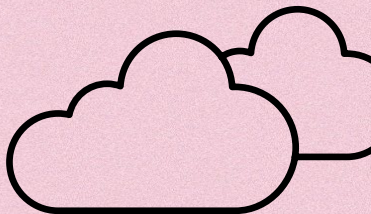


**TOO
INTO
you**



Women's
Aid research
on intimate
relationship abuse
and young people
aged 18 to 25
in Ireland



In 2020 and 2021 Women's Aid, in collaboration with RedC, completed two nationally representative studies¹ on intimate relationship abuse. Based on the findings of these studies Women's Aid published two reports, ***One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse in Ireland*** and ***Yes It's Abuse: Young people's understanding of & attitudes to intimate relationship abuse***. This short document highlights some of the key findings from these studies. This is produced as part of the Women's Aid **Too Into You** Project.



Prevalence

- > **Over half (3 in 5) young people** have experienced, or know someone who has experienced, **intimate relationship abuse**.
- > **1 in 5 young women** and **1 in 11 young men** in Ireland have suffered intimate relationship abuse.
- > In **all cases** where women were subjected to intimate relationship abuse, this abuse was perpetrated by a current or **former intimate male partner**.
- > For young women the abuse lasted, on average, **1.4 years**.
- > **1 in 6 young women** and 1 in 13 young men have been subjected to **coercive control** by a partner or ex-partner. Coercive control is a persistent pattern of controlling, coercive and threatening behaviour by a current or former partner or spouse.
- > **51%** of young women affected first experienced the abuse **under the age of 18**.

¹ Each survey sample had 500 respondents, aged 18-25, 50% female & 50% male. Both survey findings were discussed in detailed focus groups of young women and men.

- > Of the 1 in 5 young women who experienced intimate relationship abuse:
 - × **Emotional abuse** was the **most prominent form**. **9 out of 10** young women were subjected to emotional abuse. Sustained emotional abuse can have even more serious and long-term impacts than physical abuse.
 - × **3 in 4** were **sexually coerced**. Over half (51%) were **sexually assaulted** and 27% were **raped**. It is harder for women who are being abused by their partner to consent and negotiate a free and equal sexual relationship with that partner.
 - × **1 in 2** were **threatened** with physical violence. **1 in 2** experienced 'less severe' physical abuse e.g. **slapping, shoving**. **1 in 3** had experienced more 'severe' forms of physical abuse e.g. **punching, choking, burning**.
 - × Almost **1 in 3** were subjected to **financial abuse**. By controlling a woman's access to economic resources, an abuser can ensure that she is forced to choose between **staying in an abusive relationship** or **facing extreme poverty**.
 - × **1 in 2** had been targeted with **online abuse** which was described as 'draining' and 'exhausting'. **Over half (55%)** were **stalked** and/or **harassed**.

Impact

- > Of the young women who were abused **84%** said that the abuse had a **severe impact** including **loss of self-esteem**, anxiety and depression, **withdrawal from family and friends**, giving up work or college, **suicidal thoughts/attempting suicide**, needing treatment for physical injuries, and **living in fear**.
- > The impact of abuse can be severe, **long lasting** and **life changing** for young women. Abusive partners can prey on vulnerabilities and a controlling or violent partner can cause a huge setback at the beginning of their adult life.

Understanding of Abuse

41% of young people believe that women are most commonly victims of abuse, **29% did not believe this**. A **'gender neutral' analysis** was also articulated in the focus groups, particularly amongst young men. This **contradicts established international evidence** including our own national findings, which showed that intimate relationship abuse against women is much more common, with **1 in 5 young women** compared to 1 in 11 young men having suffered abuse by a current or former partner.



Young people have some **misconceptions** around the **causes of intimate relationship abuse**. For example: the majority (81%) of young people believe that drug and alcohol misuse cause someone to act abusively towards their partner. While drugs and alcohol can exacerbate abuse – they are **not the cause of abusive behaviours**. Studies show that even when using alcohol or drugs abusers can still exercise control by targeting their partner specifically and not others.

Young people also tried to justify abusive behaviours as legitimate to ensure trust in the relationship. Young people believed that insecurity (65%) and jealousy (64%) would cause someone to act abusively towards their intimate partner. **Insecurity is not an excuse for acting abusively** towards a partner, many people can feel insecure and not behave abusively towards others. **Jealousy is a demonstration of 'possessive' feelings** towards a partner, rather than regarding them as an equal. It is considered a potential 'red flag' in a relationship.

Spotting the Warning Signs

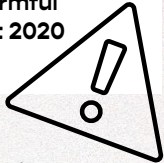
While it is very positive that the majority of young people do identify many of the behaviours that are abusive, only 16% felt sure they could easily spot the warning signs of abuse in other people's relationships and they lack confidence approaching someone they are concerned might be experiencing abuse.

- > **85% agreed that a partner demanding they send intimate images** was a warning sign for abuse, while 10% were unsure if this constituted abuse.
- > **Over 4 in 5 (82%) agreed that a partner getting jealous easily** and accusing their partner of flirting and cheating was a warning sign of abuse. 13% were unsure if this was a warning sign. This is important because **regular expressions of jealousy show possessiveness** rather than trust and equality in a relationship, which is a red flag for abuse.
- > There was some uncertainty in relation to **demanding to look through a partner's phone and knowing someone's passwords**, 57% agreed this was 'definitely a warning sign', 31% said it was 'potentially a warning sign' and 8% were unsure. This indicates **misunderstanding around boundaries and privacy** which are a vital part of a healthy and trusting relationship.



Awareness of Legal Protection

- > More young men (62%) than young women (55%) were aware that non-cohabiting partners could seek legal protection under the **Domestic Violence Act 2018** and that **coercive control is a crime** (40% men vs 33% women).
- > 53% of young people were not aware of new and important legislation, the **Harassment & Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020** (CoCo's law).



Help seeking

- > **3 in 4** young people who have experienced abuse have sought some form of support.
- > **Men are more likely to reach out for support than women** (84% vs 68%).
- > 32% of young women **never spoke to anyone** about the abuse they experienced.
- > The main sources of support for young people experiencing abuse are **friends and family**.
- > Common **barriers** to seeking support for young women include **losing trust** in their own judgement, **fearing for safety**, feeling **ashamed** and being **unsure where to turn**.
- > 50% of young people are **not aware of specialist supports** for intimate relationship abuse.

Supporting someone else

- > 4 in 5 young people believe that many of those experiencing abuse do so in **silence** and **don't seek support**.
- > The majority of young people feel a **responsibility to intervene** if they are concerned a close friend might be experiencing intimate relationship abuse.
- > 20% of males and 8% of females believed that it is **not their business to intervene** in any relationship where they suspect abuse.
- > Young people have **concerns** which might prevent them from intervening including: fears around making the situation worse (73%), **misreading the signs of abuse** (48%), saying the wrong thing (42%), and a lack of awareness of how to help (43%).
- > 61% said that if they **knew what to say** and had confidence in how to **start the conversation** (56%), it would help them approach someone they were worried about.

Recommendations

- > Young women are **most at risk** of violence and abuse in their own **intimate relationships with men**. The social systems and structures that increase their risk should be acknowledged, to contextualise wider conversations around allyship, prevention, intervention, education and consent.
- > There is a clear need to **work more with young people** on intimate relationship abuse, to raise awareness of supports available, to support their awareness and understanding of what abuse looks like, and to **empower them** to feel more confidence to check in on their peers if they suspect abuse is present in an

intimate relationship. This is essential so that the **experiences of victim/survivors are centered** and not side-lined by focusing on ‘explaining’ the motivations of abusers or ‘fixing’ them.

- > Intimate relationship abuse is a **highly gendered issue**. Young people must be taught about **healthy and unhealthy relationships** in the context of promoting greater **gender equality**, respect and mutuality. Relationships and Sexuality Education that supports young people, from young ages, to **critically examine gender norms** is essential to dismantle belief systems that justify and enable some men’s violence.
- > **Education and public awareness** of the serious harms of abuse in intimate relationships amongst young people is needed, including; **proactive offers of appropriate supports** to combat barriers to help-seeking. Emphasising the fact that abuse is **not the fault of the victim** is required to empower victims/survivors to speak out about their experiences and seek support.
- > **Everyone has a role to play**. We need to build a **collaboration involving boys, girls, men and women** working to challenge those who do abuse, behaviours that normalise and minimise abuse - but also, vitally; to model the healthy, mutual, positive and respectful relationships which are those that we aspire to for everyone in their friendships and their intimate relationships.

You can read the full reports at **WomensAid.ie**

Learn more at **ToolIntoYou.ie**

Women’s Aid Instant Messaging Service

available daily at **ToolIntoYou.ie**

24hr National Freephone Helpline **1800 341 900**