

Feeling safe? Gender-based violence experiences of 16-year-olds

Martina McKnight and Dirk Schubotz

Introduction

The prevalence and complexity of gender-based violence (GBV) and how it operates in private, public and virtual spaces has increasingly gained policy and public attention in recent years. While not limited to women and girls, a growing body of evidence shows that women and girls are much more likely to be the victims of GBV (WHO, 2021). Since the mid-1990s there have been a raft of global government strategies focused on ending this violence and abuse, culminating in the so called *Istanbul Convention* (Council of Europe, 2011), which sets an international framework for many governments to put policy mechanisms and programmes in places to tackle GBV, in particular against women and girls.

On 16 September 2024, Northern Ireland (NI) was the last of the four nations in the United Kingdom to put in place a Strategic Framework to end violence against women and girls (EVAWG) (TEO, 2024). The process to develop this Strategy began in 2021, when a cross-departmental team, led by The Executive Office (TEO), was set up to gather and collate relevant information. The necessity for urgent policy and action is unquestionable, as estimates about the number of femicides suggest that, per head of population, Northern Ireland is one of the most dangerous places in Europe for women (Kearney, 2024).

Countering the negative attitudes that underpin the violence, abuse, and harm that women and girls are subjected to therefore means that there is a need to “equip and empower our young people to enjoy healthy, respectful relationships”, as the First Minister Michelle O’Neill stated in her speech on the day of the launch of the Strategic Framework.

As part of their remit to gather attitudinal and experiential data to inform the EVAWG strategy TEO have funded ARK to ask questions on GBV in the annual *Young Life and Times (YLT)* survey (Schubotz, 2023; TEO, 2022, 2023), and the *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey (Devine & McKnight, 2024; TEO, 2023a). More in-depth lived experience data was collected from young women through a bespoke mixed-methods study (McAlister et al., 2023).

This Research Update draws on the findings from YLT 2024 which focused on the prevalence of GBV experiences, help-seeking and barriers to help-seeking, and general feelings of safety in a number of public spaces and online. Fieldwork was undertaken in March and April 2024, and 1,156 16-year-olds responded to the questions on GBV.

Personal experiences of violence

The survey began by providing respondents with the following definition of GBV:

‘GBV is violence, abuse and harm directed against a person because of that person’s gender, or violence that affects people of a particular gender disproportionately.’

Based on this definition, respondents were asked if, regardless of their gender, they had personally experienced any of four specified types of violence because of their gender in the preceding year. As can be seen in Table 1, around six in 10 respondents (62%) reported that they had not experienced any of these types of violence, whilst eight per cent said they did not know if they had done so. However, Table 1 also shows a clear gender difference in the level of violence experienced. While three quarters (75%) of male respondents said that they had not been a victim of any form of GBV, this was the case for only around half of female respondents (51%). Overall, the most common reported type of violence was online violence. Over one quarter (26%) of female respondents, but fewer than one in 10 male respondents (9%), said they had experienced online violence

in the preceding year. The figures for psychological violence were very similar, as Table 1 shows. Physical violence was the least common violence experienced

and the only one where males (8%) were more likely to report being a victim than females (5%). The gender difference was most pronounced in terms of sexual

violence, where females were nearly six times more likely to report that they had experienced this than male respondents (17% and 3% respectively).

Table 1: Personal experience of GBV in the last 12 months

	%		
	Male	Female	All
Physical Violence (e.g. being beaten, slapped, pushed or restrained)	8	5	7
Sexual Violence (e.g. upskirting, unwanted touching, being coerced into sexual acts)	3	17	11
Psychological Violence (e.g. being insulted, stalked, harassed, controlled against your will, or threatened with violence)	9	24	18
Online Violence (e.g. receiving threats online or via social media, online trolling, or being sent or asked for intimate images against your will)	9	26	19
None of these	75	51	62
I don't know	7	8	8

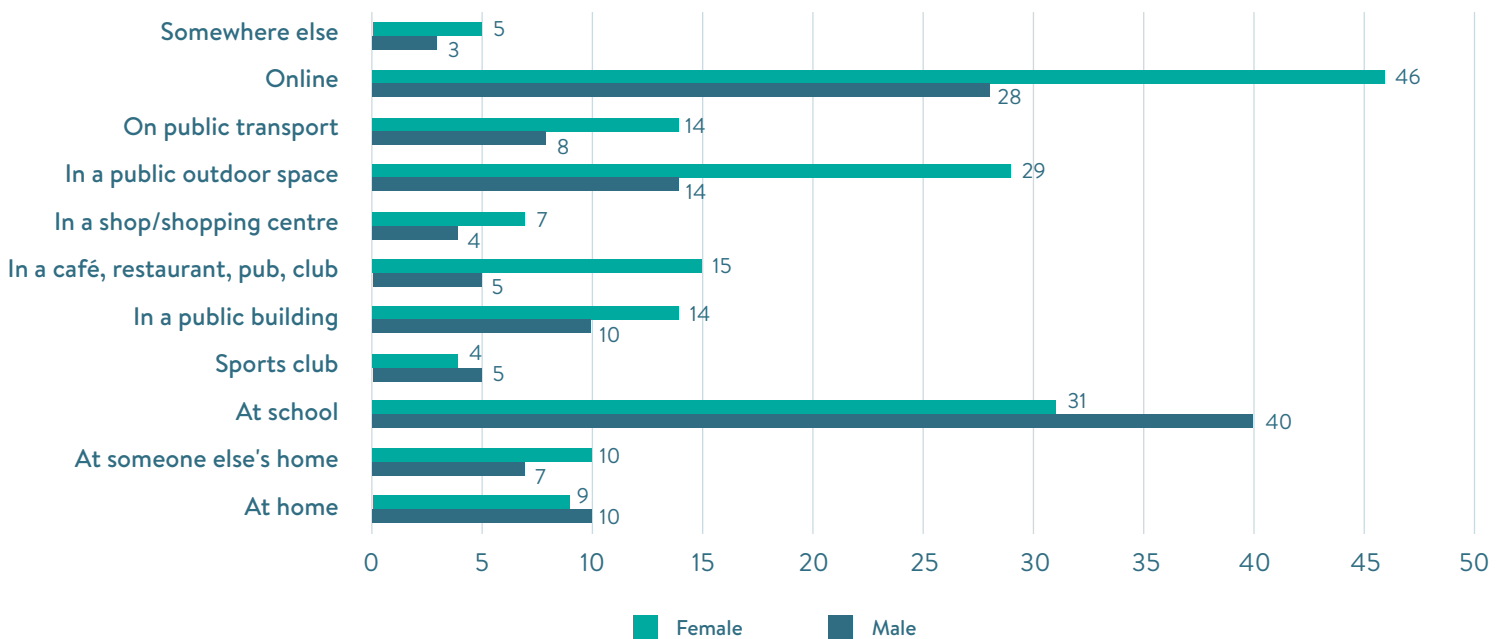
Where the violence took place

Respondents who said they had experienced any type of GBV in the preceding year were then asked where this violence had occurred. Irrespective of gender, school was the most likely place where respondents had experienced

GBV. However, as Figure 1 shows, for females the most likely space to experience GBV was online – with almost one in two females (46%) saying they had experienced this. Figure 1 also shows that females were disproportionately more

likely than males to report experiencing violence in public spaces, more than twice as likely as males to experience violence in outdoor spaces, and more than three times as likely as males to experience violence in bars, restaurants and pubs.

Figure 1: Where did the GBV take place (%)?



Perception of trends in violence against women and girls

YLT respondents were asked if they thought it was more likely now than two years ago for women and girls to become victims of GBV and online GBV. Table 2 shows that the most frequent response among females to both questions was that this was more likely now. However,

in relation to online violence, the proportion of young women believing that it had increased in the last two years was much higher than for GBV generally. The responses to the question about online GBV reflect the general feeling highlighted in the media and wider

research that online GBV is becoming more prevalent. (McAlister et al., 2023; Kearney, 2024). Overall, over half of all respondents (51%) said that women and girls were more likely to become victims of online GBV now than two years ago.

Table 2: Compared with two years ago, do you think women and girls in Northern Ireland are more likely or less likely to become victims of GBV and online GBV?

	%			
	GBV		Online GBV	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
More likely	21	40	38	60
Less likely	24	7	15	4
About the same	32	39	25	23
Don't know	24	13	22	12

As shown in Table 2, the responses of male 16-year-olds were generally much more evenly spread across all response options than female respondents. Perhaps this difference in male perceptions may reflect a certain lack of awareness regarding the prevalence of GBV, a different understanding of what constitutes violence, or, as our findings show, less direct experience of GBV. Only

one fifth of male respondents (21%) felt that women and girls were more likely to experience GBV than two years ago – this was the least likely response among males. The most likely response among males to the first question about the general trend in violence against women and girls was that there was no change (32%). Just under one quarter (24%) of male respondents said that this was ‘less

likely’, and the same proportion said that they did not know. When assessing the trend in online GBV, the most frequent response from male respondents (38%) was that this was ‘more likely’ now than two years previously; however, this figure was much lower than that of female respondents (60%).

Reporting violence and barriers to reporting

If strategies to prevent and combat GBV are to be successful, appropriate levels of violence and abuse must be monitored and support must be available to ensure that victims feel they will be listened to and taken seriously. As such, it is important to understand not only who victims are most likely to report incidences of violence to, but also what might deter them from coming forward.

Overall, when asked how easy or difficult they felt it would be to get help and support if they were a victim of GBV, the most likely response given

by respondents to the 2024 YLT survey was that they did not know, with around three in 10 respondents (29%) saying this. Four in 10 female respondents felt it would be either very easy or quite easy compared to nearly half (47%) of males.

Table 3 details that respondents were most likely to say they would report GBV or abuse to a family member (63%), followed by a close friend (48%). The next most likely people that 16-year-olds would report GBV and abuse to were the police (28%), and a teacher or school staff member (25%), but the proportion

of respondents selecting these options was much smaller than for the previous two categories. Higher proportions of female respondents than males selected each of these four sources of support. Approximately one in six males and females said they would report GBV to their girlfriends or boyfriends. Over one fifth of respondents said that they either would not feel comfortable discussing or reporting violence or abuse (12%) or they did not know who they would report it to (10%).

Table 3: If you were a victim of GBV or abuse, who would you report it to?

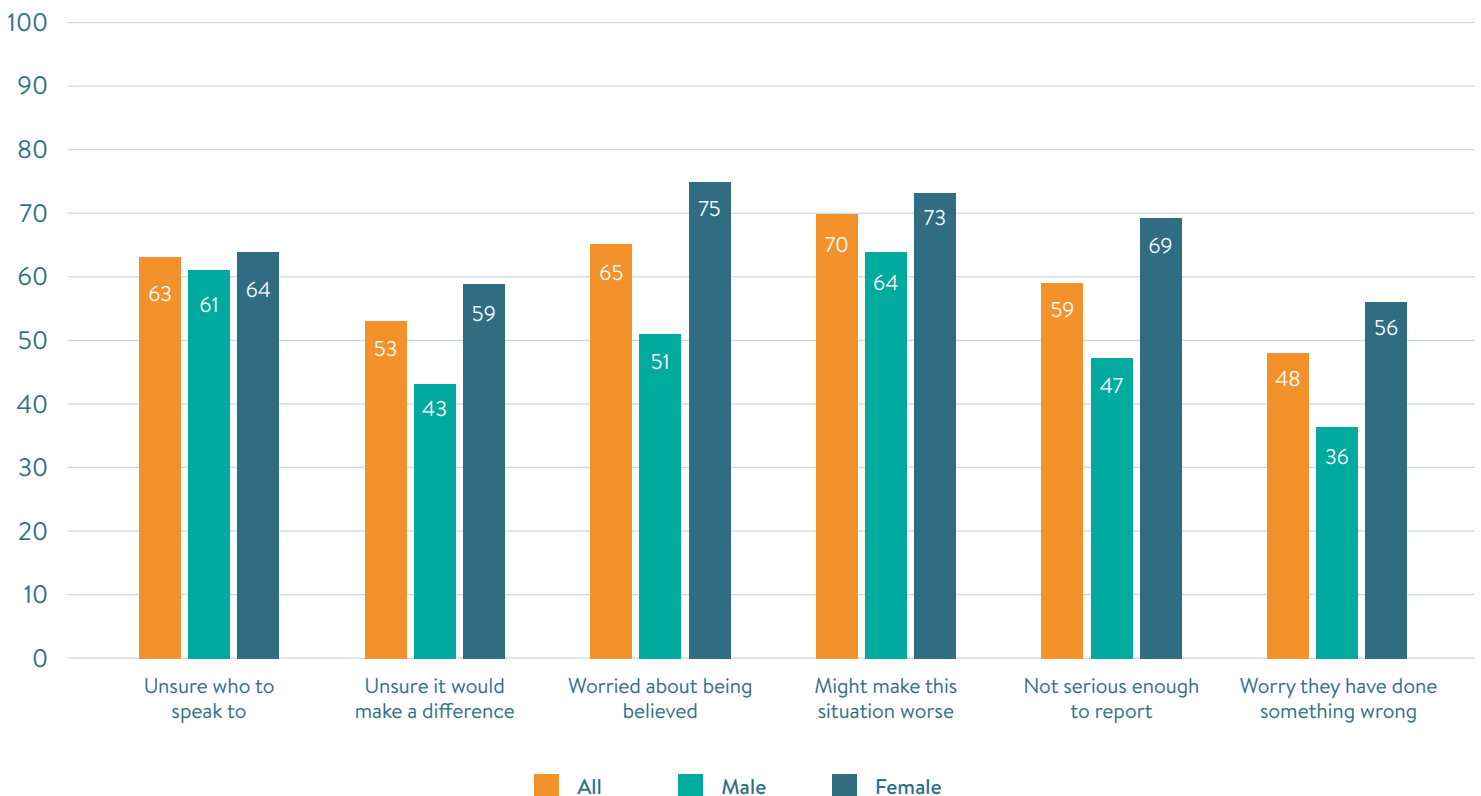
	%		
	Male	Female	All
A family member	58	68	63
A close friend	42	53	48
My boyfriend/girlfriend	17	16	17
A charity or helpline	10	10	10
The police	27	31	28
A doctor or nurse	5	7	6
A teacher or other staff member in school/college	22	27	25
Someone you trust in your church or religious community	6	4	5
Other	2	1	1
I would not feel comfortable discussing or reporting it	11	13	12
I don't know	12	8	10

Respondents were asked to select any/all from a list of potential reasons why young people might not report GBV. As detailed in Figure 2, the views of female and male respondents were similar in terms of being unsure of who to speak

to. However, in all other instances female respondents were much more likely than males to select each potential deterrent. The differences between females and males were most noticeable in relation to 'worry about being believed' – 24

percentage points; 'not serious enough to report' – 22 percentage points; and 'worry that they have done something wrong' – 20 percentage points.

Figure 2: What might stop young people reporting GBV (%)?



Perceptions of safety

Respondents were also asked how safe or unsafe they feel in a range of public places and spaces (a quiet street close to home; a busy public space, such as a high street or train station; a park or other open space; using public transport on their own) and online.

While the proportion of females (87%) and males (92%) feeling 'always' or 'mostly' safe online were similarly high, in all other places females indicated that they felt much less safe than males. Whereas over eight in 10 male respondents said they 'always' or 'mostly'

felt safe in any of these physical spaces, only 43 per cent of female 16-year-olds felt 'always' or 'mostly' safe when using public transport; 50 per cent in a busy public space; 60 per cent in a park or other open space; and 64 per cent on a quiet street close to home.

Conclusion

The 2024 YLT survey data provide further evidence that young women are significantly more likely to experience GBV and abuse. Only half of 16-year-old females compared to three quarters of their male counterparts reported that they had not experienced any form of GBV in the last 12 months. This prevalence data is also reflected by the

finding that young women also feel less safe in public places and online spaces than young males do. What is more, when it comes to help-seeking behaviour, female YLT respondents were more likely to perceive potential barriers to reporting GBV than males, including the fear that they wouldn't be believed, that their reporting would make the situation

worse, and that the violence or abuse may not be seen as serious enough to merit reporting. These findings show the timeliness of the recent introduction of the EVAWG Strategic Framework in NI, if GBV that young women experience is to be tackled.

Key Points:

- Three in four 16-year-old males, but only one in two 16-year-old females, had not experienced any form of GBV in the last 12 months.
- Young men were more likely to say they experienced physical violence, but young women were more likely to say they experienced any other type of GBV in the last 12 months.
- Violent experiences were most likely to be experienced online and in school for both males and females; however, a much larger proportion of females also reported being exposed to GBV in public places.
- Over eight in 10 young men felt always or mostly safe in public places and online spaces; however, the proportion of female 16-year-olds who felt always or mostly safe walking home on a quiet street (64%), in a park or open space (60%), in a busy public space (50%) or on their own on public transport (43%) was much lower.

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Authors

Dr Martina McKnight is ARK's Survey Manager.

Professor Dirk Schubotz is Professor of Youth and Social Policy at Queen's University Belfast and YLT Director.

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. In total, 2,210 16-year olds took part in the 2024 YLT survey, which was run as a split survey, 1,156 respondents completed Version 1 of the survey, which contained the questions on GBV. These questions were funded by The Executive Office. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt.



In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University

School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences
Ulster University
York Street, Belfast, BT15 1ED

Tel: 028 9536 5611 Email: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast
20 College Green, Belfast, BT7 1LN

Tel: 028 9097 3034 Email: info@ark.ac.uk