young people feel a responsibility to intervene if they suspect a someone they know might be experiencing abuse, they had concerns which might prevent them from stepping in:

**Over 4 in 5 young people**

believe that many of those experiencing abuse do so in silence and don't seek support.

**Over half of young people** aged 18 to 25 years old have experienced, or know someone who has experienced, intimate relationship abuse.

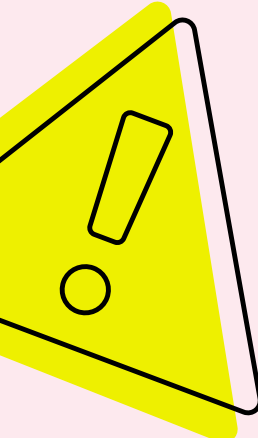
**1 in 5 young women and 1 in 11 young men**

have have been subjected to intimate intimate relationship abuse.

**50% of young people** are not aware of specialist supports for those subjected to intimate relationship abuse.

**Only 16% of young people** said that it is easy to spot the signs of abuse in other people's relationships.





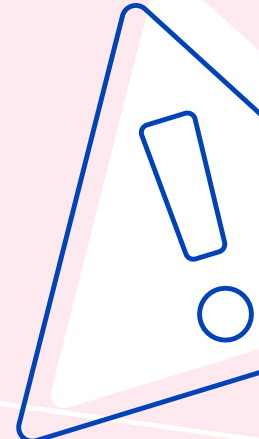
**Young people have concerns which might prevent them from intervening including:**

fears around making the situation worse (**73%**), misreading the signs of abuse (**48%**), saying the wrong thing (**42%**), and a lack of awareness on how to help (**43%**).

**41% of young people** believe that women are most commonly victims of abuse, **29%** did not believe this.

**53% of young people** were not aware of new and important legislation; the Harassment & Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (CoCo's law).

The majority of young people **feel a responsibility to intervene** if they are concerned a friend might be the victim of abuse, 20% of young men and 8% of young women believe it is **not their business to intervene**.



**61%** said that if they knew what to say and had confidence in how to start the conversation (**56%**), it would help them approach someone they were worried about.



## Background

Domestic violence/intimate relationship abuse is a **highly gendered issue**. The majority of victims/survivors worldwide are women in heterosexual relationships<sup>1</sup>, but men can also suffer and it can also occur in LGBTQ+ relationships. From our 2020 report *One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse*<sup>2</sup>, we found that one in five young women and one in eleven young men have experienced or know someone who has experienced intimate relationship abuse in Ireland. In **all cases** where women were subjected to intimate relationship abuse, this abuse was perpetrated by a **current or former intimate male partner**.

We also found that **three in five young people** have either personally experienced, or **know someone who has experienced**, current or former abuse in an intimate relationship. This identified a need for further research on those who know someone who was abused. We wanted to learn about young people's **understanding of intimate relationship abuse**, what they think it looks like in their

peers and whether or not they would feel confident **offering support** to someone they think may be experiencing abuse.

In collaboration with RedC Research and Marketing, our research comprised a survey among a **robust, nationally representative sample of 500 young people** aged 18 to 25 years (from 30<sup>th</sup> September – 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021). Four focus groups were then conducted to further explore some of the key findings from the survey (on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> November 2021), two with young women and two with young men<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> WHO (2018) Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Women's Aid (2020) One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse.

<sup>3</sup> One of each of the women's and men's groups knew someone who had experienced abuse and one of each did not know someone who had experienced abuse. Focus group participants were recruited from the quantitative survey and through RedC's recruiter network.



# Rationale

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S UNDERSTANDING OF ABUSE

There remains a **significant gap in research** about young people's understanding of violence and abuse in their own intimate relationships, their knowledge of the **warning signs** of abuse and, in particular, **attitudes to intervening** in the relationships of their peers where they suspect abuse.

According to a study of over 1,900 young women by Girlguiding UK<sup>4</sup> the majority of young women aged 13-21 agreed that physical violence or the threat of same, or controlling who you see and reading your messages are never acceptable in a relationship. However, another report from Girlguiding on abuse and healthy relationships found that **only 23% of young women aged 11 to 21 showed a full understanding of what an abusive relationship is.**

The *Young Life and Times Survey 2020-21*<sup>5</sup> of 2,069 young people in Northern Ireland, reported that just **one in six** (16%) report having heard of the term '**coercive control**' and having some understanding of its meaning. The *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2021*<sup>6</sup> of 1,292 people showed that 18-24 year olds were less likely to recognise the term coercive control and what it means than those aged over 24.

While young people do not accept violence and abuse, **many subscribe to heteronormative narratives** that define their experiences and expectations of relationships, with coercion and control being central to this discourse<sup>7</sup>. International research<sup>8</sup> with young people reveals widespread **misunderstanding and misconceptions surrounding** the causes of abuse, and significant **acceptance and tolerance of violence** if perpetrated by men within the parameters of an intimate relationship. In the same Girlguiding report mentioned above, many did not recognise intimate partner violence, specifically coercive and controlling behaviours, as 'abuse,' but seeing them instead as **part-and-parcel of a 'normal'**

4 [Girlguiding](#) (2018) We See the Big Picture: Girls' Attitude Survey 2018

5 [Lagdon, S. et al.](#) (2021) Young People's Understanding of Coercive Control. *Young Life and Times Survey 2020-21*. ARK Research Update 143.

6 Ibid

7 [Abbott, K., Weckesser, A., & Egan, H.](#) (2021) 'Everyone knows someone in an unhealthy relationship': young people's talk about intimate heterosexual relationships in England. *Sex Education*

8 [Burton, S., Kitzinger, J., Kelly, L. and Regan, L.](#) (1998) Young People's Attitudes Towards Violence, Sex and Relationships: A Survey and Focus Group Study. London and Glasgow: Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, University of London; Media Research Unit, Sociology Department, University of Glasgow; Zero Tolerance Trust. [McCarry, M.](#) (2009). Justifications and Contradictions Understanding Young People's Views of Domestic Abuse. *Men and Masculinities*.



**heterosexual relationship**<sup>9</sup>. A study of five European countries reported that control and surveillance online were seen as a normal part of a relationship and physical violence was also normalised, especially when alcohol was involved<sup>10</sup>.

Young people are also aware of societal messages that depict men as the main perpetrators of abuse, yet they offer numerous justifications for it - often **locating the blame with the women abused**<sup>11</sup>. For example, many believe that male violence within an intimate relationship is justified if the female partner has been unfaithful<sup>12</sup>. Young people also accept and rationalise controlling and coercive behaviours as 'love', 'care' and 'protection'<sup>13</sup>.

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES TO INTERVENING IN ABUSE

We know from our *One in Five*<sup>14</sup> report in 2020 that victims of intimate relationship abuse often suffer in silence. **Young women in particular (32%) never spoke to anyone about the abuse they were subjected to (84% of men sought some form of support vs 68% of women)**. Where victims/survivors do seek support, they are most likely to disclose their situation to informal social supports such as **family and friends**.

However, research<sup>15</sup> tells us that while victims may disclose to their friends, oftentimes their friends do not know how to react to a disclosure or help someone who is a victim of abuse. **Bystanders often have multiple concerns**<sup>16</sup> in relation to intervening in a situation where they suspect abuse may be happening which can act as barriers to supporting the victim.

9 [Girlguiding](#) (2013) Care Versus Control: Healthy Relationships – A Girlguiding Report

10 [Aghtaie, N., Barter, C., Stanley, N., Wood, M. J. E., & Överlien, C.](#) (2018) Interpersonal violence and abuse in young people's relationships in five European countries: online and offline normalisation of heteronormativity. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*.

11 [McCarry, M.](#) (2010) 'Becoming a 'proper man': young people's attitudes about interpersonal violence and perceptions of gender', *Gender and Education*.

12 [McCarry, M.](#) (2009). Justifications and Contradictions Understanding Young People's Views of Domestic Abuse. *Men and Masculinities*.

13 [Abbott, K., Weckesser, A., & Egan, H.](#) (2021) 'Everyone knows someone in an unhealthy relationship': young people's talk about intimate heterosexual relationships in England. *Sex Education*.

14 [Women's Aid](#) (2020) One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse.

15 [Taket, A., Crisp, B.](#) (2017) Bystanders for primary prevention: a rapid review. Deakin University, Knowledge paper produced for VicHealth. [Stewart, P.](#), (2020) Facilitators and Barriers to Bystander Intervention in the Context of Alcohol Use: A Qualitative Study. Thesis, Georgia State University. [Knowledge Networks](#) (2011) College dating violence and abuse poll; [Branch, K.A., Richards, T., Dretsch, E.](#) (2013) An Exploratory Analysis of College Students' Response and Reporting Behavior Regarding Intimate Partner Violence Victimization and Perpetration Among Their Friends. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

16 Latané, B., Darley, J. M. (1970). *The unresponsive bystander: Why doesn't he help?* New York, NY: Appleton Century Crofts ; [Storer, H., McCleary, J., Hamby, S.](#) (2021) When it's safer to walk away: Urban, low opportunity emerging adults' willingness to use bystander behaviors in response to community and dating violence. *Children and Youth Services Review*. [Amoh, N.](#) (2021) Youth Bystander Intentions to Intervene in Peer Intimate Partner Violence: The Co-Influence of Perceived Perpetrator Race and Perceived Culpability. The Graduate Center, City University of New York.



For example, the following can prevent people from intervening:

- Fear of violence or being targeted by the perpetrator;
- Lack of knowledge about how to intervene;
- Lack of confidence to act effectively;
- The need to preserve interpersonal relations; and
- Fear of judgement and consequences

## Too Into You

Too Into You is a Women's Aid campaign and resource **for young people aged 18-25** to learn about **healthy and unhealthy intimate relationships**, and seek support and advice if they are suffering intimate relationship abuse or fear their relationship may be unhealthy. At **Toointoyou.ie** young people can learn about intimate relationship abuse and available supports including the **Women's Aid Instant Messaging Service**, which is available daily.

We hope that by raising awareness of Too Into You, young people will be able to **spot the warning signs of abuse**, not only in their own relationships should they arise, but in the relationships of their peers, and feel better equipped to **support someone they are worried about** before the relationship becomes more established when it can be harder for them to leave or get support.



## Cause and Effect: Understanding Root Causes of Intimate Relationship Abuse

In conducting our research in 2021, we wanted to learn about young **people’s understanding of coercive control** and the **root causes of intimate relationship abuse**. When asked why they thought someone would act abusively towards their partner **78% agreed** that they acted abusively to **exert power and control** over their partner and **61% believed not seeing a partner as equal** would cause someone to act abusively. More young women than men and those with personal experience of abuse correctly identified gaining power and control and not seeing a partner as an equal as reasons for someone acting abusively towards a partner, see *Table 1 – Cause of Intimate Relationship Abuse*. This could indicate a higher level of understanding of the **power dynamics within abusive relationships** amongst young women because more women than men (1 in 5 vs 1 in 11) have direct experience of abuse.

<i>What do you think causes someone to behave abusively towards their intimate partner?</i>	Male	Female	Personal Experience of Abuse
They want to exert power or control over their partner	<b>73%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>80%</b>
They don't see their partner as an equal	<b>55%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>72%</b>

*Table 1 – Cause of Intimate Relationship Abuse*

In the focus groups we also asked young people if they were aware of the terms ‘intimate relationship abuse’ and ‘coercive control’. While many of the focus group participants were unfamiliar with these terms many included ‘control’ in guiding their interpretation of ‘coercive control’ saying it sounded like mind games and manipulation, and it was assumed to exclude physical of abuse.

Young people also had misconceptions around the causes of intimate relationship abuse with many **mistakenly identifying contributing factors**, for example **alcohol misuse** and **jealousy**, as causal factors in abuse.

The majority (**81%**) believed that **drug and alcohol misuse** cause someone to act abusively towards their partner. Participants in the focus groups also spoke about how someone may be more open to abusing while misusing drink or drugs. Young men in particular reasoned that alcohol does not 'suit' or 'agree' with some people and this can lead to amplification of 'bad traits' in certain personalities, while young women saw it as fueling rather than being a direct cause of abuse and an excuse for more underlying problems. We know that **alcohol and drug misuse are not root causes of abuse**. Even when using alcohol or drugs abusers can still exercise control by targeting their partner specifically and not others. Many also abuse when there is no alcohol or drugs involved<sup>17</sup>.

Participants also believed that coming from an abusive background (70%), having mental health issues (66%), insecurity (65%) and jealousy (64%) would cause someone to act abusively towards their intimate partner. **Insecurity is not an excuse for acting abusively** towards a partner, many people can feel insecure and not behave abusively towards others. **Jealousy is a demonstration of 'possessive' feelings** towards a partner, rather than regarding them as an equal. It is considered a potential 'red flag' in a relationship.

From our decades of experience supporting survivors of abuse we know that the need to exert power and control over one's partner is the core contributing factor in abuse. While drug and alcohol misuse can exacerbate abuse they are not the cause of abusive behaviours. Likewise, while jealousy, insecurity and personal experience of abuse can be signs of abuse they are not the direct cause for abuse. Individuals can exercise choice and agency in how they manage these feelings and experiences. Being an abusive partner is not inevitable.

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<sup>17</sup> [Bennett, L. Bland, P.](#) (2008) Substance abuse and intimate partner violence. VAWnet, a project of the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence: Harrisburg, PA.

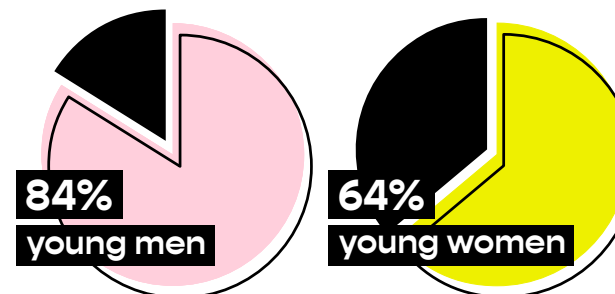


## Who is Abused?

Just 2 in 5 young people agreed that it is mostly men who act abusively towards women in intimate relationships, more women (47%) than men (36%) believed this to be true. 29% of young people surveyed did not believe this.

A more 'gender neutral' position was articulated in the focus groups, particularly amongst young men who felt that while women are subjected to physical abuse more, both genders are equally likely to be emotionally abused, and that the impact of abuse for men and women is relatively equal.

They speculated that the 'threshold' for abuse is higher for male vs female victims and that men have greater 'tolerance' to accept abuse than women. Some young men believed that men are less likely to come forward and report they are being abused given the culture and societal norms set for their gender. This contradicts established international evidence including our own national findings, which shows **that young women are at a higher risk of being subjected to abuse and that young men (84%) are more likely than young women (64%) to seek support** for intimate relationship abuse.



**Percentage of young people who have sought support for intimate relationship abuse.**

*Source: Women's Aid (2020) One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse.*

One of the young women's focus groups also referenced a tendency amongst men to respond to discussions about women's experiences of abuse by saying that abuse happens to men too, subsequently **minimising and deflecting** from discussion of the experiences of women who disclose abuse.

The national survey, combined with these themes emerging from the focus groups indicate an **urgent need for more work to be done with young people**, and in particular with young men, on the gendered nature of intimate relationship abuse and violence, and its root causes (e.g. gender inequality, sexist traditional gender stereotypes). This is vital to understand why women are most at risk of these forms of abuse – both in terms of prevalence and also the higher risks of severe harm up to and including death.

# Pornography

Young people understand pornography (porn) as presenting women and men in narrow, unrealistic and heteronormative ways, with women as objects of desire and men as always sexually active and dominating<sup>18</sup>. A growing body of research suggests a correlation between **viewing pornography** and **violent or abusive behaviour in young men**.<sup>19</sup>

In this research we asked young people about their viewing of pornography:

- **Over 3 in 5** of 18-25's disclosed that they have viewed pornography: 75% of men and 50% of women.
- **Over half (55%)** of those who have ever viewed porn currently watch it, and the vast majority do so alone (95%).
- The **average age** reported for first having viewed porn is **14**.

- The age when first viewing is **younger for males** (13.7) than it is for women (15.3).

When we asked the focus groups about these statistics, there was almost universal agreement that they don't accurately reflect the reality of porn viewing amongst their peers. Most thought that numbers are actually higher and that male viewing in particular is closer to 100%. Participants said porn viewing is very much **part of the male culture** with exposure happening at a young age and often before their first sexual experience. Young people also spoke about the **unrealistic expectations** that watching porn can set for sex, with young women noting **pressure, aggression and feelings of inadequacy**.

According to research, exposure to pornography at an early age is changing attitudes to sexual behaviours and intimate relationships and is potentially contributing to sexual violence in society. A rigorous meta-analysis of 46 studies<sup>20</sup> provides clear evidence that pornography exposure is contributing directly to the development of **sexually dysfunctional attitudes and behaviours**. Research<sup>21</sup> consistently shows that porn can play a big role

18 [Zero Tolerance](#) (2014) "He's the stud and she's the slut" Young people's attitudes to pornography, sex and relationships.

19 [Stanley, N. et al.](#) (2018) 'Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People's Intimate Relationships: A European Study', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

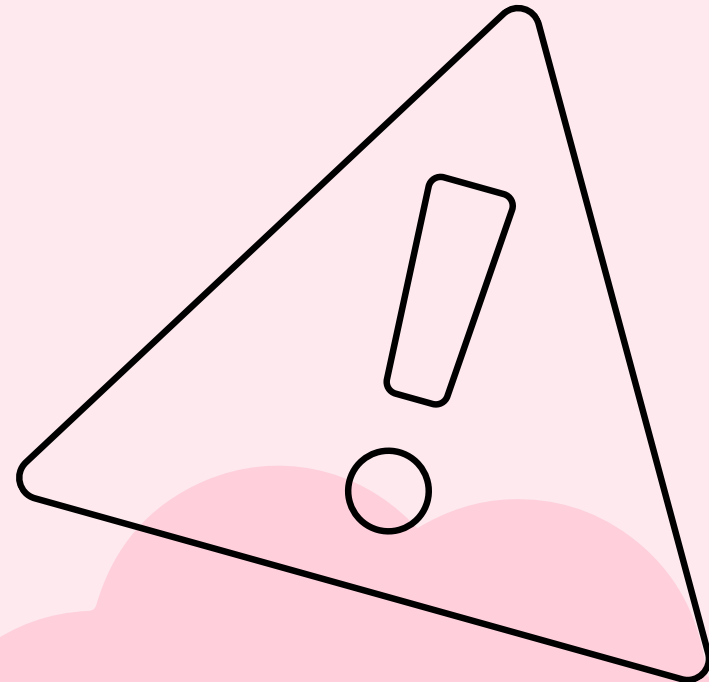
20 [Paolucci-Oddone, E., Genuis, M., & Violato, C.](#) (2000). A meta-analysis of the published research on the effects of pornography. *The Changing Family and Child Development*.

21 [Skorska, M.N., Hodson, G., & Hoffarth, M.R.](#) (2018). Experimental effects of degrading versus erotic pornography exposure in men on reactions toward women (objectification, sexism, discrimination). *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*. [Seabrook, R. C., Ward, L. M., & Giacardi, S.](#) (2019). Less than human? Media use, objectification of women, and men's acceptance of sexual aggression. *Psychology of Violence*.



in teaching viewers to consume people as products for their own personal sexual satisfaction, which can ultimately have unhealthy consequences for individuals, relationships, and for the cultures in which we live.

**Comprehensive sex and relationships education** in schools and at home, that counters the artificial and often toxic messages that pornography gives young people is vital. Engaging children and young people in healthy discussions that include a **focus on respect and mutuality**, as well as challenging the sexualisation of young women and **heteronormative attitudes to relationships**, is required in age appropriate ways from the earliest ages. This is beneficial not only for young people's sexual health, but their self-esteem, ability to form respectful friendships and intimate relationships, and to reduce their risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence.



## Warning Signs of Abuse

When presented with the warning signs of abuse the majority of young people were confident in identifying what abusive behaviours are, with females being more likely to agree with the statements presented. For example, they agreed that a partner making them participate in sexual activities that they were uncomfortable with (91%), threatening to hurt them or themselves (89%), regularly criticising or undermining them (90%), being cut off from seeing friends and family (90%), and demanding they send intimate images (85%) were warning signs for abuse.

In the focus groups, young people also spoke about mood swings, aggression, gaslighting, having limited autonomy and contact with friends, withdrawal from social circles, and stalking online as being **potential warning signs** that abuse may be present in a relationship. Overall, this indicates a good understanding amongst young people of how abuse manifests. While it is very positive that the majority of young people can identify many of the behaviours that are abusive, only 16% felt sure they could easily spot the warning signs of abuse and they **lack confidence** to approach someone they are concerned might be experiencing abuse. The challenge articulated in the focus groups, which is borne out of this small percentage, is that they find it hard to **identify that**

**another person may be in an abusive relationship** as the visible indicators may be subtle or require the person suffering to disclose something.

Some grey areas emerged in terms of what constituted abuse, which may contribute to the **lack of confidence** in spotting abuse. While **4 in 5** young people believe it is against the law in Ireland to share intimate images without consent, **10% were unsure if this constituted abuse. Over 4 in 5 (82%)** identified a **partner getting jealous easily as a warning sign of abuse**, but 13% were unsure if this was an abusive behaviour. In the focus groups young people believed this was dependant on how the jealous person acts out and was identified as being about insecurity. This is important because **regular expressions of jealousy show possessiveness** rather than trust and equality in a relationship, which is a red flag for abuse. There is an opportunity here to explain what a healthy vs unhealthy relationship looks like.



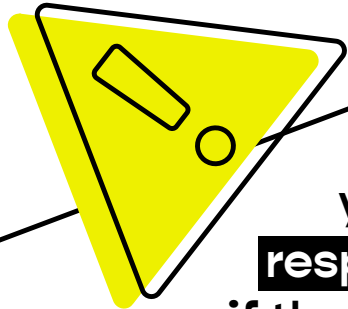


There was some uncertainty in relation to **demanding to look through a partner's phone and knowing someone's passwords**, 57% agreed this was 'definitely a warning sign', 31% said it was 'potentially a warning sign' and 8% were unsure. Focus group participants explained that while it feels wrong they were unsure if it is classed as abuse. This indicates **misunderstanding around boundaries and privacy** which are a vital part of a healthy and trusting relationship.

## Attitudes to Intervening in an Abusive Relationship

Young people had a good grasp of victims/survivors needs in relation to support, showing an understanding of the severity of abuse. **4 in 5** young people believe that many of those subjected to intimate relationship abuse do so in **silence** and **don't seek professional help**. Young women (89%) were more likely than young men (78%) to agree with this.

Young people also displayed a **strong sense of responsibility** in relation to someone being in danger in a relationship. When asked, the majority of young people (86%) do feel it is their business to intervene in a relationship where they suspect intimate relationship abuse is happening.

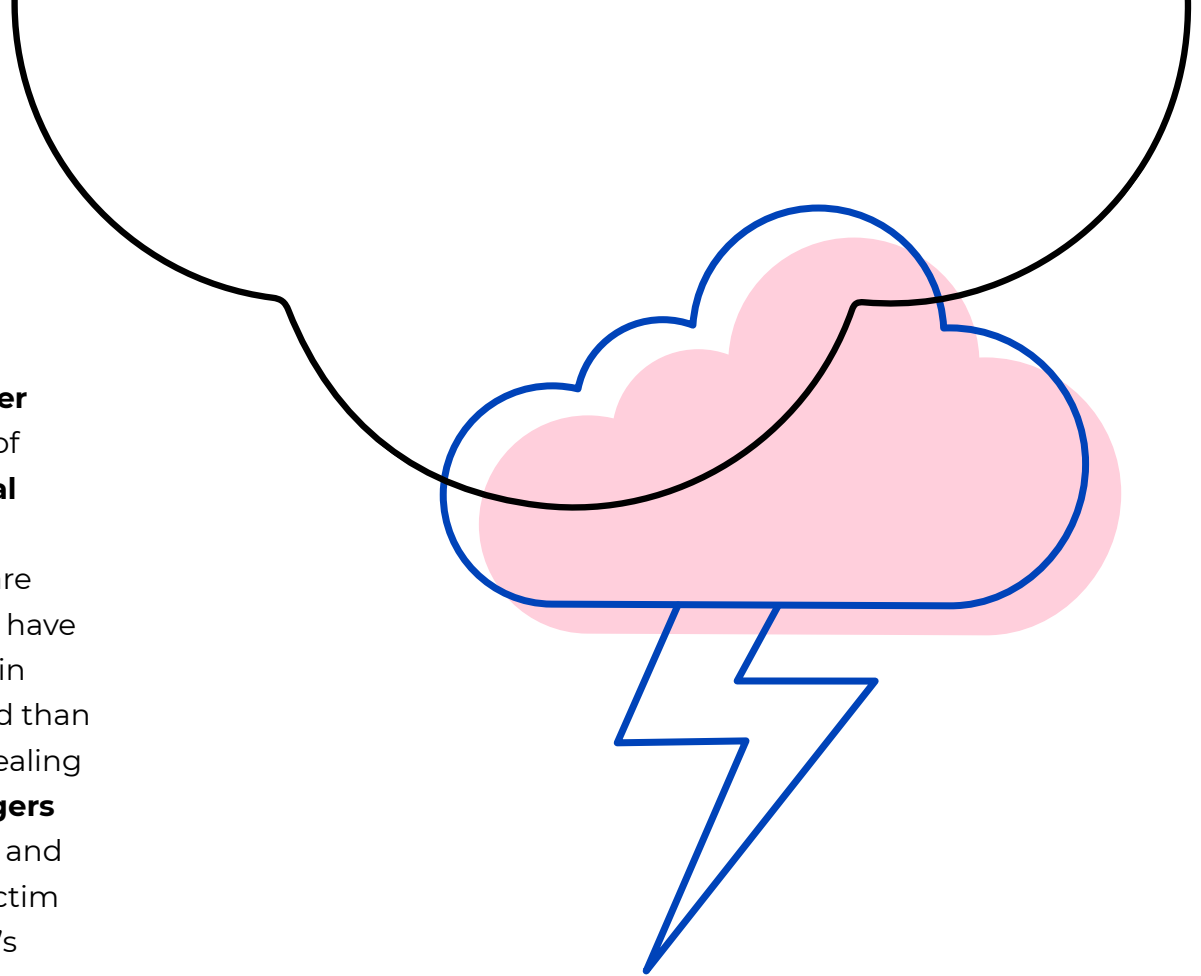


The majority of young people feel a **responsibility to intervene** if they are concerned a close friend might be experiencing intimate relationship abuse. **20% of males and 8% of females** believed it is **not their business to intervene.**

## What Does Intervention Look Like?

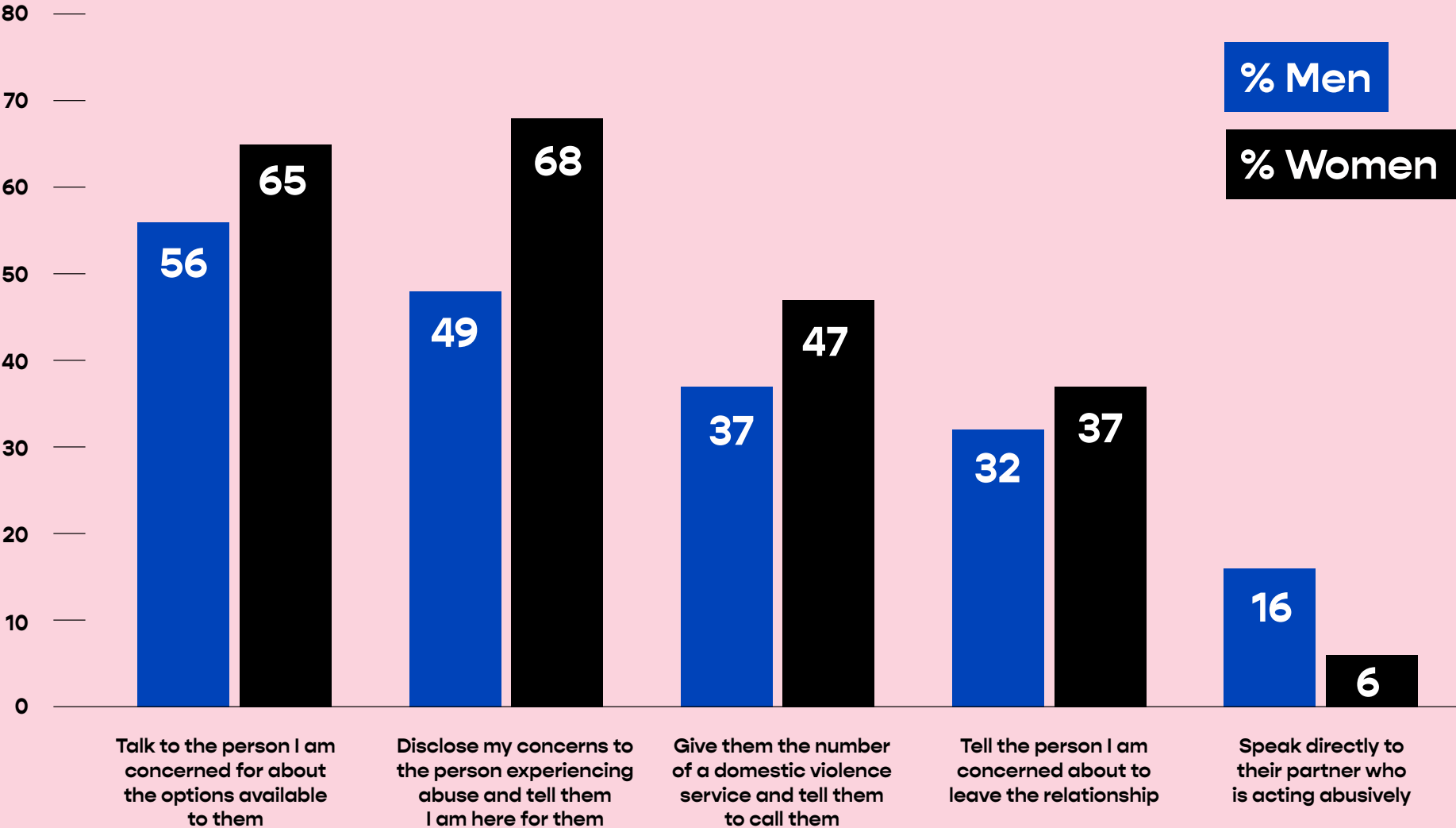
Young people would be most likely to approach a **close friend (50%)**, followed by a **close family member (38%)** if they were concerned they might be a victim of abuse. Young people would choose to have a **personal conversation with the person who is being abused** rather than speak to the perpetrator. Young women are more likely to approach the person being abused but have concerns about causing them harm or putting them in danger. Young men (16%) indicated a higher likelihood than women (6%) to approach the perpetrator directly; revealing a higher understanding amongst women of the **dangers of approaching the perpetrator** both for themselves and the victim. This feeling of responsibility to keep the victim and themselves safe was also reflected in the women's focus groups.

When asked what they would do if they suspected someone was being abused, the majority would approach the situation **offering a solution and support**. A total of 60% said they would talk to the victim about their concerns and discuss the options available to them, and 59% said they would disclose their concerns and tell them they are here for them.





**Q: What would you be most likely to do if you suspected somebody you knew was experiencing intimate relationship abuse?**



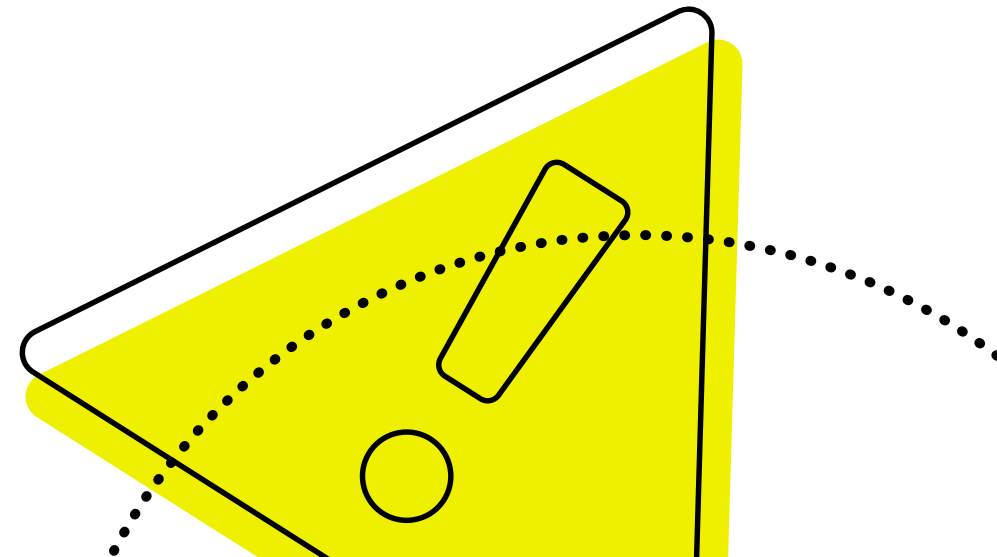
In the focus groups young people also spoke about starting a subtle one-to-one in-person conversation, creating a safe space to encourage them to open up, taking the lead from their reaction, tone, and body language, and raising their concerns by suggesting that what their partner is doing isn't acceptable. They stressed that it is a private and personal matter so they would need to have a **close relationship** with the person to consider intervening, saying that this would be important for the victim as they would only open up to close friend, who they felt safe with. If the victim was not a close friend some said they would reach out to someone who was closer to them or a formal third party, but this was seen as a potentially cold and distant response.

They also explained that their likelihood to intervene was dependant on your knowledge of abuse and **exposure to patterns of consistent abusive behaviours** to confirm abuse is present. They said that because the signs of abuse can go undetected, it can be difficult to feel confident intervening.

How they would intervene also depends on the type of abuse. In the focus groups young people believed that physical abuse is a very severe form of abuse and most people would feel compelled to intervene. Young women said they would not feel confident intervening directly in

in-the-moment physical abuse due to **personal safety concerns**. Emotional abuse is perceived to be harder to intervene in as the **signs and impacts are not always visible**.

They also spoke about a reliance on the abused person having to open up and share their situation in order for them offer support to someone experiencing abuse, which can act as a barrier in itself. We know from our 2020 *One in Five* report that **32% of young women did not tell anyone about the intimate relationship abuse** they had been subjected to. Focus group participants explained they did not tell anyone because of complex reasons including **fear of the perpetrator**, fear of **not being believed**, or being judged or blamed for the abuse themselves. It is so important that we address barriers to support seeking and do more to proactively offer support without requiring victims/survivors to make the first move.



## What Might Prevent Young People From Intervening?

While the majority of young people feel a responsibility to intervene, they have a number of concerns which might prevent them from doing so, including:

- Fears around **making the situation worse** (73%), young women were particularly concerned about this (80% vs 66% of men)
- **Misreading the signs** of abuse (48%)
- Worries about **saying the wrong thing** (42%)
- A **lack of awareness** of how to help (43%)

When examined further, young women explained that intervening could **make the situation worse** by isolating the victim more and damaging their safety. They also spoke about **feelings of inadequacy** in handling something so serious and sensitive and that a conversation could be shut down and **risk damaging the dynamic of the friendship**. Young people also had a perception that the victim would need to be close to their breaking point to accept the support offered. For some respondents, there was also reticence to intervene at all with **20%** of young men and **8%** of young women believing that it is **not their business to intervene** in a relationship where they suspect intimate relationship abuse is happening.

What might prevent young people from intervening in a relationship where they suspect intimate relationship abuse is happening?

Saying the wrong thing

Afraid of loss of the friendship

Worried about putting the victim in danger

Misreading the signs of abuse

Feeling unprepared to handle something so serious and sensitive



## What Might Help Young People Intervene?

61% of young people, in particular those who know someone who has experienced abuse, said that if they **knew what to say** and had **confidence in how to start the conversation** (56%), it would help them approach someone they were concerned about. They also said having information on what the **signs of abuse** look like (54%) and **supports available** (53%) would help them do something if they were worried about someone they know being in an abusive relationship.

This presents a good opportunity to equip young people with the appropriate information and resources so they feel prepared if someone close to them discloses abuse or if they are worried a loved one might be experiencing abuse.



Confidence  
in how to  
start the  
conversation

What would help?



Knowing  
what to  
say



Information  
on available  
supports



Information  
on the  
warning signs  
of abuse

## Awareness of Supports and Legal Protections for Victims/Survivors

We asked young people about their knowledge of specialist supports for intimate relationship abuse and laws that protect those experiencing abuse. A total of **50%** were not aware of available supports and **39%** had heard of CoCo's law/the Harassment & Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act (2020). Awareness was highest amongst young women (43% vs 34% young men) and those who have personal experience of abuse.

**Four in five** young people believed (correctly) that **sharing intimate images** and **forwarding intimate images** of somebody without their consent is an **offence**. More men (74%) than women (59%) believed (also correctly) that it is an offence to threaten to share intimate images without consent.



# Conclusion and Recommendations

## AWARENESS OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP ABUSE

While young people may not use the same language as older people when describing abuse, what is important to note is that there is some understanding of what constitutes as abusive behaviours, and there is a **very strong desire to help keep friends safe** and free from abusive intimate partners.

This being said, there are gaps in knowledge of how to actually spot these known warning signs of abuse in others' relationships. There is a **lack of confidence** among many in how to approach someone they are worried about, even if they really want to be able to do so effectively. There is also a **knowledge gap** about the root causes of intimate partner abuse, and a strong tendency to instead attribute abusive behaviours to contributory, but not causal factors such as alcohol misuse, or low self-esteem on the part of the abuser. This can be a hindrance to interventions which should both challenge abusive behaviours by abusers and also appropriately respond to victims/survivors needs. Often, victims/survivors are advised to 'help' their abuser by

dealing with his problems instead of receiving recognition and support regarding the serious harm inflicted by the abuser.

There is a clear need to **work more with young people** to support their understanding of what intimate relationship abuse looks like and raise awareness of supports available. There are opportunities to do more to clarify what constitutes a 'red flag' in a relationship through factual information combined with storytelling. This is essential so that the **experiences of victims/survivors are centralised** and not side-lined by focusing on 'explaining' the motivations of abusers or 'fixing' them. We also need to **support and empower young people** to feel more confidence to check in on their peers if they suspect abuse is present in an intimate relationship. **Education and public awareness raising** of the serious harm that abuse in intimate relationships can cause young people is needed, including **proactive offers of appropriate supports** to combat barriers to help-seeking. Emphasising the fact that abuse is **not the fault of the victim** is required to empower victims/survivors to speak out about their experiences and seek support. The earlier a victim/survivor can be supported, the better as the more established the relationship, the more difficult it becomes for them to safely leave and stay safe after ending the relationship.



Our **'Help a Friend' resource**, informed by this research, offers advice and support to young people who are worried someone they know might be experiencing abuse in an intimate relationship. Here young people can learn how to spot the signs of abuse, how to approach the conversation with a friend or loved one, and where to find further supports.

## Challenging Social Norms

Intimate relationship abuse is a **highly gendered issue**. While 41% of the young people we asked believed that women are most commonly victims of abuse, 29% of young people surveyed did not believe this. In focus groups this 'gender neutral' position was also articulated particularly amongst young men. Coercive control and abuse are justified by societal norms and expectations of what it means to be a man, therefore **Relationships and Sexuality Education** that supports young people, from young ages, to **critically examine gender norms**<sup>22</sup> is essential to dismantle belief systems that enable and encourage male entitlement to power and control.

Barriers to help seeking can be tackled through an understanding the social context in which abuse can be enabled. A social analysis and engagement in discussions about intersecting unequal power relations such as sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability and class, are also vitally important in terms of responding to the needs of all victims/survivors. These can be uncomfortable conversations, but we need to have them.

## Leaders Against Violence

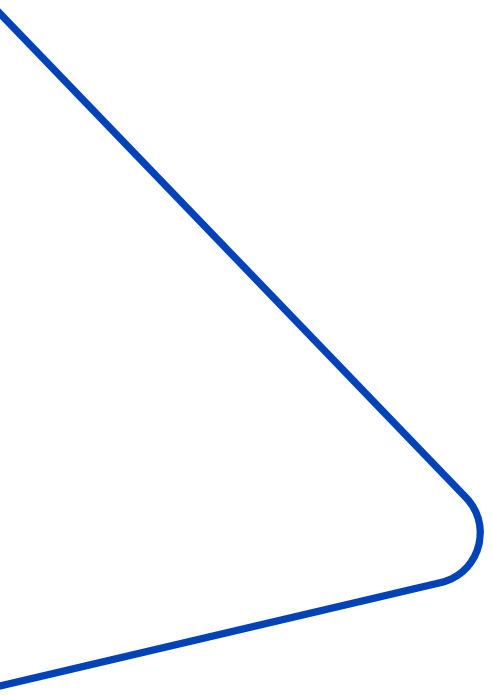
While individual intervention with victims/survivors has its place in violence prevention, it must also be supported by an opposition to all forms of gender-based violence collectively by society. **Everyone has a role to play**. The bystander approach presented by Jackson Katz<sup>23</sup>, co-founder of the internationally acclaimed Mentors in Violence Prevention Programme, shifts responsibility for intervention from the bystander as an individual, to the community as a whole. Leaders in our community, like sports captains, coaches, mentors and those who young people look up to, can take a stand against and reject gender-based violence. By changing attitudes and

<sup>22</sup> Abbott, K., Weckesser, A., & Egan, H. (2021) 'Everyone knows someone in an unhealthy relationship': young people's talk about intimate heterosexual relationships in England. Sex Education.

<sup>23</sup> Katz, J. (2018) Bystander Training as Leadership Training: Notes on the Origins, Philosophy, and Pedagogy of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Model. Violence Against Women. 24(15) 1755-1776.

challenging social norms, communities can show they don't accept violence and contribute to a reduction in perpetration.<sup>24</sup> This is a model we can work towards in Ireland, to truly overcome the harmful socialisation of both men and women that contributes so much to unequal, unhealthy and abusive relationships. There is a serious problem in our society of male violence towards women and girls. The way forward is to engage men, not as perpetrators or potential perpetrators, but instead as allies who can help us solve this problem. We all need to work together to challenge those who abuse others and behaviours that normalise and minimise abuse; and to model the healthy, mutual, positive and respectful relationships that everyone aspires to.

<sup>24</sup> Mennicke, A., Bush, H., Brancato, C., Coker, A. (2021) Bystander Intervention Efficacy to Reduce Teen Dating Violence Among High School Youth Who Did and Did Not Witness Parental Partner Violence: A Path Analysis of A Cluster RCT , Journal of Family Violence (2021) 36:755–771













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