

Violence Against Women and Girls – Attitudes and Experiences

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Introduction

The 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women explicitly brought to the fore the multi-faceted ways in which women experience violence and the negative personal and societal consequences of this. Building on this initial framework for action, the intervening years saw the introduction of a range of national and international strategies to promote and embed attitudinal, legislative and policy change aimed at eliminating such violence. At the same time, understandings of what constitutes violence have broadened. These are no longer limited to physical aggression but encompass a wide range of controlling behaviours (emotional, psychological, and virtual), as well as everyday encounters and actions, both face to face and online, that undermine and violate an individual's sense of self. As well as taking many forms, violence is not experienced solely by women and girls. However, wider gendered societal norms, hierarchies, and inequalities mean that women and girls are disproportionately impacted by some forms of violence, particularly by sexual and domestic violence and abuse.

Since 2010, the UK has introduced and revised a range of regional strategies to tackle violence against women and girls and raise awareness of its insidious prevalence in society. This greater focus has been heightened by, for example, the growth of the global #MeToo movement, and some high-profile cases. These have included Clare Wood, who was murdered by a boyfriend who had a criminal history of violence against women of which she had no knowledge, and the murders of Sarah Everard, sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, and Sabina Nessa. In Ireland the situation was forcibly brought to public attention with the murder of Ashling Murphy in 2022, and in Northern Ireland with the killings of Caoimhe Morgan in 2021 and Natalie McNally in 2023. In 2022, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) launched a *Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan*. In Northern Ireland 30 women and girls were killed by men between 2019 and 2024. In the 12 months until July 2024, there were 22,403 offences relating to violence against women and girls (PSNI, 2024). While this represents a reduction of 15.6 per cent from the previous year,

the details of some of these cases, and evidence that incidents of sexual assaults and exploitation of women are often not taken seriously, properly investigated or successfully prosecuted, have undermined confidence in both the police and judicial systems. Moreover, this lack of action or appreciation of the damaging nature of the traumas experienced, often but not solely by women, may not only deter victims from coming forward but, also, result in increased trauma for those doing so.

Several policy developments in Northern Ireland during September 2024 reflect the seriousness of this issue. The Executive Office (TEO) published the *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework*, and the Department of Justice published the *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-31*. In addition, within the *Draft Programme for Government* published by the Stormont Executive, one of the nine key priorities is Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.

To record public attitudes and understanding on this topic, since 2022, TEO has commissioned questions in ARK’s 2022 and 2023 Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys of 16-year-olds (McKnight and Schubotz, 2024; Schubotz, 2023; TEO, 2022, 2023), and questions in the 2022 and 2023 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey of adults aged 18 years and over (TEO, 2023a). While there was a focus on gender-based violence within both surveys, questions varied by year and by

survey. The inclusion of this topic built upon earlier NILT and YLT surveys which had explored coercive control. In 2020, while 63 per cent of NILT respondents had heard of and understood the meaning of the term ‘coercive control’ (Lagdon et al., 2021a), 60 per cent of YLT respondents in 2020/21 had not heard of the term (Lagdon et al., 2021b).

Responses to the gender-based violence questions included in 2023 NILT are the focus of this Research Update. 1,200

adults aged 18 years or over living across Northern Ireland completed this online survey. Importantly, while the primary focus of the NILT questions was to inform the proposed Ending Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, they were asked of all respondents, regardless of gender. Eliminating violence against women and girls specifically, and violence in general, requires wide ranging societal, attitudinal and behavioural change. As such, understanding the views across and within genders is critical.

Personal experience

The following definition of gender-based violence was provided at the start of the questions:

Gender-based violence is violence directed against a person because of that person’s gender, or violence that affects people of a particular gender disproportionately. It does not only relate to physical assaults but also includes words and actions that

can cause someone to feel afraid, anxious or humiliated.

The definition sought to tap into wider understandings of violence, and all respondents were asked about their personal experience of violence in the preceding five years. As seen in Table 1, over three quarters of respondents (79%) reported that they had not experienced

any of these forms of violence, with male respondents (82%) being more likely to say this than females (75%). The proportion of females and males was similar in relation to experience of physical, psychological, economic, and online violence. However, females were more likely to have experienced sexual violence (10%) compared with males (4%).

Table 1: Personal experience of violence in the last five years

	%		
	Male	Female	All respondents
Physical Violence (e.g. Being beaten, slapped, pushed, kicked, choked, restrained, a weapon or any other force being used against you in a way that causes harm)	6	8	7
Sexual Violence (e.g. Being forced or coerced into having sex against your will or into sexual practices or acts you didn’t want to engage in, including unwanted attempted sex and sexual acts, or being choked or restrained)	4	10	7
Psychological Violence (e.g. Being insulted, stalked, harassed, threatened, humiliated, denigrated or controlled against your will)	11	14	13
Economic Violence (e.g. Someone controlling your finances and spending and other resources against your will)	4	3	3
Online Violence (e.g. receiving threats online or via social media, online trolling, or being sent or being asked for intimate images against your will)	6	8	7
None of these	82	75	79

In general, for all forms of violence, the proportion of respondents reporting such experience decreased with age. Approximately nine in 10 respondents aged 55 years or over reported that they

had not experienced any forms of violence in the last five years, compared with one half of those aged 18-24 years (48%). Respondents in this youngest age group were much more likely to experience

all types of violence than those in other age groups: physical (27%), sexual (34%), psychological (36%), economic (9%) and online violence (34%).

Acceptability

Subsequent questions probed the (un) acceptability of four behaviours: cat-calling or wolf-whistling; sending an intimate photo/video of yourself to a woman without her agreement; sharing an intimate photo/video of a woman without her agreement; and posting a

'joke' or sexual comment about women online. These examples, to some degree, highlight how some instances of gender-based violence may be construed as unremarkable or taken for granted occurrences (McAlister et al., 2023). To answer this question, respondents were

randomly assigned to one of two groups, with one group being asked to answer in relation to themselves and the other group on how they felt most people would think.

Table 2: Acceptability of violent behaviours

	%			
	Always	Sometimes	Never	Don't know
Self: Cat-calling or wolf-whistling	2	19	73	7
Self: Sending an intimate photo/ video of yourself to a woman without her agreement	1	7	90	2
Self: Sharing an intimate photo/ video of a woman without her agreement	<0.5	<0.5	99	<0.5
Self: Posting a 'joke' or making comments of a sexual nature about women online that might make women feel uncomfortable	<0.5	<0.5	99	<0.5
Others: Cat-calling or wolf-whistling	2	33	60	5
Others: Sending an intimate photo/ video of yourself to a woman without her agreement	1	18	78	3
Others: Sharing an intimate photo/ video of a woman without her agreement	1	5	93	1
Others: Posting a 'joke' or making comments of a sexual nature about women online that might make women feel uncomfortable	1	4	94	1

As evident in Table 2, the majority of respondents felt that they personally would never find these behaviours acceptable (73%, 90%, 99% and 99% respectively). However, this was lower when respondents were assessing how most people would think (60%, 78%, 93% and 94% respectively).

When answering from a personal perspective, there was no difference between males and females in relation to sharing an intimate photo of a woman without her agreement or posting a 'joke' or sexual comment about women online. Males were more likely than females to say that cat-calling or wolf-whistling was never acceptable (76% and 70% respectively), while the reverse was true in relation to sending an intimate photo/video of yourself to a woman without her

agreement (88% and 93% respectively) – although these differences were not statistically significant. Males were more likely than females to say that most people would feel it was never acceptable to pressurise someone to share an intimate photo/video of a woman without her agreement (96% and 89% respectively) or post a 'joke' or sexual comments about women online (98% and 90% respectively). For the other two scenarios, responses for males and females were similar.

Looking now at responses by age and how NILT respondents felt personally, the youngest respondents (aged 18-24 years) were most likely to say that cat-calling or wolf-whistling was never acceptable (84%), compared with approximately seven out of 10 of respondents in other

age groups. A similar pattern is evident in relation to sending an intimate photo/video of yourself to a woman without her agreement: 96 per cent of 18-24 year-olds felt this was never acceptable, compared with 85 per cent of those aged 35-44.

However, when considering their perception of 'most people', the youngest respondents (aged 18-24 years) were least likely to say that in each situation the behaviour was unacceptable. For example, 77 per cent thought that most people would feel that posting a 'joke' or making comments of a sexual nature about women was never acceptable. In contrast, at least 86 per cent of those in all other age groups thought that most people would never find this acceptable.

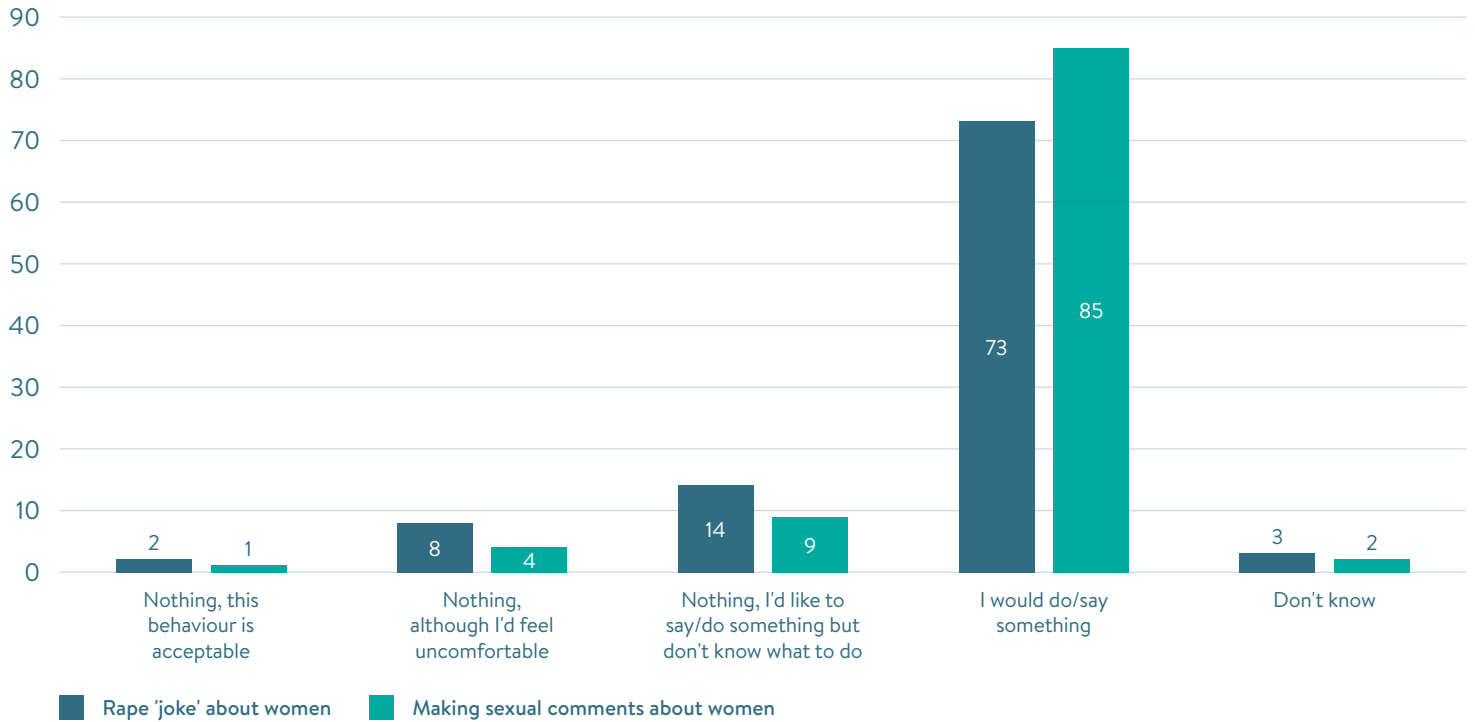
Bystander response

Violence against women and girls is a societal problem which remains entrenched if people ignore violence when they witness it or are aware of it happening. In order to explore the

likelihood of bystanders intervening, NILT respondents were asked how they would respond in two situations, namely, if they saw someone they personally know telling a rape 'joke' about

women, or making a woman or girl feel uncomfortable by making comments of a sexual nature towards them.

Figure 1: Bystander response (%)



As Figure 1 shows, in both situations, the majority of respondents felt that they would do or say something to indicate that they did not approve of the behaviours. However, a higher proportion felt they would be proactive in challenging someone they know making comments of a sexual nature (85%) than if that person was telling a rape 'joke' (73%). However, one in 10 respondents in both situations felt that although they would like to intervene, they were unsure of what to do.

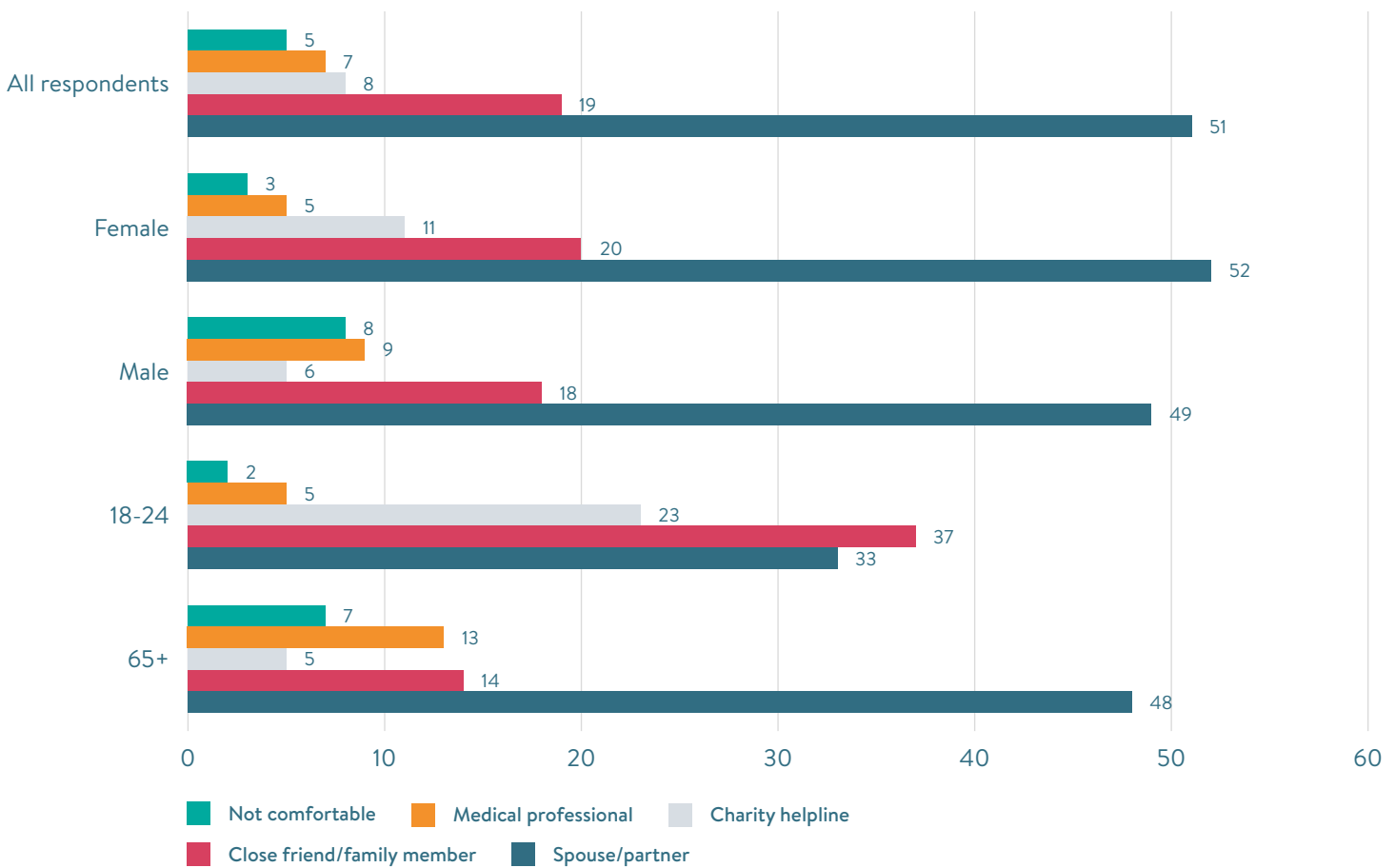
Females were more likely than males to say that they would intervene if someone they knew was telling a rape 'joke' (78% and 69% respectively). However, the reverse was true in relation to making sexual comments (83% and 86% respectively). Potential bystander intervention was lowest amongst those aged 18-24: 61 per cent in relation to telling a rape 'joke', and 77 per cent in relation to making sexual comments.

Reporting violence

NILT respondents were asked, if they were a victim of gender-based violence or abuse, who they would be most likely to report it to. They could select the three most likely people/organisations from a given list of seven or they could identify a different source of support. Focussing on the person/organisation the respondent was most likely to approach first, Figure 2 shows that the most frequently identified were spouse or partner (51%), followed by a close friend or family member (19%), a charity helpline (8%) and a medical professional (7%). While five per cent of respondents said that they would not feel comfortable discussing or reporting it, the proportions saying this was higher among males (8%) and respondents aged 65 years or over (7%). Perhaps relating to their life stage, the first choice by those aged 18-24 years to report gender-based violence or abuse was a close friend (37%), followed by a spouse or partner (33%).

For respondents in other age groups, the reverse was true, with around one half saying they would first report such abuse to a spouse or partner, with less than one fifth saying that they would talk to a close friend. A notable difference is evident in relation to a charity helpline – whilst this would be the first port of call for 23 per cent of respondents aged 18-24 years, this was the case for less than one in 10 of all other age-groups. Very few respondents (2%) of all ages would approach the police in the first instance.

Figure 2: Who respondents are most likely to report gender-based violence to (%)



Conclusion

This Research Update highlights some of the key findings from NILT in 2023 in relation to gender-based violence. In particular, experience of sexual violence was higher among females than males. Respondents, especially females, were much more likely to say that they would report gender-based acts of violence to their spouse, partner, close family or friends. Few respondents would report gender-based violence to the police in the first instance. While there are structures and policies in place around gender-based violence, these findings highlight the need for these to be strengthened and for the public, particularly women, to feel that action will be taken and that they will not be trivialised or retraumatised within the criminal justice system.

The publication of the *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework*, and the *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-31* are welcomed, as is the emphasis on ending violence against women and girls in the *Draft Programme for Government*, and the PSNI's *Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan*. However, the successful implementation of government strategies and initiatives are dependent on greater societal appreciation of the widespread and insidious nature of gender-based violence. Preventing violence against girls and women requires broad and systemic change to attitudes, cultures, policies, institutions and laws (McAlister et al., 2023). It is important, therefore,

that the attitudes that foster and sustain gender-based violence are addressed in the legal system. However, of equal importance, initiatives should be put in place aimed at preventing such violence happening, and key to this must be our schools and colleges. Indeed, Outcome 2 (Healthy, Respectful Relationships) of the *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework* stresses the need for schools and further and higher education institutions to support children and young people to develop healthy, respectful relationships.

Key Points:

- One quarter of female respondents had experienced some form of gender-based violence in the previous five years.
- Most respondents would intervene if someone was making sexual comments (85%) or telling a rape ‘joke’ (73%) about women, although this was lowest among 18-24 year olds: 61 per cent in relation to telling a rape ‘joke’, and 77 per cent in relation to sexual comments.
- Respondents were more likely to say that they would report violence or abuse to a family member, spouse or a close friend rather than to the police.
- Five per cent of NILT respondents said that they would not feel comfortable discussing or reporting their experience of gender-based violence.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues.

In 2023, 1,200 people aged 18 years or over took part. NILT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/nilt



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