

**Research In Brief No. #:**  
**Young Peoples Attitudes Towards Gendered Violence**

### **1. The background**

This research summary is based on research carried out by Michele Burman and Fred Cartmel from the University of Glasgow. It reports on research with young people living in Scotland (14 to 18) who were asked for their views about different kinds of violent, coercive and abusive acts and behaviours that may occur in the domestic sphere and also, outside the home, between those involved in intimate relationships. The research explores the young peoples' views on possible reasons for and effects of violence in certain contexts and situations and, in particular, their views concerning the acceptability of such violence.

### **2. The approach**

The research had two aims;

- to provide an overview of young peoples' attitudes concerning gendered violence in order to assess whether there have been any changes in attitudes to those documented by an earlier study which documented wide-spread acceptance of forced sex and physical violence against women, and a marked readiness on the part of young people to blame women for men's violence towards them (Burton et al, 1998).
- to examine attitudes towards violence and sexual coercion that occurs within young people's own intimate relationships.

The research was carried out in ten secondary schools in four Scottish Education Authorities, a Further Education College and in youth group settings. The report draws on a questionnaire-based survey (n=1395) and twelve focus group discussions. In structure and content, the questionnaire was informed by similar studies conducted in Britain, the US and Australia. Fifty five per cent of those who completed the questionnaire were female and forty-five per cent were male. Three fifths (61%) lived with both parents, and almost a quarter (24%) lived with a single parent. Eighty nine percent described themselves as 'white', and eleven per cent were from an ethnic minority background.

### **3. The key findings**

#### **Attitudes To Different Forms of Violence**

Young people tended to consider most forms of violence to be 'very serious', particularly sexual assault/rape, fights between husband and wife, racially motivated violence, and sectarian violence. The majority of youths also indicated they did not agree with the use of any physical violence, unless it was used to defend oneself.

Males appeared more likely than females to condone the use of violence in conflict situations.

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- More than twice as many males as females (33% to 15%) agreed with the statement *'it might not be right, but threatening to hit someone gets you what you want'*.

- Almost three quarters of males (compared to slightly more than half females) agreed with the statement *'you have to stick up for yourself, and sometimes this means getting violent'*.
- Three times as many males as females (38% to 12%) strongly agreed with the statement, *'some people deserve to get hit.'*

Young women considered all forms of violence more serious than males.

- Rape and sexual assault was considered *'very serious'* by a high proportion of all young people, although females (98%) were more likely than males (93%) to consider it so.
- Similarly, more females (81%) than males (72%) regarded domestic abuse as *'very serious'*; almost two-thirds of females compared to one half of males were more likely to consider physical fighting between boyfriend and girl friend in a dating relationship *'very serious'*;
- Slightly more females (72%) than males (70%) regarded racially motivated violence as *'very serious'*.
- Two-thirds of both males and females viewed sectarian violence as *'very serious'*.

### **Violence in Young Peoples' Relationships**

The majority of young people reported they had 'never' experienced or inflicted physical violence within the context of their own relationships. Young people, of both genders, reported experiencing verbal and emotional abuse and physical violence within the context of their own relationships. 12% of young people reported that they had been hurt or frightened within the context of a fight or argument with their partner.

- 40% of females had been yelled at by a boyfriend, and over a third stated that they had been put down or humiliated by their boyfriend.
- 9% of girls reported being kicked, bit or hit by their boyfriend,
- 16 % of females reported being pushed grabbed or shoved.
- 10% reported their partner tried to force them to have sex
- 3% reported that their boyfriend had actually forced them to have sex.
- Over half of young men reported being yelled at by their girlfriend, and 28% reported being put down or humiliated at least once.
- 20% of young men said that their girlfriend tried to hit them with something; just under a fifth reported that they had been kicked, bit or hit.
- Almost a third of young men reported that their girlfriend had slapped them; and one quarter said that they had been pushed, grabbed or shoved.

Young women were significantly more likely to report inflicting verbal and emotional abuse and violence on their partner, than the young men

- Over half of young women reported yelling loudly at their partner (compared to two fifth of young men)
- 16% of young women and 6% of young men report slapping their partner;
- 11% of young women and 5% of young men report that they have threatened to hit their partner

A relatively small proportion of young people reported experiencing, and conducting coercive sex. As may be expected, young women were more likely to report this

- 10% of females said that their boyfriend had tried to force them to have sex, with 3% saying that their boyfriend had forced them to have sex
- 5% of males admitted trying to force their girlfriends to have sex at least once; with 4% reporting that they had managed to force sex
- 2% of females said they had forced their boyfriend to have sex

### **Provoking Violence**

Although attitudes are not as marked as those found by Burton et al (1998) the findings still point to a belief by some young people that women's actions may provoke violence by men. This does not imply that such violence is considered acceptable. It does, however, point to the pervasiveness of beliefs about victim precipitation in general, and 'woman-blaming' in particular.

One in five young men believe that women 'often' provoke violence;

- A quarter of young men believe that women 'often' provoke violence by nagging,
- A third believe that women 'sometimes' provoke violence by the way that they dress, as did over a third of young women.
- Half of the young women felt that women 'sometimes' provoke violence by flirting with other men, as did 46% of young men.
- One in five males and slightly more than one in four females believe that males 'often' provoke violence by females by 'pushing women too far'.
- Over half of females hold the view that men 'sometimes' provoke violence by nagging, and nearly half of males share this view.

### **Domestic Abuse**

Many young people acknowledge domestic abuse to be a very pervasive problem, affecting all kinds of households, across all cultures, and incomes. On the whole, this research found evidence of a more informed view amongst young people of the many types of abuse, and less tolerance of gendered violence than was evidenced in the earlier study by Burton et al (1998).

In the focus group discussions, young people put forward a diverse collection of practices as examples of violent behaviour, including extreme acts of interpersonal physical violence and sexual violence. They also identified emotional and psychological factors, signalling a clear recognition that a wide range of behaviours, practices and orientations can be considered domestic abuse. There was also an acknowledgement of the cumulative nature of domestic abuse, with recognition that it increases in severity, and that domestic abuse is very rarely a one-off event.

Young people believe domestic abuse to be widespread; that it is not restricted to particular areas or indeed to any particular family configuration or socio economic status of families. Young women's estimates tend to be higher than young men's. Perceived prevalence increases with age, for both genders.

In the focus groups, most young people identified 'stress' factors as a major causal factor that can lead to abuse within the home, although more young women tended to

put forward more structural explanations referring to 'patriarchal society' and 'gender relations' as reasons for violence against women in general. For many young people, domestic abuse and alcohol are inextricably linked, with alcohol seen as a 'trigger' precipitating abuse.

There was a relatively high awareness of the deleterious and damaging effects of domestic abuse, both on an individual and a wider social level. Many young people referred to domestic abuse leading to depression, lack of self-esteem, and homelessness.

### **Tolerance And Acceptability Of Violence Against Women**

In the focus group discussions, the majority of young people expressed a very low tolerance towards violence, at a conceptual level. That said, however, it became evident that as discussion became more focused some young people displayed a higher tolerance for violence against women that occurred within certain contexts, in particular when the woman, through her actions (or inaction) may be perceived as having 'pushed the man too far'. This was also borne out by the survey findings. The questionnaire findings suggest that female violence towards men is condoned more readily than male violence towards women. A relatively small proportion of young people responded that the man has a *right to hit* a woman under any of the circumstances presented. Yet 20% of males and 17% of females believe that a woman has a right to hit a man if he hits her (compared to 4% males and 7% females who chose this option in circumstances where a man hits a woman). 16% of males and 11% of females felt that a woman has a right to hit a man where he throws something at her (compared to 5% of males and 3% of females in circumstances where a woman throws something at a man), and; 11% of males and 10% of females believe that a woman has a right to hit a man where he admits to having sex with someone else (compared to 8% of males and 3% of females in circumstances where a woman admits to sex with someone else).

## **4. The Main Themes**

Young peoples' attitudes towards violence and domestic abuse are complex and sometimes contradictory. Whilst, in a general sense, most young people view violence and abuse negatively, it is clear that, for some types of violence and abuse, in some situations, they consider it acceptable and, perhaps, justifiable. This is not so dissimilar to the findings of Burton et al (1998) and others that have researched young peoples' views about violence.

Despite improvements in the extent of public awareness and understanding in Scotland, there remains some misunderstanding amongst young people of the nature of domestic abuse, and in particular the processes of victimisation. Some young people continue to consider that women and girls provoke violence and abuse through their own actions, or inactions, and could be to blame for the violence that they experience at the hands of men.

More encouragingly, there was evidence in this research that many young people acknowledge domestic abuse to be a very pervasive problem, affecting all kinds of households, across all cultures, and incomes. There was evidence of a more informed view amongst young people of the many types of violence and abuse that that can be characterised as domestic abuse, including forms of financial, emotional, sexual,

physical and psychological abuse. On the whole, this research found less tolerance of gendered violence than was evidenced in the earlier study by Burton et al (1998) and in this regard, attitudes seemed to have improved.

### **5. The next steps**

It is intended that the findings from this research will inform the development of strategies, initiatives and resources by the national and local organisations and the Scottish Executive for working with young people to challenge and prevent violence.

### **6. Finding out more**

A full report, entitled 'Young Peoples Attitudes Towards Gendered Violence' is available at [www.hebs.com/research/cr/](http://www.hebs.com/research/cr/). Copies of other research in briefs are available at [www.hebs.com/research/pd/](http://www.hebs.com/research/pd/). If you would like more information or have any comments, please contact HEBS Research Administrator (rls@hebs.scot.nhs.uk) quoting reference number 2003/2004 RE024.

#### **Reference:**

Burton, S., Kitzinger, J., Kelly, L. and Regan, L. (1998) *Young People's Attitudes Towards Violence, Sex and Relationships* Zero Tolerance Charitable Trust: Edinburgh