

Sticks and Stones? Violence experiences of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

The very public media coverage of sexually-motivated murders of women and girls in the UK and Ireland in 2022, such as that of Sarah Everard in London and that of Ashling Murphy in Tullamore, Co. Offaly, in Ireland, have resulted in public protests, outcries and demands to address safety needs of women and girls. Too often, unfortunately it seems, it takes high profile 'stranger-danger' abuse cases or murders that focus policy makers' attention. However, the criticism of how court cases have been conducted, where women and girls were victims of sexual or domestic violence, is all but new, and we know that in the vast majority of cases the perpetrator of violence is not a stranger, but is known to the victim. Recent NI-based studies (e.g. Anyadike-Danes et al. 2022) suggest that over six in ten students in NI universities have had unwanted sexual experiences, which suggests that this is an experience that a majority of young people, especially young women and LGBTQ+ young people, share.

Misogyny, victim blaming and rape myths have a long and sad history in preventing justice for victims of sexual violence (MacKenzie, 2022). However, again, it was the backlash from the very public

2018 rape trial against two Ulster Rugby players (McCann, 2018), which provided further evidence for victim blaming in sexual violence cases dealt with in the Northern Irish court system, that eventually triggered a review of court proceedings. The Gillen Review (2019) recommended, amongst other actions, that a working group is established to discuss and agree measures that would tackle rape myths and victim blaming in the court system, but also implement more effective awareness campaigns and education interventions to address gender-based violence, in particular, but not only, against female victims.

With funding from The Executive Office (TEO), which is currently developing a policy to tackle violence against women and girls for Northern Ireland, the 2022 YLT survey (www.ark.ac.uk/ylt) included some baseline questions around the experience of different kinds of violent and aggressive behaviours, and levels of acceptability towards different types of gender-based violence, among 16-year olds.

YLT is an annual survey run by ARK in Northern Ireland. 2,073 16-year olds took part in 2022. Half of the eligible

YLT respondents were asked to complete the questions on gender-based violence, and 1,034 did. TEO (2022) published an extensive statistical bulletin on this research.

Personal violence experiences

Respondents were asked about their personal experience of different types of violence and violent behaviours. The answer options were that they had personally experienced these 'never', 'rarely', 'sometimes' or 'often'. These types of violence respondents were presented with included a range of high level and low level violent behaviours, including face-to-face physical violence and verbal abuse, different types of coercion and aggression, but also unwanted and intrusive experiences via virtual media platforms. Figure 1 shows respondents' reported experiences by gender. Anyone who reported such experience, even if just 'rarely' experienced, is included in this prevalence figure

Figure 1: Prevalence of personal violence experiences of 16-year olds by gender (%)

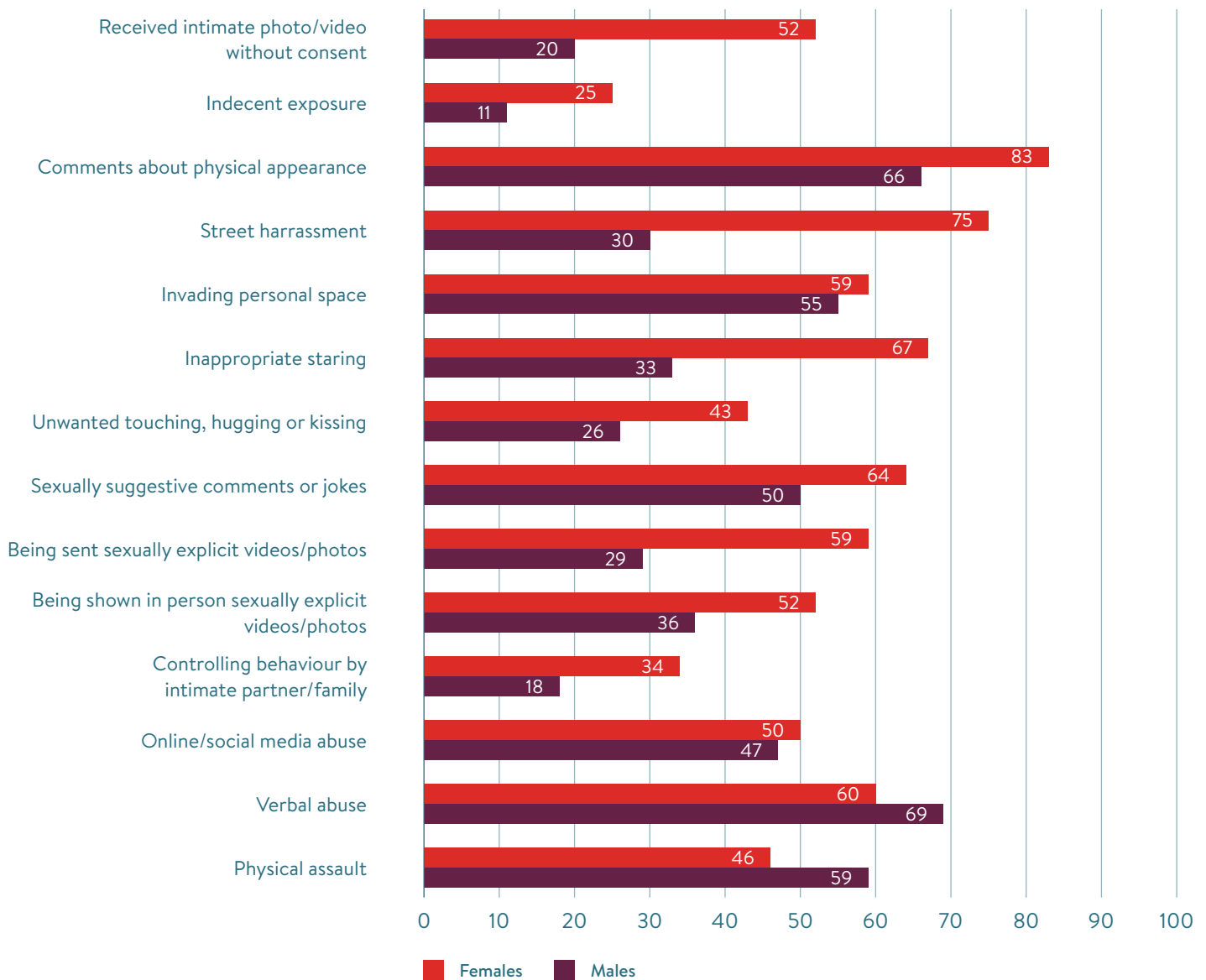


Figure 1 shows that, with the exception of physical assault and verbal abuse (67% and 33%), 16-year old females were more likely to report that they had personally experienced these behaviours. In some cases the differences in experience between young men and young women were highly significant. For example, female respondents were at least twice as likely as their male counterparts to report that they were at the receiving end of indecent exposure (25% and 11%); received an intimate photo or video without consent (52% and 20%); or felt

that they were stared at inappropriately (67% and 33%). Over one third of females also reported that they had experienced controlling behaviour compared to just 18% of males.

Whilst respondents' gender was the main factor that determined the extent of violence experienced, other background variables also made a difference. Respondents who said they had been sexually attracted to someone of the same sex were more likely to have experienced a range of

these violent behaviours compared to those attracted to the opposite sex. Respondents who had a disability or long-term health condition were also more likely to have experienced most of these types of violence more frequently than respondents with no disability or long-term health condition. Respondents from not well-off backgrounds were more likely than their better-off counterparts to have been at the receiving end of verbal or online abuse.

Acceptability of violent behaviours

16-year olds were asked how acceptable they found a range of violent behaviours. Table 1 shows that very large majorities of respondents considered these behaviours never acceptable. Over nine in ten respondents expressed that they felt that unwanted kissing, hugging or touching; pressuring someone to share an intimate photo of themselves or sharing intimate photos or videos were never acceptable. The level of expressed acceptability was slightly higher for harassment (cat calling, wolf whistling or shouting at someone on the street); posting jokes or comments of a sexual nature online and seeking the control of a partner. Around one in ten respondents found these behaviours either always or sometimes acceptable, as Table 1 shows.

Again, there were some significant differences in attitudes towards some of these behaviours by respondents' gender identity. Eighteen percent of males found wolf whistling, cat calling or shouting at someone in the street 'always' or 'sometimes' acceptable compared to just five percent of females. Males were also more likely than females to find controlling behaviour towards a partner 'sometimes' or 'always' acceptable (13% and 7% respectively). One in five males (19%) responded that they found posting nasty jokes or comments of a sexual nature online 'always' or 'sometimes' acceptable compared to just three percent of females.

We also found some differences in attitudes by school type attended. Generally, acceptability levels for certain types of violent behaviours were somewhat higher in secondary schools than in integrated or Grammar schools. This was largely due to differences in expressed attitudes among males, but not females, attending different school types. For example, whilst 88% of males attending planned integrated schools and 81% of males attending Grammar schools stated they found street harassment 'never' acceptable, less than two thirds (63%) of males attending secondary schools did. Also, 96% of males in integrated schools, 84% in Grammar schools, but only 78% in secondary schools found controlling behaviour towards a partner 'never' acceptable.

Table 1: How acceptable do you think the following behaviours are? (%)

	Always	Sometimes	Never	Don't know
Cat calling, wolf whistling, shouting at someone in the street	2	8	84	6
Sharing intimate photos/videos of others without agreement	1	2	94	3
Seeking to control your partner	<1	9	87	3
Posting a 'joke' or making nasty comments of a sexual nature online	1	9	85	5
Pressurising someone to share an intimate photo of themselves	<1	<1	96	3
Touching, hugging or kissing someone in a way that is unwanted	<1	3	95	2

Perpetrator knowledge

Finally, YLT asked respondents if they personally knew someone who had perpetrated different types of violence against girls or women. Table 2 shows that 16-year olds were most likely to know someone who had touched, hugged

or kissed a girl or woman in a way that is unwanted. They were least likely to say that they knew someone who had taken a photo of a girl or woman without her agreement (32%).

Table 2: Proportion of respondents saying they personally knew someone who had perpetrated these behaviours (%)

	%
Touching, hugging or kissing a girl or woman in a way that is unwanted	47
Verbal harassment of a girl or woman (Cat calling, wolf whistling, shouting at someone in the street)	45
Posting a 'joke' or making nasty comments of a sexual nature about a girl or woman online	45
Sharing intimate photos/videos of a girl or woman without agreement	43
Trying to control a girl or woman by preventing her from going out	39
Pressuring a girl or woman to share an intimate photo of themselves	37
Taken a photo of a girl or woman without her agreement	32

Table 2 shows the overall proportion of 16-year olds who personally knew someone who had perpetrated different kinds of violence against a woman or

a girl. The survey data suggest that a sizable minority of 16-year olds knows perpetrators of acts of violence against girls and women.

As Figure 2 shows, there were, again, some notable differences by gender and sexual attraction. For example, 50% of females, but only 17% of males, said they knew someone who tried to control a girl or woman by preventing her from going out. Females (48%) were also much more likely than males (19%) to say that they knew someone who had tried to pressure a girl into sharing an intimate photo of herself. The proportion of females who reported that they knew someone who tried to touch, hug or kiss a girl or

woman against her will was twice that of the proportion of males who knew someone who tried this (57% and 28%).

With regard to these specific behaviours, the difference between same-sex and opposite-sex attracted respondents was also significant. Nearly half (48%) of same-sex attracted respondents said they knew someone who tried to prevent a girl from going out compared to just over one third (34%) of opposite-sex attracted respondents. Same-sex

attracted respondents were also more likely to say than opposite-sex attracted respondents that they knew someone who had pressured a girl or a woman to share an intimate photo of herself (49% and 33% respectively), to try to touch, hug or kiss a girl without consent (59% and 40%) or to post a nasty joke or personal comment of a sexual nature on social media (54% and 42%).

Figure 2: Respondents saying they personally know someone who has done the following, by gender and sexual attraction (%)



Note: Any respondent who reported that they had been sexually attracted to someone of the same sex at least once were coded 'same-sex attracted', even though they may also have been sexually attracted to someone of the opposite sex on other occasions.

Respondents who reported that they had a disability or long-term health condition were also more likely to say that they knew someone who had posted jokes or comments of a sexual nature on social media than respondents who said they had no disability or long-term health condition (54% and 43% respectively), and they were more likely to know someone who had tried to touch, hug or kiss a girl without her consent than respondents who reported no disability or long-term health condition (56% and 45% respectively).

We analysed all violence experiences and attitudes questions also for differences by rurality, i.e. whether respondents lived in cities and their suburbs, small towns or in rural areas; whether or not they identified as belonging to minority ethnic backgrounds; and respondents' religious and family financial backgrounds. Whilst we found occasional differences in few selected violence experiences, overall, there was no evidence that these factors substantially related to young people's experiences of violence and aggression and their attitudes towards these. As

reported here, the main differences arose when comparing males with females, same-sex attracted with opposite-sex attracted respondents and – with some distance – those who had a long-term health condition or disability and those who did not.

Conclusion

This Research Update summarises headline findings of a module of questions on gender-based violence that was asked for the first time in YLT. The results show significant differences between 16-year old girls and boys with regard to experienced violence, knowledge of perpetrators, but also, to a lesser extent, their attitudes. The results also show that 16-year olds who were same-sex attracted had experienced violence and aggression more frequently than respondents who had only been attracted to people of the opposite sex. These findings confirm results reported elsewhere (Fedina et al. 2009, Mullen

et al. 1988) that young women and LGBTQ+ young people are at higher risk to experience sexual violence.

However, the study results also show that 16-year old males are more likely than their female counterparts to experience physical violence and verbal abuse. There was no gender difference with regard to online or social media abuse, but females were much more likely to experience sexual harassment and violence. Some of these behaviours might be perceived as 'low-level' violence such as street harassment, 'staring' or 'comments on the physical appearance', however,

from previous research and qualitative studies on this issue we know that these behaviours can still have a profound impact on young people's mental health and educational achievements (Anyadike-Danes, 2022). As introduced here, work is under way in Northern Ireland to try to better capture and understand the extent of gender-based violence, in particular violence against women and girls. It is hoped that a more comprehensive understanding will enable government and service providers to put appropriate measures in place to address and reduce gender-based violence.

Key Points:

- Whilst 16-year old males were more likely to have experienced physical assaults and verbal abuse, all other types of violence were more likely to be experienced by females
- Same-sex attracted 16-year olds were more likely than opposite-sex attracted 16-year olds to have personally experienced violence.
- Respondents with disabilities or long-term health conditions were more likely to have experienced certain types of violence than 16-year olds without disabilities.
- Females, same-sex attracted respondents and respondents with disabilities or long-term health conditions were disproportionately more likely to personally know people who had perpetrated violence against women or girls.
- The vast majority of respondents found acts of violence unacceptable.

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of social and political issues. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. In total, 2,073 16-year olds took part in the 2022 YLT survey, whilst 1,033 respondents responded to the questions on gender-based violence. These were funded by The Executive Office. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt.



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