

# Young people's attitudes about violence



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## Young people's attitudes about violence

Men's violence against women is a global social problem and an enduring human rights issue. Feminist research and activism has maintained that to challenge and prevent men's violence against women, changing attitudes and behaviour are key. This briefing outlines a project that examined the views of Scottish 11 and 12 year olds about violence.

### Key points

- Young people can and did speak confidently and articulately on a range of related topics. This is despite professional's concerns that 11 and 12 year olds would know little about violence
- Young people defined 'real' violence as physical acts done by men that had legal consequences. As a consequence much of the violence experienced or perpetrated by themselves, as young people, was minimised, normalised and regarded as 'unreal'
- Young people subscribed to naturalised definitions of masculinity to explain (rather than question) why men were violent
- Young people justified men's violence against women using gender stereotypes and a rigid understanding of adult relationships framed by heterosexuality and marriage
- Young girls had ambition and felt, presently, there were few restrictions to achieving their goals. They saw this as changing dramatically however when they were married and had children

### The study

The aims of the research were:

- Finding ways to talk to younger people about violence to confront and challenge the 'everyday' occurrence and acceptability of male violence against women
- To challenge the perception that 11 and 12 year olds are too young to 'know' about violence or to offer opinions on it

The fieldwork took place over a period of six months involving 89 young people in five primary schools in Glasgow. Three main methods were used:

#### An exploratory questionnaire

This provided an opportunity to explore what the young people already knew about the topic and explore their preliminary attitudes. Their answers and ideas were then used as the basis for the discussion groups.

#### Discussion groups based upon friendship groups

The sessions took place among friends, ensuring a safe and trusted environment. This format enabled the young people to have a space to explore their own and others' attitudes more reflexively and to question, agree and challenge the responses of others.

#### Three vignettes

Vignettes, or short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, were used to broaden the discussion topics to include actual examples of violence against women, and to uncover and explore the young people's understandings of these.

### What the young people said

#### "Violence is only perpetrated by adult men"

For an act to be considered 'violent' by the young people it typically had to fulfil certain criteria. These criteria normally included acts performed by adult men, in an outside space, and involving physical actions. These acts would normally result in visible injury ending with police intervention and consequence such as an arrest.

#### "Adults and authority define real violence"

The young people saw a difference between violence perpetrated and experienced by adults and violence between young people. They felt that adult legal consequences identified violence between adults as more serious.

Simon: If a boy, well if a girl hits a boy, the boy can't do anything cos it's the law.

Jason: No that's only if you are a man but ...

Craig: If a boy hits a girl well that's it, but if a man hits the woman he can go to jail for it.

This raises important questions about the young people's lack of knowledge of their own rights. It also creates and sustains a belief among young people that 'real' violence is rarely committed or experienced by them personally. This is because the acts are not always witnessed, labelled or condemned by 'authority'. Young people anticipated and accepted the role of (adult) authority in defining 'real' violence for them.

Whilst the young people were most likely to label adult actions as 'real' violence, actions that took place at school between boys were often defined in the same way because they followed the same sequence of events as their experience of adult violence. Incidents often involved two or more boys, fighting physically in the yard or in an area or the school that was not (or very rarely) the classroom. Teachers, or dinner ladies broke up the violence and the boys were chastised. It was this intervention by 'authority' that was the key to acts being labelled as 'real' violence.

### “Violence between young people isn't real violence”

The young people were adverse to physical violence that resulted in pain or physical injury and their discussions in the groups reflected this stance. However, time and time again, the same young people told of violent interactions with their siblings, or among their peers. Such interactions were either regarded as dummy fighting or 'unreal' violence.

These actions were proximate to the young people and perpetrated by those known by them and close to them. They occurred in spaces that were known to them – homes, schools, playgrounds, and involved those of a similar age but not always the same gender. Because all these factors rendered the experience as common it also colluded to construct the experience as invisible, 'unreal' and served to invalidate and minimise many of the young people's own experiences of violence and violent behaviour.

John: Like girls won't talk to you for ages, just cos you've given them a bruise on their arm.

Several of the young people disclosed violence that they had used against their peers and that they felt justified in doing so.

Sandeep: You sometimes hit a girl if you get annoyed if they say something to you.

Iain: Because boys always use carry on fighting and say I hit him it wouldn't really hurt him. Boys always carry on fight. If I go and hit a girl, they start crying and say that I am abusing her.

Emma: Sometimes they do it with us like sometimes they come up and punch you.

[All talking at once]

Cheryl: And I say just 'Go Away!' And he just ignores me and keeps on hitting me.

In all of the young people's narratives they talked about violence that was 'not real', 'a kid on' or 'carry on' or 'dummy fighting'. They associated this form of 'violence' with their peers, other young people and particularly with their siblings.

Raswana: If its your brother, you just fight cos its for a wee laugh, but you never actually fight properly like punch cos I could never hit him back like he hits me

### “Men are naturally violent”

The young people thought violence was a prerequisite of masculine identity. These intrinsic attributes of 'being a man' were also drawn upon to explain girls' violence (as unnatural or 'non' violence) because of their lack of masculinity.

Grace: It's not natural for girls to hit each other but ... it's natural for boys to hit each other 'cos they are always fighting.

For many of the young people, there was a 'natural' linear progression from boys turning into men and becoming potentially violent. Violence was the physical embodiment of strength (and weakness) and the anticipation of certain acceptable displays of masculinity, such as anger or showing off.

Yet these examples of violence as 'natural' jarred with discussions of their own lives and experiences. For example, when the young people talked about boys they knew (or their own experience of being boys themselves) they discussed masculine identities as being socially constructed roles rather than natural or innate elements of being a man. Indeed many of the boys considered such attributes of masculinity as unobtainable and struggled with the expectation that they should perpetrate or experience violence as part of their gender role performance.

Paul: One of the things I don't like about being a boy is like well men they get a reputation from a few people and after that, like people think that almost every single boy could be like that so that's how they get their name for it.

When girls talked of violence they talked of 'boys' as well as 'men'. Boys were much more likely to only refer to 'men'. They tried to deliberately redefine the boundaries of violence and to exclude themselves from its perpetration.

## Policy/research implications

- Young people's views demonstrate the need to engage with primary school children on a national level. Encourage the promotion of positive, respectful relationships and the prevention of violence through engaging with the new Curriculum for Excellence (Scotland), in particular the elements which draw upon healthy relationships, issues of control and sex education.
- Connect and work with children's organisations (and primary schools) to look at challenging sibling violence. Tolerance of sibling violence seems to support tolerance of young men's violence towards women. This needs to be brought onto the public agenda and critiqued in the same way that domestic abuse was in the 1970s.

- The findings highlighted that where gender divisions and stereotypes were perpetuated, the young people were less likely to challenge men's violence against women. Therefore, the promotion of gender equality and the reduction of gender segregation is key. For example the use of (and exclusion from) space in the playground and discouraging gender division within schools, such as ending the practice of single sex lining up; different activities for boys and girls and encouraging playtime activities and sport for all..
- The role of the adult in validating what is 'real' violence. This needs to be taken into consideration for how teachers and school staff chastise some behaviour within schools and minimise others.

### “Much of men's violence against women is justified”

#### ‘It's ok because they're together’

Young people understood men's violence by examining the motivations of the individual through the context of heterosexuality. Many of the young people's understandings of heterosexual relationships were based upon issues of owning and belonging further legitimating a man's entitlement. Marriage was a validation of this belief and a created a metaphor for possession.

Raymond: [discussing vignette 1] Cos he'd be like, she's mine and she's wearing my ring and like she's my wife and this is what I married cos she's beautiful.

Lucy: But she's only been seeing him for four months, it's not like she is technically his.

As well as discourses of ownership and possession, heterosexual relationships were also constructed with an expectation of a man's sense of entitlement, which was further used to justify men's abusive and violent behaviour. Power was often conceptualised in terms of the rights that were available and that men were entitled to possess.

Sally: He shouldn't have hit her. That's so wrong. What he should do is push her and say next time I want my dinner ready.

#### ‘It's ok because she deserves it’

Young people framed their understanding of men's violence against women as the result of women's lack of obedience, or not doing what they were told.

Lily: Because they're a couple, she should do what he says.

This gender regime unequivocally positions men in a position of power, with the focus upon the woman's failing

in her expected gender role, rather than the man being wrong. Young people often constructed the violence used by men against women to be an anticipated consequence of gendered inequality endorsed by expectations of male entitlement, obedience, regulation, control, ownership and possession. It is by understanding heterosexuality in this way that young people go on to blame women for violence perpetrated against them.

Craig: Well she's been cheating on him so she deserves it.

Daniel: Yeah, she deserves it.

### “When I'm a woman ...”

Girls in particular see their futures as limited and their ambitions curtailed because of their understanding of anticipated gender roles and future relationships. Their own understandings and expectations of gender were shaped by their experiences and their anticipation of their future lives. The young people were most likely to view their gendered identities as constantly evolving and more fluid, with a range of identities available to them rather than being constrained by a singular identity. Yet they see these identities became more rigid, and less plural, as they get older, are in relationships and have children.

Lucy: I mean now I have lots of friends, girls and boys. But when I'm older, like when I am married, I'll probably just have one friend and it'll be a woman.

Sarah: At the moment I want to be a dancer or a doctor [ ... ] When I grow up I'll going to have two babies and work part time in the shop down the road.

The heterosexual partnership and the gender roles within such relationships, become more structured, fixed and rigid and acceptable for the young people (male and female) when aligned with marriage, the private sphere of the home and children.