

Policy Roundtable: *Public Understanding of Coercive Control In Northern Ireland*

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This brief draws on published research evidence and discussion at an ARK organised roundtable event held on 11 August 2022. The roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House Rule which requires anonymity of reporting. Attendees included representatives from government departments, statutory agencies, voluntary and community organisations and academia. At the roundtable Susan Lagdon and Julie-Anne Jordan made a short presentation of their research findings. The powerpoint is available on the ARK website.

Research Context

Domestic violence and abuse is a significant issue for Northern Ireland. Between April 2021 and March 2022, the Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded 33,186 domestic abuse incidents, a record high for the region since the data series began. Such figures while stark, are likely an underestimation of victim experience as many do not officially report their abuser particularly when there is a lack of physical evidence of abuse. The 2016 Northern Ireland Government Strategy - *Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland* defines domestic violence and abuse as “threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, virtual, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or any form of disability) by a current or former intimate partner or family member.

Coercive control is characterised by a pattern of negative behaviours which aim to intimidate, threaten and humiliate a person or restrict a person’s liberty (e.g. isolating a person from friends and family; taking control over aspects of everyday life such as where a person can go and who they can see; repeatedly putting a person down; making credible threats of violence; or economic oppression). While coercive control may include acts of assault, it is not always physical in nature, it is more often described as emotional or psychological abuse, indirect abuse, or emotional torture (Lagdon et al. 2021).

Research with female survivors has emphasised that coercive control is one of the worst types of abuse to experience within an intimate relationship and is the most difficult type to evidence and report (Lagdon et al., 2015). The evidence continues to demonstrate the elevated risk of partner violence and abuse among women but emerging research demonstrates the experience of IPV victimisation among men also (Tsui, 2014; Bates et al., 2020) although less is known about male’s experience of coercive control (Lagdon et al., 2021, p.3).

Young people also experience domestic abuse, including coercive control within their intimate relationships and tend to be exposed to similar forms of violence and abuse as those described by adult victims (Korkmaz et al, 2020). In a five-country European survey, emotional abuse was reported by approximately 50% of 3,277 young

people who stated that they had been subjected to some form of emotional extortion and/or coercive behaviour from an intimate partner (Stanley et al., 2018).

Stark (2012, p.5) talked about the major outcome of coercive control being ‘a hostage-like condition of entrapment that arises from the suppression of a victim’s autonomy, rights and liberties’. The negative outcomes include significant mental health consequences (Lagdon et al. 2022; Barter & Stanley, 2016) as well as an increased risk of future victimisation (Stark and Hester, 2019; Barter and Stanley 2016). Additionally, the invisible forms of coercive control such as forced pregnancy, economic abuse and education or employment sabotage can lead to a series of longer-term socioeconomic consequences, many of which are exacerbated by existing inequalities among victims.

The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act came into force in Northern Ireland in February 2022 and makes coercive control an offence. The new offence is intended to better reflect the experience of domestic abuse victims by emphasising the importance of power and control in abusive relationships as well as improving the criminal justice response. Importantly, the legislation also recognises the impact that coercive and controlling behaviour can have on children who are often hidden victims.

The introduction of new laws which criminalise coercive and controlling behaviours is a welcome development and a significant step forward for Northern Ireland but there are challenges in operationalising the prohibition of coercive and controlling behaviour as well as ensuring understanding among the general population (Stark & Hester, 2019; Lagdon et al. 2021).

Exploring Public Understanding of Coercive Control in Northern Ireland

In 2021 a set of questions developed by Lagdon et al (2021) on the public understanding of coercive control within intimate relationships was included in the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT). This enabled important baseline data to be collected from 1,292 adults. The survey explored the public’s attitude towards coercive control behaviours through the use of scenarios (Full module details can be accessed from https://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2020/Coercive_Control). Each scenario described a type of coercive control within intimate heterosexual relationships: obvious coercive control (scenario 1) and less obvious coercive control (scenario 2). These were further adjusted to present the victim as either male or female. Half of the sample (Group A) were presented with scenarios 1 and 2 with a male perpetrator and a female victim. For the other half (Group B), in scenarios 1 and 2 the perpetrator was female and the victim was male. Respondents indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with 10 statements covering attitudes towards: coercive and controlling behaviours; victims of coercive control; talking about coercive control; and whether coercive control is a crime. In addition, questions were also included within the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey 2020/21 of 16 year olds living in NI (2,069 respondents). Similar to NILT, the survey module included a scenario describing coercive control within an intimate heterosexual relationship, but this was adjusted to better reflect some of the issues young people might face in an unhealthy relationship such as digital abuse (Full module details can be accessed from https://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/2020_21/YLTquest2020_21A.pdf). Half of the sample (Group A) were presented with scenario 1, with a male perpetrator and a female victim. The other half of the sample (Group B) were presented with scenario 2: a female perpetrator and a male victim. After reading the scenarios, young people were instructed to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement to 10 statements similar to NILT.

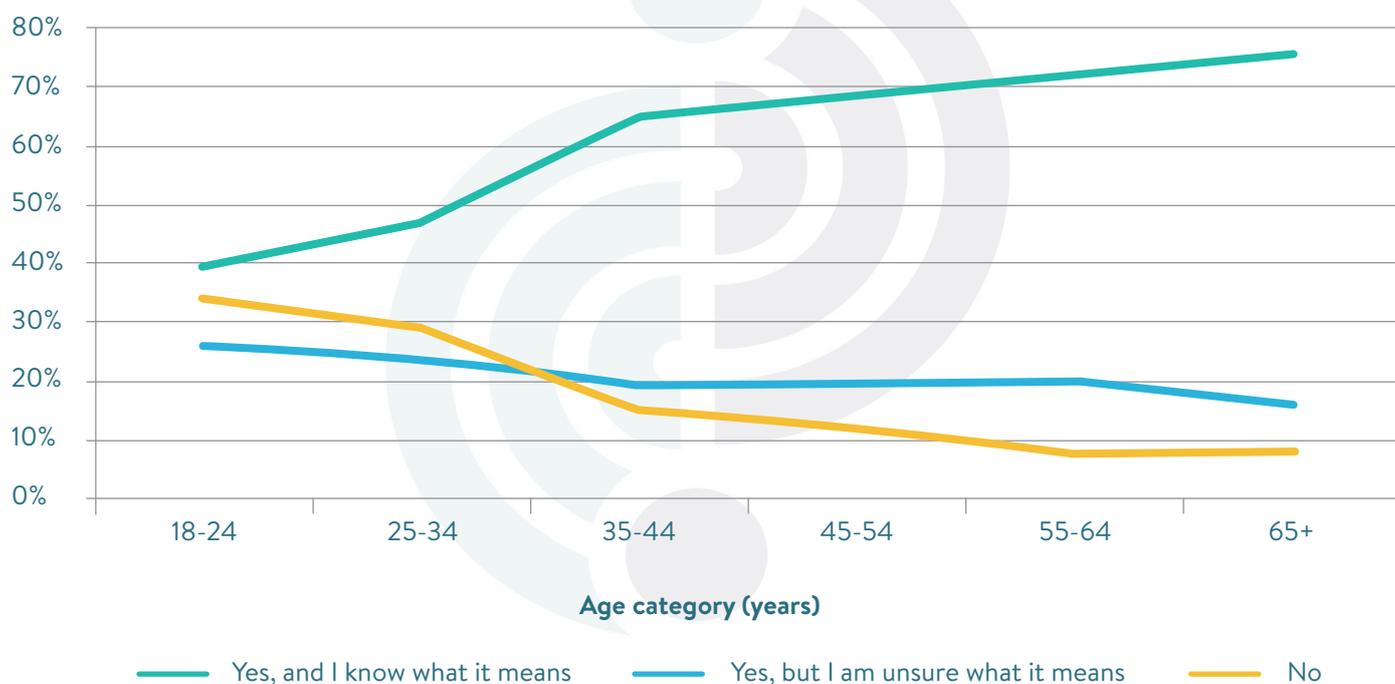
Key Research Findings

Awareness of coercive control

Sixty-three per cent ($n = 811$) of adult participants indicated that they had heard of the term coercive control and understood its meaning, with the remaining respondents indicating that they had heard the term but did not know what this means (20%) or that they had not heard of the term coercive control at all (16%).

People who were younger and male were more likely to say that they had heard of the term but were **unsure what it means** as opposed to saying they had heard the term and **'I know what it means'**. Those who had not heard of coercive control at all were more likely to be on a lower income, less qualified and younger, when compared to those who said they knew what the term meant. Results also suggest that awareness may be linked with age as demonstrated by figure 1.

Figure 1: Adult awareness of coercive control, by age group



Only 16% ($n=325$) respondents to the YLT survey reported they had heard of the term coercive control and knew what it meant. The remainder either said they had heard of it but were unsure what it meant (24%) or had not heard of the term at all (60%). Young females were more likely than males to say 'yes, but I am unsure what it means' or 'no', rather than stating that they had heard of coercive control and knew what it meant. In fact, 19% of young males claimed to know what coercive control means, in contrast to 13% of young females.

Adult attitudes towards obvious and less obvious coercive control scenarios

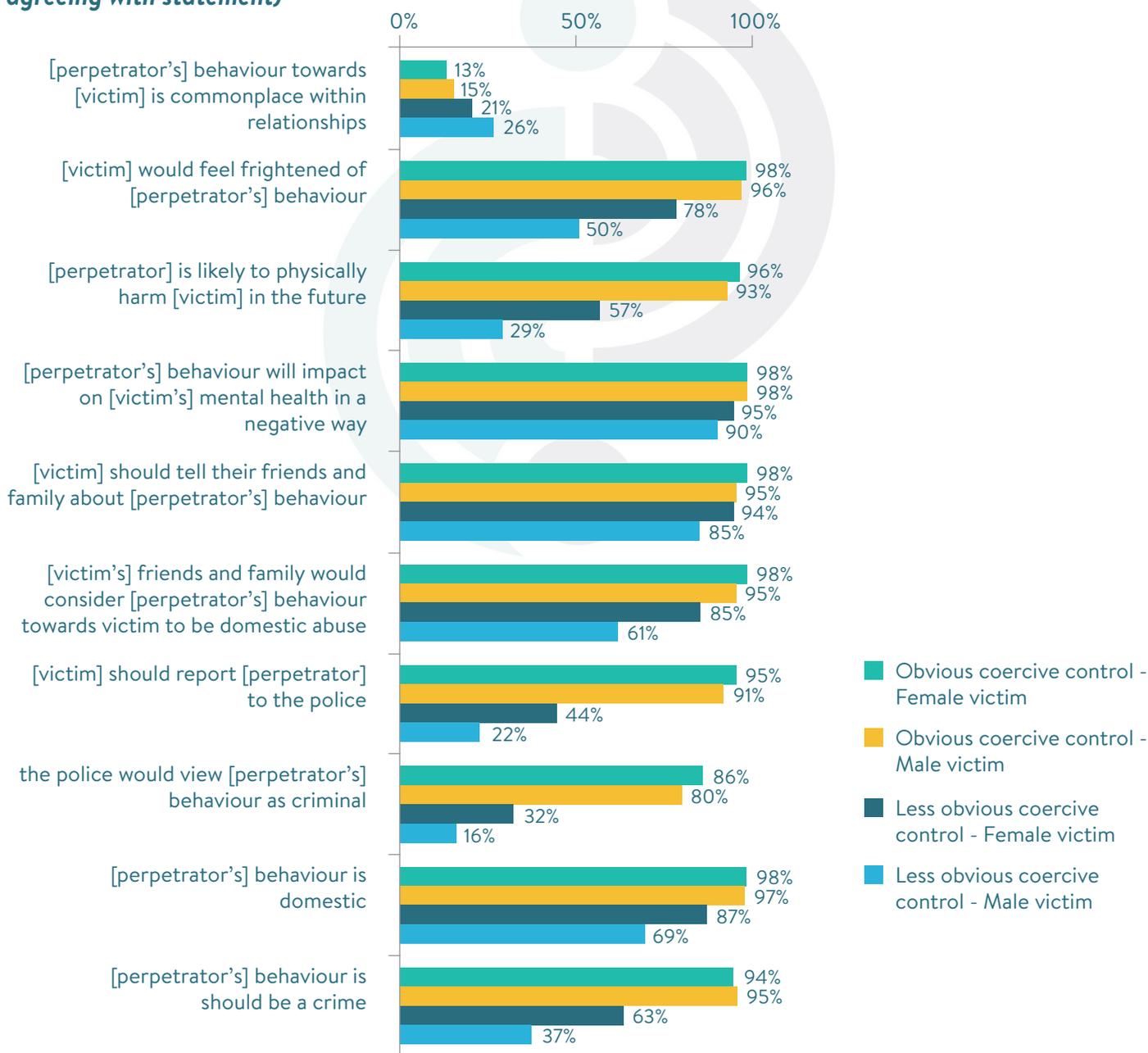
Figure 2 presents the proportion of adult participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the 10 statements presented for: 1) obvious coercive control – female victim; 2) obvious coercive control – male victim; 3) less obvious coercive control – female victim; and 4) less obvious coercive control – male victim. Results demonstrate greater levels of agreement across 7/10 statements for obvious and 9/10 for less

obvious cases of coercive control when the victim was female rather than male.

Within cases of obvious control, there tended to be strong agreement amongst the population sample that the described behaviours would leave a person feeling frightened, that their mental health would be impacted, that the victim is likely at risk of future physical harm and should speak with friends and family. There was also a high

level of agreement that the behaviour would be considered abusive, should be reported to the police and should be a crime. The level of agreement to all statements presented notably reduced within the less obvious cases of coercive control; this was particularly the case when the victim is male. Results suggest that members of the public may not recognise coercive control in its more subtle forms or seek support early on within an abusive relationship.

Figure 2: Adults Attitudes towards coercive control scenarios (% agreeing or strongly agreeing with statement)

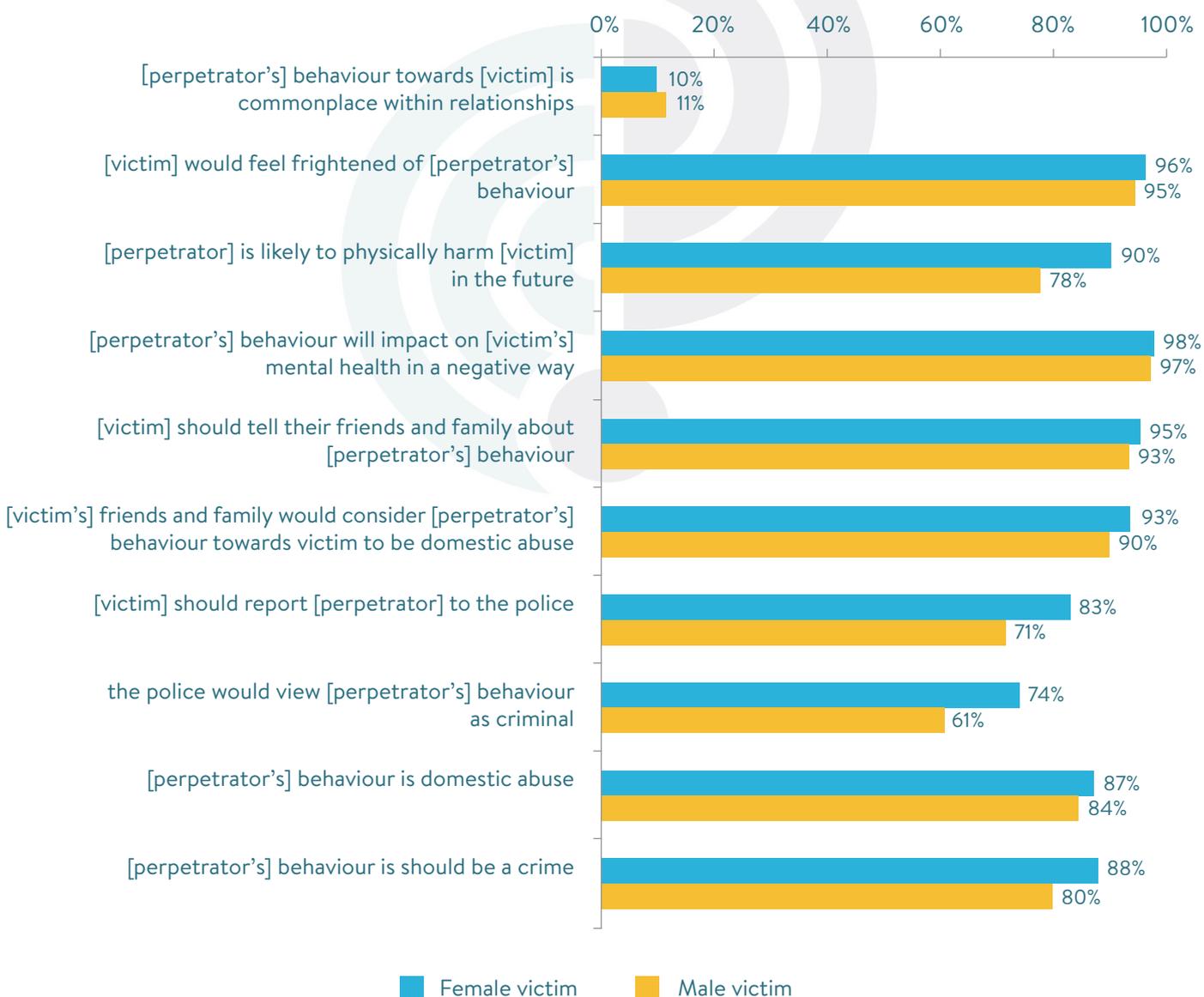


Young people's attitudes towards coercive control scenarios

Figure 3 shows the proportion of young people who agreed or strongly agreed with the 10 statements, presented separately for the scenario with a female victim, and the scenario with a male victim. For both the male and female victim scenarios, only a small proportion of respondents believed the behaviour described is commonplace within relationships (10-11%).

Young people agreed that the scenarios (whether with a male or female victim) were abusive and likely to result in negative outcomes. They also agreed coercive behaviour should be viewed as criminal, and as such, should be shared with friends and family as well as reported to police, although this view was disproportionately lower in relation to male victims.

Figure 3: Attitudes towards coercive control scenarios (% agreeing or strongly agreeing with statement)



The experience of domestic abuse is seldom the result of an isolated incident. Coercive control as a form of domestic abuse generally becomes apparent when associated behaviours develop into a pattern over time, by which stage the importance of identifying the early ‘minor’ acts of coercion and control has become clear (Stark, 2012). However, coercive control is a social construct and therefore takes on real meaning when the majority of people are in agreement. Indeed, social norms themselves regulate formal criminalisation (Barlow & Walklate, 2022). In advance of the roundtable participants were invited to reflect on a number of questions including: *in what contexts does ‘coercive control’ as a concept have the most meaning and for which groups of people does it not?; do we require blameless victims?; when does control become coercive and who decides on what constitutes a healthy or*

unhealthy relationship?; some definitions may reduce complexities and therefore create a one size fits all approach which has important implications for risk assessment, help-seeking and judicial process – how can we address this?; how do we ensure relevance and reach of public awareness raising for different groups?; is there awareness amongst professionals/police of what constitutes coercive control and is this explored within training?; the criminal justice system may not always be the most appropriate avenue of support and response therefore how do we support victim-centred courses of action?; will providing young people with the language and tools to communicate with parents, guardians, peers and youth-focused professionals about unhealthy relationship practices reduce the risk of partner violence and widen pathways to support?

Discussion

Understanding coercive control

The discussion began with a focus on ‘coercive control’ as a concept. Participants agreed that understanding and interpretation of the concept and terminology could differ between groups of people. The example was given of how coercive control behaviours may not be identified or accepted as such by perpetrators, victims or others. Addressing these deficits in understanding is pivotal to the success of policy. In explaining coercive control there are features of coercive control that are important to emphasise – for example that it involves a *pattern of behaviour*.

Throughout the discussion there was a strong focus on the importance of cultural relevance in strategies to improve understanding. An example was given of the nature of relationships between some young people where there is an element of ‘pester power’ - young men ‘pestering’ young women for sex being seen as enhancing social status. A key question is how these types of relationships can be identified and challenged early

on. It was also noted that this type of behaviour is often centred around digital abuse, much of it taking place online and on digital platforms. It was strongly argued that the basis of an understanding of coercive control is the relevance of power to gender based violence and recognition of the need for cultural change.

A key concern was that coercive control can become normalised for young people, especially if they have an abusive / unhealthy relationship at a young age. In a discussion of what ‘entry behaviour’ looked like for young people, in terms of both perpetrating and experiencing coercive control, reference was made to phenomena observed in school aged young people. One, called ‘humbling’, involves boys essentially picking out flaws in girls and purposively teasing them. Another, referred to as ‘gathering’ was noted to resemble ‘something from the 50s’ and sees boys ‘picking out girls’ encouraging ‘old fashioned’ culture / behaviours and raising serious concerns that this

could become acceptable or normal practice. The point was made that there is a responsibility on adults to find a way to identify these gateway practices to ensure that they are not normalised and continued into adult relationships.

The impact of social media trends has been a key factor in debates about coercive control and gender based violence more generally. Participants described how social media has been used as a platform normalising misogynistic views and promoting violence against women. This led to a wider conversation on how social media plays such a crucial role in the lives of young people and can influence their attitudes to relationships in many respects.

Awareness raising and education

There was strong support for the enhancement and implementation of relationships and sex education (RSE) as a key factor in supporting young people to understand what is acceptable and not acceptable in relationships. This should extend beyond statutory education settings to youth services, where there are some existing examples of good practice. An RSE hub has been developed on the CCEA website. There was a strong consensus that a consistent approach must be taken to the delivery of RSE and the only way to do this is by legislating it into the curriculum. At present, schools are not mandated to provide a standard level of RSE. As a result, teachers are often afraid to use the excellent RSE Hub because Board of Governors object to its use.

A key issue for awareness raising is how to recognise that coercive control is taking place. The ability of individuals, professionals and wider society to recognise and respond to coercive control is influenced by many factors. Participants noted how research demonstrates that victims of coercive control are mostly women, a factor which is linked to historical patriarchal structures resulting in unequal relationships and a lack of equality. The importance of power was an important theme during the roundtable. As in unequal

relationships dependence, including economic dependence, facilitates and perpetuates control. The history of gender *inequality* also contributes to coercive control being seen as 'natural' - not always recognisable to the victim and 'accepted' because it has always been that way.

The justice system

Attention was given to a range of issues relating to justice. New legislation is an important development but people may not know how to report abuse and there was a detailed discussion on the available pathways to reporting abuse and the 'stepping stones' people can access.

Participants heard about training taking place within the Police Service for NI (PSNI) relating to the new powers. The aim is to help officers identify coercive abuse and reduce barriers to reporting. Several different modules are included in this training and it has been well received by staff. Call handlers are also trained and the PSNI are keen to understand and educate staff on the 'A-Z of the victim process'. There is an understanding that risk assessments are crucial and the focus is on ensuring that the work is informed by trauma informed practice and a therapeutic approach. The training has resulted in a better understanding that once a victim comes forward there is real opportunity to end the abuse, provide support and ensure the perpetrator is convicted. The introduction of the coercive control legislation has been very useful for the PSNI and now they feel better placed to help victims.

There was consensus about the need to look not just at a criminal justice response to victims but at support by other professional agencies and wider society. Not all victims will want to engage with the criminal justice system but need other kinds of support. Crucially, it is important to understand why there may be a reluctance to reveal abuse and the importance of factors such as shame and fear – which can be used by abusers. The point was made that people may not want to be identified as a 'victim' and they may want

to confide in friends or family rather than going to the police. This underlines the importance of societal understanding.

[Link to the violence against women and girls strategy](#)

Reference was made to the development of a new strategy for ending violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland and the importance of this to addressing gender based violence. Statistics from research conducted by the Women's Policy Group were also shared at the roundtable. From a survey sample of 1060 women, 82% experienced or had been impacted by men's violence, many indicating first experiences before the age of 20. It was also emphasised that NI has high levels of violence against women and that it is important to take account of the specific context of paramilitary coercive control in local communities, for example, women are watched and tracked. Image based sexual assault also continues to rise in Northern Ireland and there are serious concerns about revenge porn. Concerns were also raised about the vulnerabilities pertaining to some disabled women including the potential of carer/partner abuse; examples were also provided of how some people, including ethnic minorities and people living in rural areas often find it more difficult to seek or get help. Participants urged that these experiences should not get lost when developing the violence against women and girls strategy.

[The problem of gender neutrality](#)

Some concern was expressed about the negative impact of gender neutral language. It was stressed that language is important, that a clear definition and understanding is vital to ensure it should not be 'misused' as then it will not have the same power behind it. Participants recognised that the majority of abuse happens to women and gender neutral language could undermine recognition and understanding of this. In this regard, it is important to distinguish between gender-based violence and domestic abuse. There

was a discussion about the need for legislation to be gender neutral, but with gendered policies and regulations as a gender lens is needed for the development of policy. A gendered lens applied to budgeting is also important to identify and address inequalities in resource allocation which contribute to gender inequality.

[Raising awareness and improving education](#)

Participants discussed the importance of awareness campaigns and some good examples were provided- including the 'You don't have to be hit to be hurt' campaign. For awareness raising to be effective it has to be built on understanding why people may be reluctant to report coercive control. Concerns about the consequences and fear (also 'shame') of reporting are important factors and research has identified that concern about social services involvement can be a barrier. There are also difficulties navigating the system and this can cause additional pressure and stress for victims. As mentioned earlier, professions such as youth work can help with training to recognise potential for abuse. Family Centre work is also an important source of education, even when social services are involved.

[Structural inequalities](#)

A recurring theme in the discussion was the importance of context which includes key structural inequalities and these can *result from* social policies. A significant example is the operation of Universal Credit where there has to be a lead claimant and one person in the household normally receives the payment. Other examples of policies that negatively impact women are the two child limit with regard to social security and tax credits, as well as restrictions on the right to healthcare (reproductive health and abortion services). To help avoid this, evidence based policy making is crucial as are consultation processes which are informed by lived experience and those working within the sector. There are also examples of where UK and NI governments have not introduced social policies which

would help address the problem and mention was made of the CEDAW recommendations regarding healthcare, RSE and social protection which have not been implemented.

Resourcing the community and voluntary sector

Lack of resources for the voluntary sector which provides fundamental support services was raised. Most rely on a cocktail of charity funding, and this

creates issues for sustaining services (for example, the Raise Your Voice funding ran out in June). It was argued that, without the adequate resourcing of the sector, the participatory approaches which are needed are in jeopardy.

It was noted that employer engagement and input was missing from the policy roundtable and that it is important that they are engaged with.

Key findings

- Education is key. Schools should be mandated to deliver the RSE curriculum. Youth services are very well placed to engage with young people on these issues and the good work already in evidence should be built on, including by statutory youth services.
- Greater public awareness and understanding is critical. This can be through a range of methods including education and promotional campaigns. It is important to normalise the *challenging* of coercive behaviour and have more open conversations on coercive control. Language and terminology is essential here – as is not giving false equivalence re women and men’s experience of domestic abuse when the evidence is clear that women experience more and greater domestic abuse.
- Early intervention is important and a dual approach can be taken: through engaging with families to ensure early education around healthy relationships and with schools to provide training which helps people recognise unhealthy relationships, as well as to intervene where they see coercive control or domestic violence.
- Better equality proofing of policies is needed to ensure that social policies do not have adverse impact on women (for example as seen with Universal Credit)

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