



# POLICY BRIEF

Education to Prevent  
Intimate Partner Violence  
*in the UK*



*University of*  
**HUDDERSFIELD**  
Inspiring global professionals

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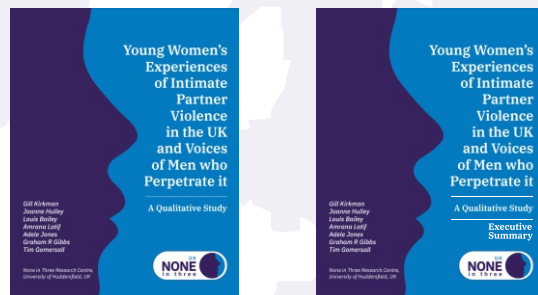
# THE POLICY CHALLENGE

**This Policy Brief** is drawn from research on intimate partner violence (IPV) conducted by the None in Three Research Centre UK ([www.noneinthree.org/united-kingdom/](http://www.noneinthree.org/united-kingdom/)). The studies include two systematic reviews of the existing literature and a primary qualitative study with survivors and perpetrators of IPV carried out in 2018-19. One of the systematic reviews focused on the qualitative evidence on the impact of IPV on survivors and the other explored the efficacy of schools-based programmes to prevent IPV.

The primary research involved:

- **in-depth interviews** with 52 female and three male survivors of IPV; and
- **focus groups** with 19 male perpetrators of IPV.

**The Executive Summary** and **full report** on the primary research, entitled “Young Women's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence in the UK and the Voices of Men who Perpetrate it”, are both available here: [www.noneinthree.org/united-kingdom/resource/](http://www.noneinthree.org/united-kingdom/resource/)



Information about the broader policy context available at: [www.noneinthree.org/united-kingdom/uk-policy-hub/](http://www.noneinthree.org/united-kingdom/uk-policy-hub/)

# UNITED KINGDOM

**IPV is a severe problem in the UK**, in terms of both its prevalence and potential consequences for those who are victimised. While IPV can affect anyone, women and girls of all ethnicities and backgrounds are disproportionately represented among those victimised.

Many survivors have experienced routine abuse, being controlled and living in fear, all because of their gender. The impact of IPV is broad ranging, continuing post separation with potential devastating long-term effects on survivors' physical and psychological health.

**Young people aged 16-24 experience the highest rates of IPV** out of any age group. They often face challenges in their intimate relationships due to their lack of education, maturity, and prior relationship experience.

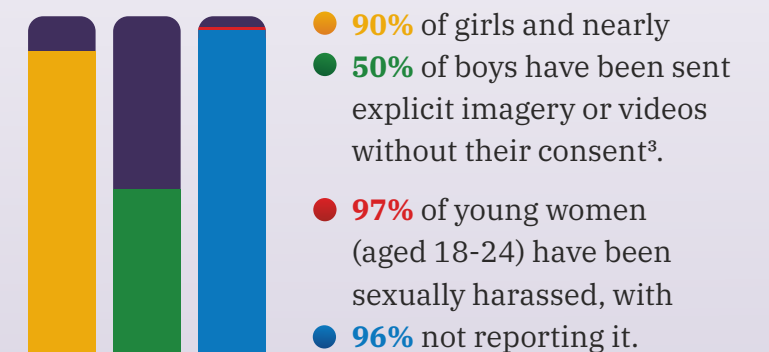
They are influenced by peers who normalise abusive behaviours in intimate relationships and as digital natives, they are heavy users of communication technologies which are used to control and coerce.

**A multifaceted approach is needed** to provide education, increase awareness, and prevent harmful attitudes and behaviours developing in young people's relationships.

**The policy recommendations in this document aim to support the Government in achieving these objectives.**



- Young people normalise abuse in their relationships, with **47%** of girls stating that physical violence towards them was acceptable in certain circumstances (e.g. after flirting with another boy or liking their post online)<sup>2</sup>.



<sup>1</sup>Refuge & Avon, (2017). Define the Line <https://www.refuge.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/define-the-line/> <sup>2</sup>(GirlGuidesurvey, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Ofsted Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges (2021) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

<sup>4</sup>APPG Report for UN Women UK (2021) Prevalence and reporting of sexual harassment in UK public spaces [https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women\\_Sexual-Harassment-Report\\_2021.pdf](https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women_Sexual-Harassment-Report_2021.pdf)

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR FINDINGS

## Experiences of IPV

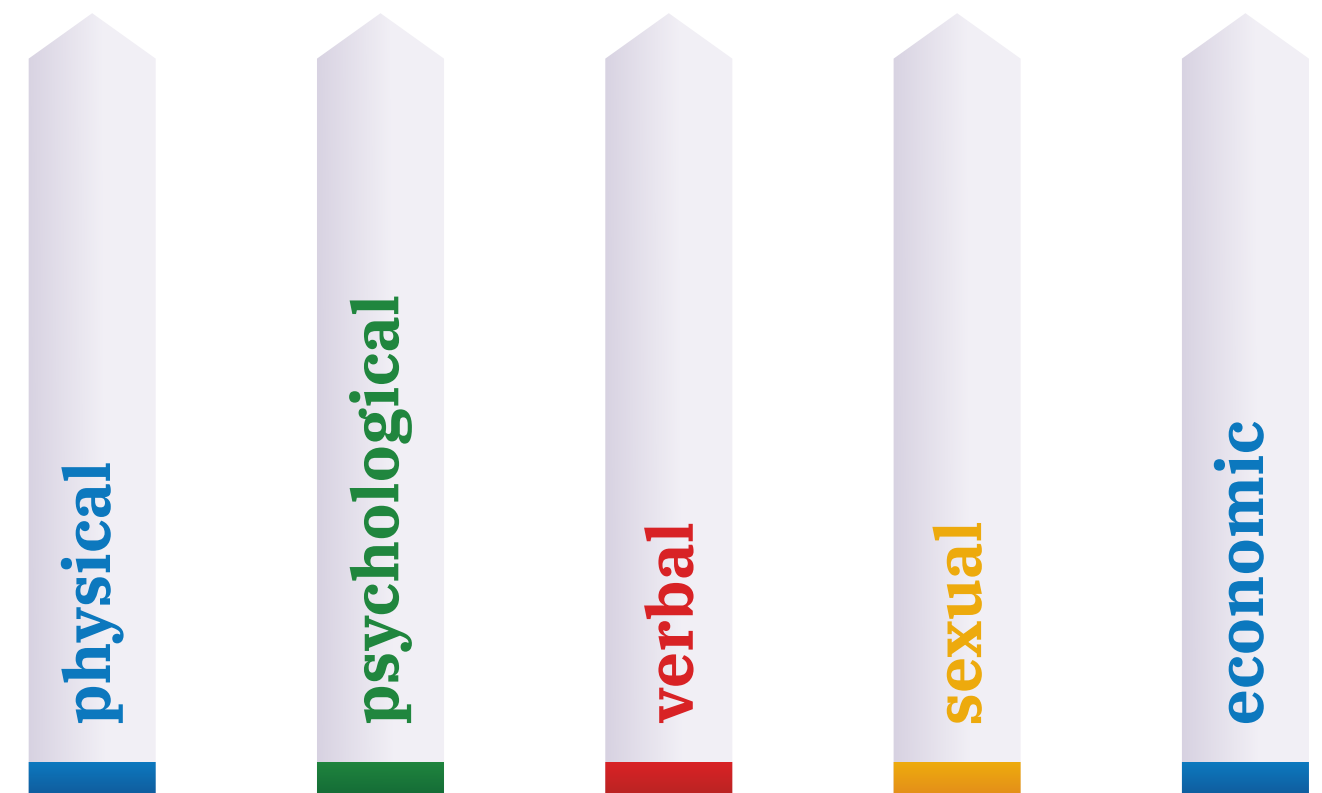
- **IPV is rarely a one-off event**, but rather a **calculated** and **sustained pattern** of unacceptable abusive behaviours.
- Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to IPV and are especially at **risk of exploitation** by older men.
- Feeling controlled by their partner and being subjected to terror were very much part of survivors' experiences of abuse and were the **two main barriers** to help seeking.
- Having once dated or lived with a perpetrator of abuse, women are **more at risk of re-victimisation**.
- **Repeated rape was experienced by most women**, although they rarely described sexual violation as rape. This was due to dominant myths about the classification of rape ('stranger danger') and the acceptance of norms about men's sexual entitlement.
- **Patterns of grooming** ('love bombing') were identifiable across the lifespan of an abusive relationship. These were used variously to seduce, coerce, and **entrap victims**.
- **Controlling behaviours** often began subtly with small acts before **escalating** to a point where a victim's social world, personal identity and autonomy were significantly curtailed.
- **Patterns of controlling behaviour** by perpetrators led to and/or exacerbated low self-esteem in their partners. This led to a further cycle of emotional dependency, poor mental health and low self-worth, which in turn was **exploited** by abusive partners.

*According to both survivors and perpetrators,*

***normalisation of violence and rigid understandings of masculinity***

*were the two main factors contributing to men's use of violence within intimate partner relationships.*

- **Mobile phones and social networking** technologies provided abusers with additional ways to control, harass and intimidate their victims. **Technology-facilitated abuse** became the primary means for perpetrators to continue their campaign of terror through coercive control long after a relationship had ended.
- Perpetrators used **women's mental health issues**, real<sup>5</sup> and projected, as a weapon to further abuse, confuse and undermine their victim (gaslighting), to prevent disclosures of abuse to health service providers (such as GPs or A&E staff), and to **manipulate** social workers and the family court to present themselves as the more 'stable' parent in contact/custody disputes.



- **Men who had undertaken IPV perpetrator programmes** spoke highly of them, but in many instances, they continued to speak in ways that minimised their abusive behaviour (e.g. only disclosing one incident of abuse, blaming their actions on the victim or attributing it to a 'red mist of anger and loss of control'). There was also a tendency for perpetrators to **regurgitate phrases** they had learnt from the programmes, but without having necessarily learned the intended lessons.

**IPV involved a continuum of abusive behaviours**, comprising combinations of multiple forms of abuse including:

- physical
- psychological
- verbal
- sexual and
- economic abuse

<sup>5</sup>In most cases any real mental health issues were a result of the violence and abuse women had experienced at the hands of their partner.



## Effects of IPV

- The impact of living with **violent and abusive men** was described by the women as traumatic, terrifying and life-changing.
- **Control, manipulation, anticipation and fear**, often experienced daily, kept women in a constant state of heightened alertness, generating problems with sleep and day-to-day functioning.
- **Sexual violence**, often accompanied by **verbal abuse**, was noted as having an enduring impact.
- Loss of **self-esteem, low self-worth**, and a **lack of self-confidence** were commonly reported.
- The interviewees reported that their **mental health was severely impacted**. Diagnoses of depression and/or anxiety, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder and PTSD were common. Several women had self-harmed, engaged in suicidal ideation, or had attempted suicide.



The reported **impact of IPV on women's mental health** was severe. Significant health issues resulting from the abuse left women lacking in self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence, which **enhanced their vulnerability** to further abuse.

## Impact on Children

- **One third of the women in the study had experienced abuse as children**, which they associated with becoming a victim of IPV in later life due to the normalisation of violence. Therefore, violence was deemed something to be expected in the context of intimate relationships.
- Several of the interviewees had their own children and shared their observations of the **negative impact of IPV** on their children.
- IPV emerged as a **significant child welfare issue**. Living with an abusive father left children feeling fearful, which resulted in emotional distress and some behavioural issues.
- Some children try to protect their mother from their father's violence and, in the process, find themselves at **considerable risk of accidental or intentional harm** perpetrated by their father to cause further distress to the mother.
- Sons sometimes imitated their father's behaviour and, as they grew older, behaved **disrespectfully towards their mother**, creating concerns for mothers that their sons would also become abusive to women.
- **Survivors of IPV** who themselves were mothers expressed concerns that their daughters might become **susceptible to victimisation** within intimate relationships as they grew older on account of witnessing their mother's victimisation.
- Most **male perpetrators** interviewed had **witnessed IPV** and/or had **experienced abuse** during their formative years.
- In nearly all cases, these **men's experiences of abuse** were characterised as being perpetrated by an **older male** (father, uncle, schoolteacher) and appeared to provide a blueprint for their subsequent behaviour.
- Children were often the main reason female survivors of IPV decided to seek help: when they realised the impact on their child's behaviour; when the perpetrator inflicted direct harm towards their child; or **threats to kill** included the children.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## Develop the Role of Schools and Education

Young people spend a considerable proportion of their lives in educational environments, providing the context in which many form their first intimate relationships. **Schools therefore have a vital role** in enabling young people to learn about healthy and unhealthy relationships. The PSHE curriculum and mandatory Relationship and Sex Education (SRE) agenda **aim to equip young people** to manage the complexities of their relationships and their role in society, however IPV remains a concerning and immediate issue to address.

The following recommendations should be developed within a **clearly defined school strategy** of zero tolerance against sexual harassment and abuse. Young people themselves should be engaged in developing this, and parents informed. With such a strategy, schools can then form effective policies around expected behaviour, with **consequences** for not meeting expectations. Education and training for school staff in dealing with issues relating to sexual harassment and IPV is also essential.



equip

engage

educate

### Schools and colleges should:

#### 1. Enhance children's social and emotional well-being

- Build children's **self-esteem** and **sense of autonomy**
- Foster children's development of emotional intelligence

#### 2. Model and encourage respectful interpersonal styles

- Enable children to develop non-adversarial conflict **resolution skills** from an early age
- Provide **opportunities to develop** their understanding of healthy relationships, highlighting the characteristics of abuse, grooming and coercive control
- Encourage children to **respect the autonomy and opinions** of others
- **Teach** respect, permission and consent in relationships

#### 3. Challenge gender inequality

- Empower young people to **recognise their self-worth** and **equal status**, regardless of gender and sexual orientation
- Encourage boys to develop **healthy expressions** of their masculinity
- Equip girls and boys to **recognise and speak up** against gender inequalities
- **Dispel** rigid binary conceptions of gender and avoid gender stereotyping
- **Challenge dominant views** about masculinity and femininity that are built on perceptions of dominance and submissiveness

#### 4. Challenge victim-blaming discourses and tendencies

- **Refrain** from conceptualising problems in ways that place the **onus on potential victims** to prevent someone else from abusing them
- Foster development of **victim-empathy**
- **Create safe spaces** for children to take responsibility for their actions that have negative consequences for others

#### 5. Encourage safe and effective bystander behaviours

- Build young people's confidence in **recognising the signs** of abusive behaviour and give them strategies for safely intervening or eliciting support from others to protect their peers

#### 6. Encourage help-seeking behaviours

- **Signpost young people** to individuals within the school who are skilled to help them and/or refer them to specialist sources of support
- **Create opportunities** for private disclosures

These recommendations can and should be built into (but not limited to) **delivery of the SRE curriculum**, covering the abusive behaviours that can be exhibited across all types of relationships, and ensuring debate and discussion on the current cultural influences on young people that we know influence behaviours, such as music videos, social media and films, as well as pornography.

Education providers should aim to select programmes **addressing these issues** that are empirically-informed and have been (or are being) robustly evaluated in terms of their efficacy.

*Such programmes need to be identified by Government and promoted/made available to schools.*

## Raising Public Awareness of IPV

There is a need for government-funded public awareness campaigns to:

- **build understanding** of IPV as a form of gender-based violence,
- **encourage bystander** intervention and
- **create an environment** that is responsive to the help-seeking behaviours of people affected by IPV.

This could also be targeted at the places young people frequent and the staff who could crucially intervene, acknowledging the fact that cycles of IPV often begin in young people's dating relationships.

### Awareness campaign strategy

- **Utilise mass media**, including television and social media advertising, to promote the idea that violence against women is a public health issue and is everyone's business.
- **Facilitate men's engagement** with, and support of, policies that protect and promote women's rights.

### Suggested campaign content

- **Share women's stories** about the abuse they have faced and the obstacles they have overcome, to counter the myths around IPV and victim blaming.
- Point out the more **covert** kinds of violence.
- Highlight the **negative impacts** of masculine identities based on male dominance and having control over others, particularly girls and women.
- Highlight that abusers are often manipulative and **good at presenting** themselves as charming, likeable, 'normal'.
- **Challenge perceptions** by showing that IPV is perpetrated and experienced by people from all socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Challenge** bystander apathy/encouraging bystander intervention.



None in Three is a global research centre which develops and evaluates prosocial games to prevent gender-based violence. It is based at the University of Huddersfield; the project which produced this work was funded by the UK Government's Global Challenges Research Fund through UK Research and Innovation, in an international partnership including institutions in India, Jamaica, Uganda and the UK.

The Centre takes its name from the fact that, according to the World Health Organisation, one in three women and girls are subject to physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. We aim to make this none in three.



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