



Gender-based violence: Safe or unsafe in everyday spaces

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The last 20 years have seen the introduction of numerous national and international strategies to eliminate violence against women and girls in private, public, and online spaces. Underpinning many of these policy initiatives is the recognition that violence is not limited to physical assaults but can take many forms, including, for example, coercive control, stalking, harassment and sexual exploitation. Importantly, violence against women and girls is often a reflection of wider societal inequalities and embedded negative gender stereotypes and norms. While felt most keenly by the individuals experiencing these violent traumas, the negative impacts also affect family, friends and communities, and is detrimental to society more generally. In addressing the complexities and prevalence of the problem, there is a growing focus on prevention in the formulation of government strategies. This is evidenced in a greater emphasis on challenging and changing attitudes and behaviours that reinforce gendered mindsets, and opinions which can trivialise or normalise the wide-ranging violence that women and girls are confronted with. It is also recognised that attempts to combat violence against women and girls

require cooperation within and between government departments, and the close involvement of the police, communities and the education system, as well as the provision of support for victims.

In Northern Ireland, the elimination of violence against women and girls is one of the nine key priorities of the *Programme for Government 2024-31* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025). The growing public and policy focus is evidenced directly in the *End Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework 2024-2031* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024). An important addition to this is the cross-departmental *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031*, published by the Department of Health and the Department of Justice (2024), who will work in conjunction with the Department for Communities, the Department of Education and The Executive Office.

To develop and monitor strategies and attitudes, The Executive Office, beginning in 2022, has commissioned questions on gender-based violence in two ARK surveys, namely, the *Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT)* survey of adults, and the *Young Life and Times*

(YLT) survey of 16-year-olds. While some questions have been included each year, new questions have also been introduced to reflect specific themes and concerns as they arise. This Research Update draws on data from NILT 2024 which focused on experiences of different forms of gender-based violence, perceived ease of obtaining help and support, and respondents' sense of safety in different locations and timeframes.

Personal experience

As in previous NILT surveys, respondents in 2024 were asked about their experience of different forms of gender-based violence. The following broadly-based definition was provided at the start of the questions, and all respondents were asked about their personal experiences of these types of violence in the preceding five years.

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.

As shown in Table 1, over three quarters of respondents (77%) reported that they had not experienced any of these forms of violence, with male respondents (81%) being more likely to say this than females (75%). These figures are almost identical to those reported in the 2023

NILT survey (Devine and McKnight, 2024). Nonetheless, over one in five (21%) respondents in NILT 2024 had experienced some form of gender-based violence in the previous five years, this being the case for 24 per cent of females and 18 per cent of males. However, while

the proportions of females and males were similar in relation to experiences of physical, economic, and online violence, females were more likely to have experienced sexual violence (8%) or psychological violence (18%) compared with males (3% and 10% respectively).

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

	% experiencing violence		
	All	Male	Female
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)	7	7	8
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)	5	3	8
Psychological Violence (e.g. Being insulted, stalked, harassed, threatened, humiliated, denigrated or controlled against your will)	15	10	18
Economic Violence (e.g. Someone controlling your finances and spending and other resources against your will)	4	4	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)	8	7	8
Other	1	1	2
Don't know	1	1	1
None of these	77	81	75

As in 2023, for all forms of violence, the proportion of respondents reporting such experiences decreased with age. Approximately nine in ten respondents (89%) aged 55 years or over reported that they had not experienced any forms of violence in the last five years, compared with almost one half of those aged 18-24 years (46%). Respondents in this youngest age group were much more likely to experience all types of violence than those in other age groups: physical (17%), sexual (25%), psychological (37%), economic (10%) and online (28%). However, in comparison to 2023 the

proportion of respondents in this age group experiencing sexual violence had decreased from 34 per cent to 25 per cent, with a similar pattern in relation to online violence (from 34% in 2023 to 28% in 2024).

Location of violence

In 2024, respondents who had experienced physical, sexual, or psychological gender-based violence were presented with a list of locations and asked to select where this violence had taken place. Table 2 presents the

five locations most frequently identified by respondents for each specified form of violence (respondents could select more than one location). As detailed, for all three types of violence, this was most likely to occur in the respondent's own home or in someone else's home. A public outdoor space was identified by 29 per cent of those experiencing physical abuse, and 33 per cent of those experiencing psychological abuse. A café, restaurant, pub, club, or disco was the location identified in relation to 25 per cent of physical and 31 per cent of sexual violence.

Table 2: Location of violence

Physical	%	Sexual	%	Psychological	%
Own home	45	Someone else's home	44	Own home	49
Someone else's home	31	Own home	39	Public outdoor space	33
Public outdoor space	29	Café, pub, club, disco	31	Work	32
Café, pub, club, disco	25	Work	16	School, college, university	24
School, college, university	20	Online	13	Someone else's home	24

Help and support

Respondents were asked to consider, if they were a victim of gender-based violence, how easy or difficult it might be to get help and support. Just over one quarter (27%) of respondents thought that they would find it very or quite easy to obtain this if required. However, approximately one third (32%) of respondents thought that it would be quite or very difficult. It is worth noting that 20 per cent of respondents selected 'I do not know' in answer to this the question. Females were more pessimistic than males in their ability to obtain help and support, with 36 per cent of females feeling that they would find it quite or very difficult compared with 28 per cent of males. Similarly, females (23%) were more likely than males (17%) to say they did not know.

Differences according to age were also evident, with over half of those aged 18-24 years (55%) saying that it would be quite or very difficult to get help or support, compared with less than 30 per cent of those in other age groups. However, ten per cent of the youngest respondents said that they did not know, compared with 25 per cent of those aged 45-54 years. While nearly two-thirds (64%) of males in the youngest age category felt that it would be quite or very difficult to get help and support this was the case for just over one half (52%) of females in the same age group.

Approximately one half (51%) of respondents who had experienced gender-based violence within the past five years thought that it would be quite or very difficult to obtain help or support, compared with 28 per cent of those who had not experienced violence.

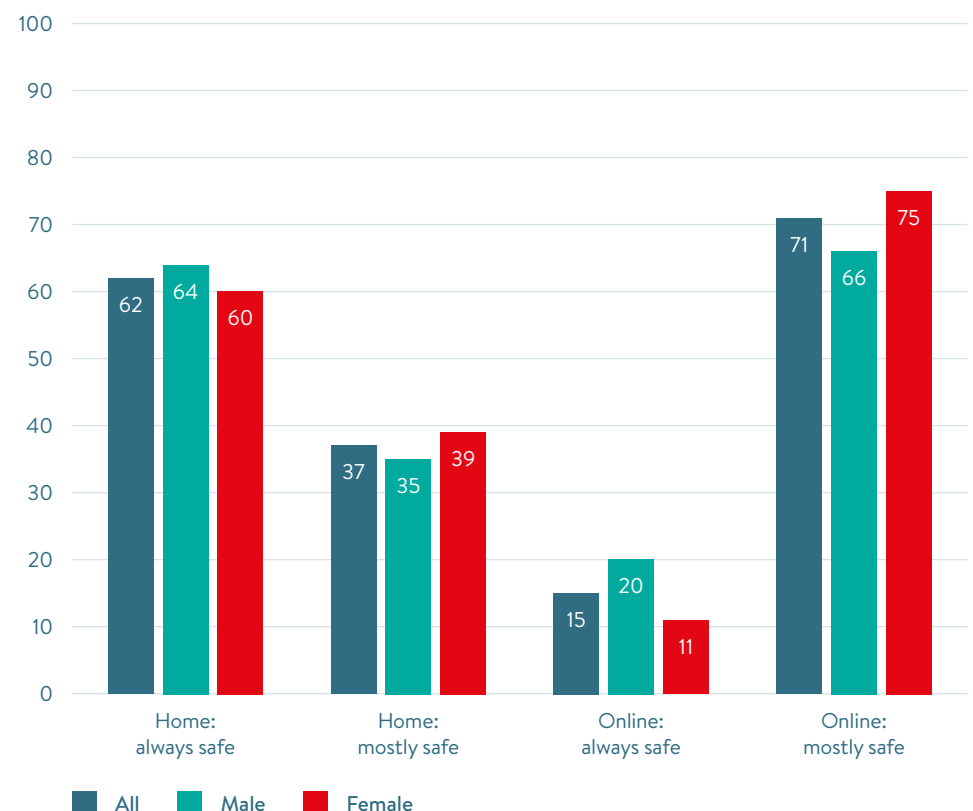
Sense of safety

Respondents were then asked about their perceptions of personal safety in specified private and public spaces. Figure 1 focuses on private spaces and shows that most respondents (62%) said that they always felt safe at home, with a further 37 per cent saying that they felt mostly safe. In contrast, only 15 per cent said that they always felt safe online, although 71 per cent said that they mostly felt safe. These figures exclude the small number of respondents (1%) who said that they never use the Internet. Nevertheless, ten per cent said that

they felt mostly unsafe or always unsafe online, compared with less than one per cent saying this in relation to home.

While overall, 86 per cent of males and females said they always or mostly felt safe online, only 11 per cent of females reported always feeling safe compared with 20 per cent of males. Respondents aged 18-24 years were least likely than other age groups to report feeling always safe online (9%), compared with 20 per cent of those aged 55-64 years.

Figure 1: Perceptions of safety in private spaces (%)



Respondents who had experienced some form of gender-based violence within the previous five years were less likely to report feeling always or mostly safe online (77%) than those who had not experienced violence (89%). There was little difference between these two groups in relation to feeling always or mostly safe at home (100% and 96% respectively). However, more detailed analysis showed that 47 per cent of those respondents who had experienced violence said they always felt safe at home compared with 67 per cent of those who had not experienced violence.

Public spaces

Respondents were then asked about their sense of safety when walking on their own in a quiet street close to home; walking on their own in a busy public space, such as a high street or train station; walking on their own in a park or other open space; and using public transport on their own in or around their local area. Half of respondents were asked these questions in relation to daytime, and half were asked these questions in relation to nighttime.

Table 3 shows that nearly all male respondents felt always or mostly safe in all four scenarios during the day. After dark, feelings of safety were reduced, with walking on their own in a park or other open space eliciting the lowest feeling of safety (69%). Similar to males, albeit with lower proportions, most females felt always or mostly safe in all four scenarios during the day. Over nine in ten females felt safe on a quiet street close to home, a busy public space or using public transport. However, they felt least safe during the day in a park or other open space (84%). Unsurprisingly, respondents were less likely to feel safe after dark. While this was the case for both males and females, females were much more likely to report this than males. For example, after dark only 58 per cent of females would always or mostly feel safe using public transport around their local area and only 27 per cent would feel safe walking on their own in a park or other open space. Across all scenarios, during the day or after dark, the youngest age group (18-24 year olds) were least likely to say that they always or mostly felt safe.

Table 3: Perception of safety in public spaces

	% saying always or mostly felt safe					
	All		Male		Female	
	Day	After dark	Day	After dark	Day	After dark
Quiet street close to home	96	85	98	96	94	74
Busy public space	95	77	98	87	93	68
Park or other open space	91	47	98	69	84	27
Using public transport	96	73	99	88	94	58

The combined figures in Table 3 mask differences in perceptions of safety in public places. For instance, in all four scenarios, both during the day and after dark, females were less likely than males to say that they always felt safe. Furthermore, while 40 per cent of males always felt safe walking on their own during the day in a park or other open space, only 17 per cent of females felt this.

Perceptions of safety were lower among respondents who had experienced gender-based violence compared with those who had not. For example, 40 per cent of those with experiences of such violence always felt safe walking on a quiet street during the day, compared with 60 per cent of those who had not.

Conclusion

The findings from the 2024 NILT survey provide important baseline information for the *End Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024), and the *Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy* (Department of Health and Department of Justice, 2024), as well as for the *Programme for Government* (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025). This Research Update has indicated that females and respondents aged 18-24 years were more likely than males and respondents in other age groups to have been victims of gender-based violence and to express more concern about their safety in both public and private spaces. Furthermore, for those respondents who had experienced gender-based violence, perceptions of safety in both public and private spaces were less positive than respondents who had not experienced gender-based violence.

The 2024 NILT survey included several new questions which reflect areas of growing concern, such as online safety. Much research, policy and media coverage on this topic have focused on children and young people. In this vein, questions on social media and online safety were included in ARK's Young Life and Times and Kids' Life and Times surveys in 2025 (Butler, Schubotz and McKnight, 2025). However, the NILT findings indicate that online safety is of concern for people of all ages.

While the vast majority of respondents said that they always or mostly felt safe at home, a key finding was that home is not necessarily a place of safety for everyone. At least four in ten respondents who had experienced physical, sexual or psychological violence said that this had occurred in their own home.

The elimination of gender-based violence in all its guises in private, public and digital spaces requires widespread and systemic change. Undoubtedly policy change and targeted legislation are essential in tackling these issues, while the ubiquity of social media in today's world mean that global technology companies also have a role to play. Furthermore, challenging negative attitudes and social norms are very important in helping to prevent gender-based violence. These are undoubtedly areas where all members of our society have a role to play. To this end, public awareness campaigns focused on prevention are becoming more evident, while school curricula offer opportunities to discuss and question gender stereotypes and promote positive, healthy relationships for all.

Key Points:

- 24% of females and 18% of males had experienced some form of gender-based violence in the previous five years.
- Females were more likely to have experienced sexual or psychological violence than males.
- Gender-based violence was most likely to have taken place in the victim's own home or someone else's home.
- 27% of respondents thought it would be very or quite easy to get help and support if they were a victim of gender-based violence, while 32% thought it would be quite or very difficult.
- 62% of respondents said they always felt safe at home, and 37% felt mostly safe.
- 15% always felt safe online, and 71% mostly felt safe.
- Most respondents felt safe in public places during the day, with males more likely to feel this than females.
- The sense of safety was lower after dark, especially among females, and those who had experienced gender-based violence.

References

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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 2024, 1,199 people aged 18 years or over took part. NILT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University 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. The questions on gender-based violence were funded by The Executive Office.



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