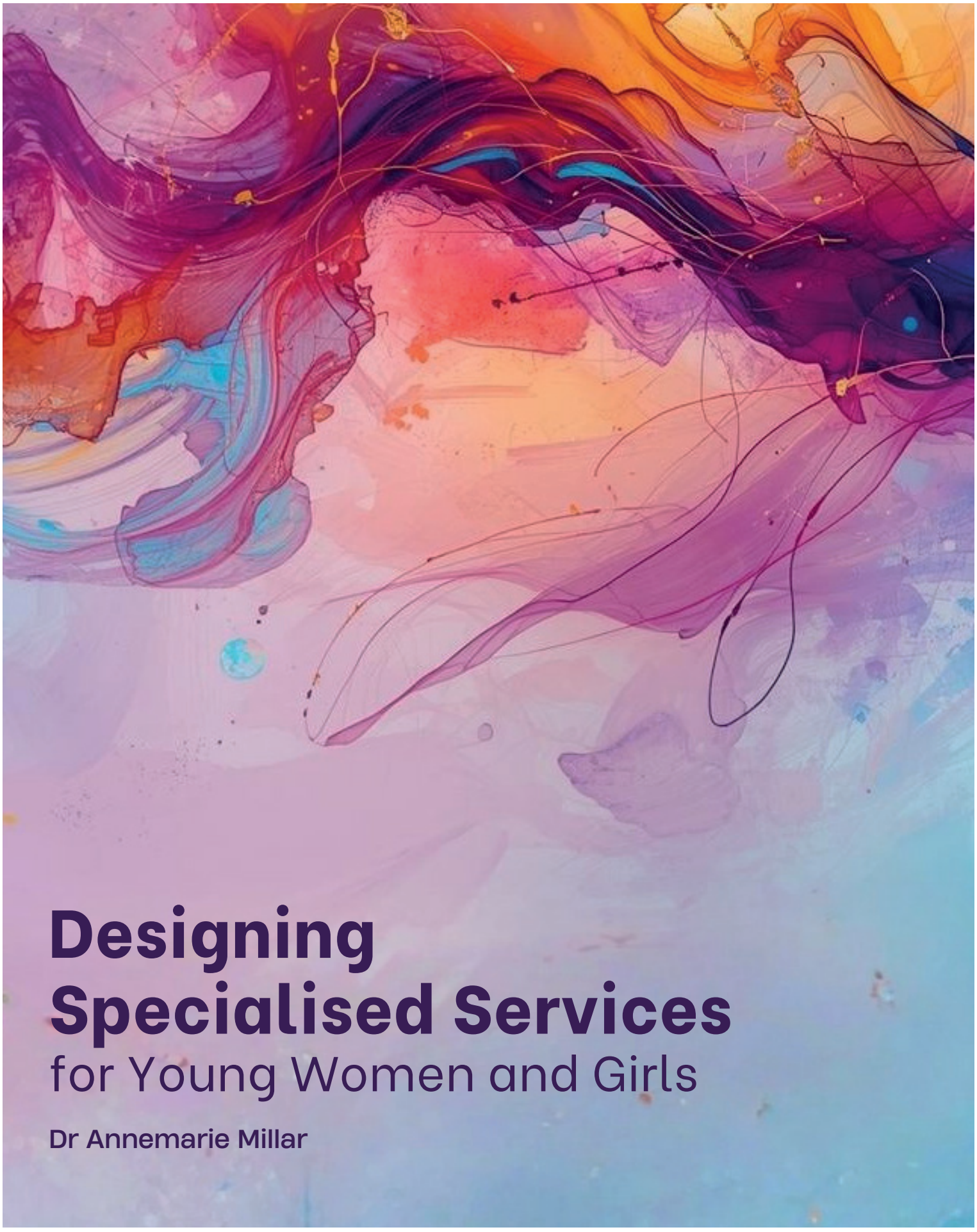


Designing Specialised Services

for Young Women and Girls

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Designing Specialised Services for Young Women and Girls

Dr Annemarie Millar

"Early [relationship] experiences leave scars."

"If someone were to stick a label on me—I don't think that I would ever be able to let it go, like it would always be a part of me."

This research was commissioned by Women's Aid Armagh Down Ltd and funded by the Department of Justice Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy Small Grant Scheme 24/25.







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Executive Summary

Designing Specialised Services for Young Women and Girls

Dr Annemarie Millar | Commissioned by Women's Aid Armagh Down Ltd

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Purpose of the Research

This qualitative consultation engaged 31 young women (aged 15–24) in Northern Ireland to explore:

- Their understanding of, and perspectives on, healthy and unhealthy relationships
- Help-seeking behaviours and barriers
- Preferences for support services

The research was grounded in a child rights-based approach using the Lundy Model (Space, Voice, Audience, Influence) and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Key Findings

1. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Awareness

- Young women have high baseline awareness of GBV, especially through social media and peer networks.
- Formal education is often seen as superficial or disconnected from lived experience and based on a risk-based approach.
- Emotional and psychological abuse, coercive control, and digital abuse are widely recognised but often normalised.

2. Digital Evolution of Relationships

- Technology is central to young women's lives, relationship formation, and communication.
- Young women navigate complex digital norms (e.g., location sharing, nude requests, ghosting) with limited adult guidance.
- Social media platforms are sources of both support and risk.

3. Language and Generational Identity

- Terms such as 'domestic violence' are seen as irrelevant and intimidating.

- Preferred language includes ‘toxic’, ‘manipulative’, and ‘controlling’.
- Youth want conversational, empathetic language that reflects their reality.

4. Help-Seeking Hierarchies

- Peers are the first point of contact; teachers and police are rarely trusted.
- Disclosure is delayed due to shame, fear of judgment, and loss of control.
- Young women want autonomy and discretion when seeking help.

5. Developmental Vulnerability

- Adolescent relationships shape identity and future expectations.
- Early experiences of abuse can become embedded in self-concept.
- Young people want their relationships taken seriously by adults.

6. Service Design Preferences

Young women want services that are:

- Discreet and anonymous
- Digitally accessible and youth-led
- Inclusive and representative
- Empowering, not prescriptive
- Emotionally safe and relationally supportive

Recommendations

Service Design

- Develop anonymous webchat and discreet app features (e.g., hidden browsing history).
- Create youth-led digital content (TikTok-style videos, infographics).
- Use youth-informed language; avoid adult-centric or legal terminology.
- Ensure diverse representation in staff and materials (LGBTQIA+, disability, learning differences and ethnic minorities).
- Train staff in trauma-informed care and active listening.
- Offer informal drop-in spaces and peer support forums.

Section One: Background Information

Women's Aid Armagh Down (WAAD), as subject matter experts, brings 40 years of experience in the provision of support to women and children fleeing, living with, and recovering from trauma. As an organisation, they have built services shaped by the voices of women and children. They have been consistently at the forefront of innovation, meeting needs, removing barriers to access, and helping to protect and prevent future harm, homicide, or suicide.

This research aims to broaden the next evolution of co-created service by being professionally curious and actively listening to the voices of young women and girls, engaging meaningfully to deepen our understanding of their needs by exploring the nature of a young women's service, how we should engage with them, how the service would meet their needs, and how we could remove barriers to their access.

WAAD engaged Dr Annemarie Millar, a Chartered Psychologist and researcher with over 10 years' experience working in the field of Domestic & Sexual Violence, to conduct an independent, qualitative research consultation with approximately 30-40 young women in various settings with a range of experiences.

Ultimately, this research will not mark the end of the conversation but will act as a catalyst for change: Its findings will inform the project design for a new, responsive, co-designed, young women's DSA support services.

1.1 Locating Young Women and Girls' Experiences of Gender Based Violence (GBV) within a Northern Ireland and International Context

Global Prevalence

Globally, one in three women**—approximately 736 million—**experiences physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner during their lifetime (WHO, 2024). Recent data shows that by the time they are 19 years old, almost one in four adolescent girls (24%) who have been in a relationship have already been physically, sexually, or psychologically abused by a partner (UN Women, 2024). Significantly, younger women face the highest risk for recent violence, with the highest rates (16%) of intimate partner violence in the past 12

months occurring among young women aged between 15 and 24 (WHO, 2024). Studies of intimate abuse among young people have found that 65% of first victimisation happened between the ages of 13-19, with peak age of perpetration occurring between the ages of 16 and 17 (Klencakova, 2023).

The Northern Ireland context reveals concerning statistics. Estimates of femicides suggest that, per head of population, Northern Ireland is one of the most dangerous places in Europe for women (Kearney, 2024). In Northern Ireland, there were six domestic abuse homicides recorded in 2024/25 (PSNI, 2025). These six women had family and friends who live with their loss. Recent research found that 98% of women in Northern Ireland have experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime, with half (50%) experiencing this before they were 11 years old (Lagdon et al., 2023). The authors found that psychological and emotional abuse were reported to be the most common experiences during childhood (34%), adolescence (63%), and adulthood (70%). The *'It's Just What Happens'* report found that 73% of girls aged 12-17 reported having experienced at least one form of violence in their lifetime, with the persistent nature of 'everyday violence' illustrated by the fact that almost all had experienced catcalling and street harassment from age 10-11 onwards (McAlister et al., 2023). Females who reported violent experiences were most likely to experience it online and in school (McKnight & Schubotz, 2024). Despite high prevalence rates, young women and girls remain a ‘hidden group’ when it comes to accessing support and services for GBV (Barnes et al., 2023).

Barriers and Help-Seeking Behaviours

Research consistently reveals significant barriers to help-seeking among young women experiencing gender-based violence. Northern Ireland-specific research shows concerning gaps in knowledge and help-seeking behaviours. Research has found that 84% of young people in Northern Ireland had never heard of the term ‘coercive control’ or were unsure of what it means (Lagdon et al., 2021). A study on the public understanding of coercive control in Northern Ireland revealed a significant lack of awareness, providing a baseline before the introduction of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings (Northern Ireland) Act 2021 (Lagdon et al., 2023). Research evidence suggests that Relationship and Sexuality (RSE) Education in Northern Ireland is inadequate characterised by a lack of meaningful discussion and

ability to ask questions, resulting in ‘surface level learning’ especially in subjects such as sexual violence, abortion, and LGBTQIA+ relationships (McAlister et al., 2023).

Research and current relationship education discourse predominantly focus on understanding and identifying ‘red flags’, or warning signs of abuse, with limited attention to exploring and developing young people's understanding of ‘green flags’, or positive relationship indicators, potentially leaving them ill-equipped to recognise and cultivate healthy relationship dynamics. The absence of ‘green flags’ education is particularly problematic for young people with histories of childhood trauma or adverse experiences, who may have internalised unhealthy relationship dynamics as normal. For these individuals, what feels ‘familiar’ in relationships may be harmful patterns that mirror their early experiences of inconsistent care, emotional volatility, or abuse. Without explicit education about healthy relationship indicators, they may unconsciously gravitate toward partners or dynamics that recreate familiar but unhealthy patterns, mistaking intensity or chaos for love, or viewing jealousy and control as signs of care and commitment. Prevention-focused interventions that address underlying attitudes and behaviours offer more sustainable outcomes than reactive systems that respond only after warning signs emerge.

Helping young people work on attitudes and develop the social and emotional skills to explore issues such as consent and demonstrating respect for one another are other critical aspects to this work. Furthermore, building young people's capacity to navigate digital communication respectfully—including seeking explicit consent before sharing images or personal information, demonstrating empathy in online interactions, respecting the right to disconnect, and developing emotional regulation skills for social media conflicts—constitutes another vital aspect of this work.

Emotional barriers are key to understanding the kinds of education and support needed for young women and girls. These include age-related fears of not being believed or taken seriously, feelings of embarrassment and stigma, and struggles to validate and report non-physical forms of abuse (Lagdon et al., 2023; McAlister et al., 2023). The testimony of young women and girls indicates a level of awareness of gendered messages and blatant sexism in their lives, including within their family and school (McAlister et al., 2023).

Regarding educational support, research in Northern Ireland has found that pupils receive very few, if any, relationship and sexuality education lessons despite RSE being compulsory, leading female pupils to report feeling reluctant to display help-seeking behaviours in school: "At the moment if you were experiencing domestic violence, you wouldn't think to go to the school for help. But, if they talked about domestic violence more, then you would feel like you could" (Maguire, 2020 p. 8).

However, findings reveal that young women do not feel comfortable reporting concerns relating to intimate relationships to members of teaching staff (McKnight & Schubotz, 2024). Furthermore, a lack of RSE provision, combined with limited access to high-quality guidance, leaves young men seeking alternative sources of advice online, where problematic content is readily accessible. For example, influencers such as Andrew Tate and other ‘manosphere’ content creators who advocate for male dominance, emotional manipulation, and transactional views of relationships present themselves as successful masculine role models while promoting content that normalises controlling behaviours, emotional unavailability, and disrespect toward women.

National and international research reveals similar patterns relating to adolescent dating violence and abuse (Barnes et al., 2023; Ovelien, 2020). Barnes et al. (2023) found that young people wanted clearer information on identifying abuse from a younger age in schools and better access and signposting to specialist services. They benefited the most from equal power dynamics in relationships with professionals, where they were supported to make their own decisions. Once again, the authors found that teachers were not conducive to conversations about intimate relationships. Other research findings also found that support is viewed as beneficial when, instead of attempting to force a young person to end the relationship, they are provided with information about unhealthy behaviours using accessible language and enabling them to make decisions for themselves (Daw, 2021). These findings challenge prevailing narratives that position young women as a 'hidden group' in domestic violence services. Rather than young women being a ‘hidden group’, the evidence suggests a fundamental lack of services specifically designed to meet their developmental, social, and cultural needs, with existing provision largely oriented toward adult women's experiences and circumstances.

Youth-Specific Vulnerabilities and Contemporary Challenges

Uniquely, the developmental context of adolescence further complicates recognition of unhealthy relationship behaviours, as this period represents a time of 'firsts'—first romantic relationships, first intimate experiences, and first encounters with relationship dynamics. Without established reference points for healthy relationship patterns, young people may normalise controlling, manipulative, or abusive behaviours as typical relationship experiences, particularly when these behaviours are gradual or intermixed with positive experiences. This developmental vulnerability, combined with the intensity of first relationships and the desire to maintain romantic connections, can create psychological and emotional barriers to recognising unhealthy relationship dynamics, even when warning signs are present. Whilst adolescence is a time of great discovery and growth, it will also inevitably involve risk.

Seventy-four per cent of teenage couples last less than a year (Foulkes, 2024, p. 118), but the memories of these relationships can last a lifetime—a reason to take these relationships much more seriously. Notably, research on adolescent development recognises this as a period when young people first acquire the cognitive capacity to create coherent, lasting stories about themselves, *origin stories* (Foulkes, 2024), suggesting that early experiences of relationship violence may become deeply embedded in their developing sense of identity and expectations of intimate relationships if left unchallenged:

> In adolescence, so much of what we experience is still completely new, and you don't know who you are. It is the first time you start asking the question, 'Who am I?' and you look around yourself for evidence: from the things you do, from the way people treat you, from the relationships you have with others. […] Like tattoos etched onto fresh skin, the relationships and mistakes and events we go through in adolescence all leave marks that last (Foulkes, 2024, p. 6).

In the past decade, two new narratives have emerged relating to teenagers: They are defined by an epidemic of mental health problems and, connected to this, they are all addicted to their phones, with social media enabling a new suite of baffling,

problematic behaviours. Capturing this moment, the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2024) has recently published his book, *The Anxious Generation*. However, some counter the click-bait claims, demanding a more in-depth and balanced analysis of the evidence. Foulkes, for example, an academic psychologist and author of *Coming of Age: How Adolescence Shapes Us*, argues that social media 'is simply a new avenue through which age-old adolescent behaviour is expressed and explored, and today's adolescents are not uniquely vulnerable to mental health problems' (Foulkes, 2024, p. 15).

However, technology-facilitated dating violence and abuse have emerged as a critical concern. Recent global assessments highlight the growing threat of technology-facilitated GBV, with a significant proportion of women and girls reporting exposure to online abuse and harmful digital content (United Nations Population Fund, 2024). Research has also shown that young people's pervasive use of digital technology (e.g. sharing passwords as tokens of trust, monitoring behaviours as proof of care, believing certain things about sexual intimacy, sharing intimate pictures) can put them at higher risk of abuse than any previous generation (Barnes et al., 2023). Against this backdrop, '[T]he walled containment of childhood socialising has been entirely blown apart' (Foulkes, 2024, p. 3).

Further to narratives suggesting that technology has created what Haidt (2024) terms 'the anxious generation', contemporary discourse also promotes a culture that labels young people as 'snowflakes' prone to oversensitivity. Yet young people today demonstrate an emotional literacy that would have been remarkable in previous generations. They recognise injustice with notable clarity and understand that healthy relationships should not require surrendering personal autonomy. However, when they attempt to articulate these insights, their perspectives are frequently pathologized rather than valued. The contradiction is stark: society has created conditions that expose young women to unprecedented forms of harm yet simultaneously dismisses their attempts to describe these experiences as evidence of generational weakness. This response conflates emotional intelligence with fragility and awareness with anxiety, inadvertently creating additional barriers to the help-seeking behaviours that could provide protection and support.

Intersectional Considerations and Vulnerable Populations

Research highlights how intersecting identities create additional barriers for young women seeking help. UK research specifically examining minoritized ethnic women's experiences found that victims from BME communities typically suffer abuse for 1.5 times longer before getting help than those who identify as White, British, or Irish, and that higher rates of domestic homicide and domestic abuse-related suicide are evident amongst minoritized ethnic women (Scottish Government, 2024).

Within the Northern Ireland context, intersectional considerations include the legacy of conflict and its impact on communities' relationships with statutory services, particularly police and social services. The region's unique political and cultural divisions may create additional barriers for young women from different community backgrounds, with some research noting the connection between Northern Ireland's history of political violence and underlying cultural attitudes that may normalize violence within relationships. Lagdon et al. (2023) found that only one-third of participants felt able to speak about or report violent incidents, with shame and embarrassment identified as the greatest barriers to reporting. In research carried out by Queen's University Belfast, participants emphasised the need for early, inclusive, and meaningful education, noting that blaming boys and men was not useful. Instead, support was needed to help young men recognise the impacts of their attitudes and behaviours (McAlister et al., 2023). Additionally, LGBTQIA+ young women in Northern Ireland may face compounded barriers including family rejection, community hostility, and limited access to affirming support services, particularly given that LGBTQIA+ rights in the region have historically lagged behind other parts of the UK, creating additional vulnerabilities when experiencing intimate partner violence.

Educational Settings and Prevention

Research increasingly recognises the important role of educational institutions in both prevention and support (Klencakova, 2023; Maguire, 2020). Violence in children's lives often disrupts their schooling and harms the quality of their educational experiences and outcomes, with abuse resulting in emotional trauma, physical and psychological barriers to learning, and disruptive behaviour in school

(Wood & Barter, 2018). However, research indicates that teachers often lack the confidence and knowledge necessary to identify signs of abuse and signpost referral pathways (Wood & Barter, 2018). Klencakova's (2023) research situated in Northern Ireland reveals that while schools are uniquely positioned to reach all young people with prevention education, the impact remains limited due to inadequate teacher training, inconsistent delivery of relationship and sexuality education, and institutional barriers that prevent teachers from effectively identifying, responding to, and preventing intimate partner violence among their students.

Contemporary prevention approaches emphasise the importance of comprehensive relationship and sexuality education. WHO (2024) recommends promoting egalitarian gender norms as part of life skills and comprehensive sexuality education curricula taught to young people. Research on prevention programmes shows promise but highlights implementation challenges. Evaluation research emphasises that young people require more than a one-off programme to persuade them of the benefits of seeking help for abuse, and teachers need to be trained and supported to integrate such education into the school curriculum (Wood & Barter, 2018).

Implications for Service Development

The research literature points to several critical areas for service development. First, services must be designed with explicit recognition of young women's unique needs and help-seeking patterns. Younger adults may not consider that helping services are designed for them, and those who are older are more likely to know about formal helping services than younger people. Second, services must address intersectional needs, with recommendations for bilingual, anti-racist, and culturally sensitive services that support young women in the long term, ideally run by women from a diverse range of identities and cultural backgrounds.

The evidence strongly supports the need for comprehensive, multi-sector responses that address not only immediate safety needs but also long-term recovery and empowerment. Specialist domestic and family violence services are best positioned to provide comprehensive responses, but this requires investment in an adequate range and level of service responses to meet diverse short- and long-term needs. The existing research underscores that effective support services for young women

must be accessible, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and embedded within broader systems of education, healthcare, and community support.

1.2 Background information on Relationship and Sexuality Teaching (RSE) in Northern Ireland

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) has been a statutory component of the primary and post-primary Northern Ireland Curriculum since 2007, situated within the Personal Development areas of learning. RSE is described as ‘a lifelong process’ that helps young people develop knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and values about relationships, sexual identity, and intimacy (CCEA, 2025):

> RSE helps children and young people acquire age-appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills, and develop attitudes, beliefs and values about relationships, intimacy and sexual identity. Effective RSE, which is taught in a sensitive and inclusive manner, encourages children and young people to value themselves as individuals and to make responsible and well-informed decisions about their lives. (CCEA, 2025).

While all grant-aided schools must have an RSE policy, implementation varies significantly across institutions. Recent evaluations have revealed considerable inconsistency in delivery, with many schools avoiding or insufficiently addressing sensitive topics (Informing Choices NI, 2024). In 2023, legislative changes required schools to provide "age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education" at Key Stages 3 and 4, including content on reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion (ibid., p.2).

Each school's Board of Governors remains responsible for ensuring delivery of a comprehensive programme that aligns with both statutory requirements and the school's ethos (Department of Education, n.d.). Of interest to the current research and its findings, the Northern Ireland Assembly has recently launched an inquiry (September 2024) to assess current RSE provision and its effectiveness in meeting the diverse needs of all children and young people (NI Assembly, 2024).

Following provision of oral evidence in September 2024, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) submitted detailed evidence to the Education Committee's Mini-Inquiry into Relationships and Sexuality Education in October

2024, with the stated aim of ‘explor[ing] the recommendations for the school system of the Gillen Review of Serious Sexual Offences and consider[ing] the role that RSE might play in developing consent education to reduce sexual violence, particularly against women and girls’ (NIHRC, 2024).

The Commission made comprehensive recommendations focused on several critical areas and grounded in international human rights standards, emphasising children's fundamental rights to education and agency (NIHRC, 2024). Regarding legislative frameworks, the NIHRC recommended that RSE legislation should expressly articulate children's fundamental right to education and their ability to exercise agency and autonomy. On parental withdrawal provisions, the Commission called for consideration of UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommendations and European Court of Human Rights rulings, advocating that children's voices and evolving capacity should be central to RSE policy development, including their right to make informed decisions about withdrawal from lessons.

Given the NI context of this research, NIHRC's recommendations emphasise ‘holistic’ RSE education; this reflects its human rights-based approach, which views relationships and sexuality education as interconnected with broader rights to education, health, and protection from violence rather than as isolated topics that can be selectively addressed. Furthermore, the NIHRC's advocacy of ‘holistic’ RSE represents a shift from traditional risk-focused approaches toward comprehensive education that encompasses positive relationship dynamics, emotional wellbeing, and empowerment. By advocating for ‘holistic RSE’ and recommending that programmes meet the educational needs of all students while addressing myths and misconceptions, the Commission positions RSE as education that goes beyond merely warning about dangers to include fostering healthy relationship skills, understanding consent as an ongoing process, developing social and emotional skills, and promoting agency and autonomy in young people's decision-making about their bodies and relationships.

The Commission emphasised the need for ‘comprehensive’ curriculum content, recommending that the Department of Education clearly outline key elements of 'comprehensive' RSE reflecting international standards to ensure consistent delivery across all post-primary schools.

They also stressed the importance of student participation, advocating that schools include students in co-developing and evaluating RSE policies to ensure they meet young people's needs. Any changes must reflect their lived experiences in a meaningful way.

Teacher training emerged as a priority area, with recommendations for engagement with teacher training colleges and continuing professional development to ensure competent delivery of comprehensive, scientifically accurate RSE. The Commission also called for systematic monitoring, including data collection on withdrawal rates disaggregated by demographics to identify disproportionate impacts on specific groups, and regular curriculum evaluation. Finally, they emphasised inclusivity, recommending that RSE programmes meet the educational needs of all students, including disabled students, ethnic minorities, and those with diverse gender and sexual identities, with violence against women and girls as a mandatory curriculum component.

1.4 Research Questions

With this issue receiving increased recognition, WAAD commissioned this research to gain a better understanding of how they and their partners can best support those most affected.

The research consultation aimed to explore the following areas with young women:

- Young women’s understanding and perspectives of healthy and unhealthy behaviour in romantic relationships.
- What factors young women consider when seeking help in their relationships.
- Where young women go for advice and support when seeking help in their intimate relationships.
- What barriers to help-seeking young women experience.
- Designing a responsive service around the experiences and needs of young women.

The research methodology aims to address the research questions.

Section Two: Methodology

2.1 The Role of Children's Rights: Article 12 – The Lundy Model (Space, Voice, Audience & Influence)

This research is premised on a child rights-based approach (UNCRC, 1989). A cornerstone of conducting research with children and young people is creating an environment that recognises their evolving capacity and autonomy. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) gives children and young people the right to be heard and requires their views be given due weight on all matters affecting them. As noted in the literature, children are not inevitably vulnerable; still, they can be "vulnerabilised", often through dependency and exclusion from decision-making processes, as they are not considered competent to make decisions in their own interests.

Lundy (2007) developed a framework conceptualising Article 12 as four separate, yet interconnected concepts: space, voice, audience, and influence (Figure 1). This framework ensures children have safe opportunities to form and express views, that appropriate individuals listen to these views, and that these perspectives meaningfully impact outcomes.

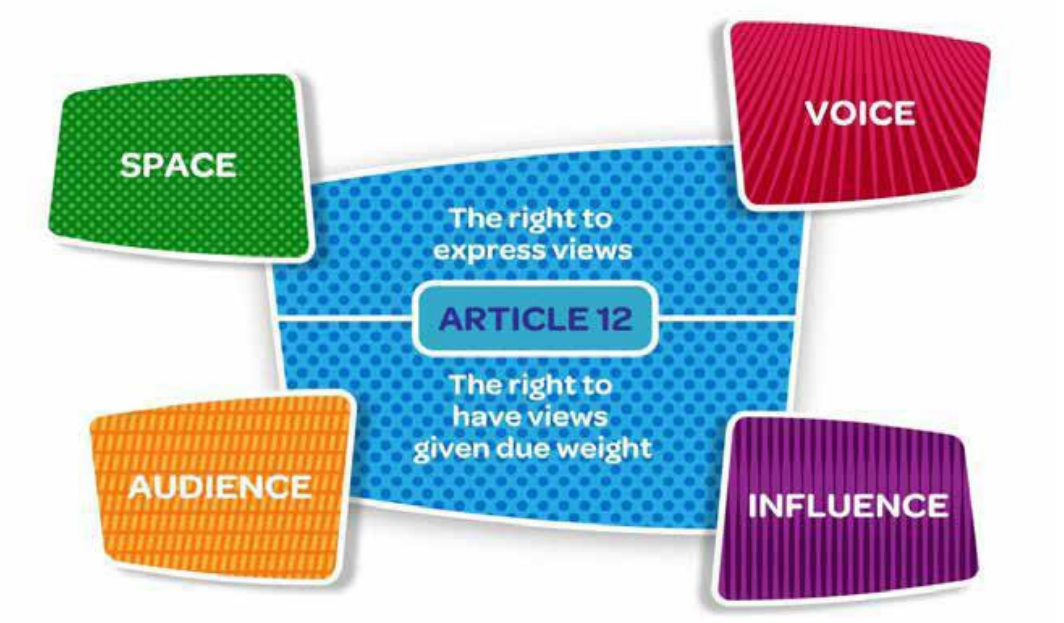


Figure 1: Lundy's (2007) Model of Participation

Applying a child rights-based approach is distinctive, and different from participatory research with children and young people; regarding the substantive issues, it requires that children and young people are assisted not only in expressing their views but in forming them (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012) (Figure 2). A key aspect of this research involved Dr Millar integrating and designing a capacity-building element as part of the interview structure; this process is described in more detail in Section 2.3. As Lundy and McEvoy (2012, p. 129) point out, "[B]uilding capacity on the substantive research issues enables children to contribute more confidently."

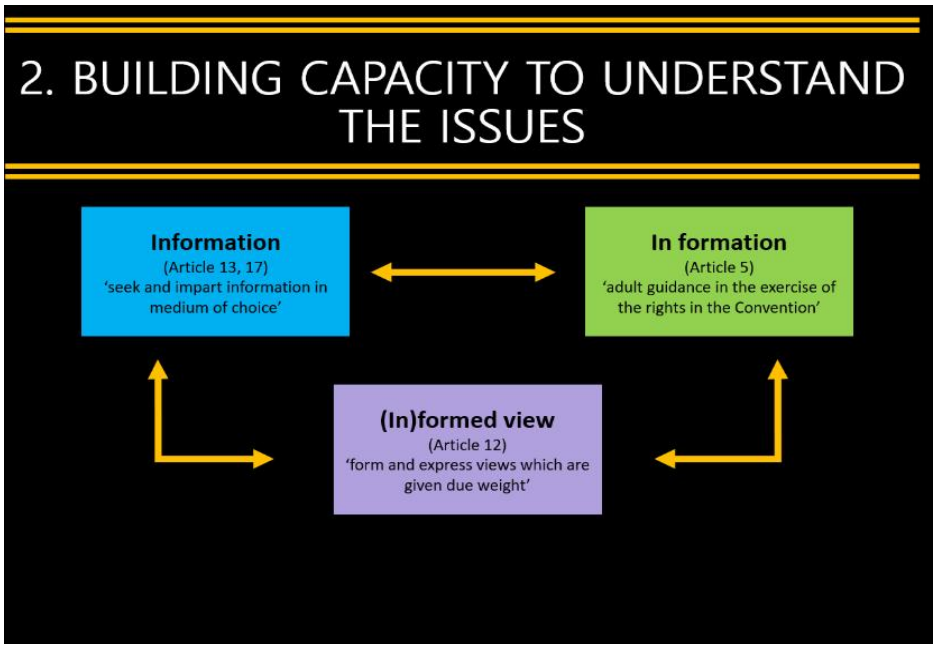


Figure 2: The Lundy Model: Assisting Children to in(formed) views

2.2 Recruitment and Sample

The research was aimed at young women 16 to 25 years old. They did not have to have experience of domestic abuse. It was made clear in the information provided to participants that the consultation did not seek to ask about their personal experiences of abuse in romantic relationships, but rather, to capture their reflections as an expert group on the experiences of young people in general. In total, 31 young women participated in the research: four focus groups (n=27), and four individual virtual interviews. Each focus group included between five and eight young people

and lasted approximately two hours. Four participants who completed a virtual interview had previous experience of domestic abuse within the context of their intimate relationship. At the time of the interviews, two out of the four young women were living in Women's Aid refuge accommodation in the locality. After each interview, a support worker from Women's Aid followed up with them. Gift vouchers valued at £20 were given to each person, in both focus groups and individual interviews, to thank them for their participation. All participants were given a short demographic questionnaire to complete and return with the consent form; these details are outlined in Section 3.1.

A senior staff member of WAAD approached various schools and organisations in their local network about the research. After confirming participation, a date and time for the research interviews was arranged. Participating schools and youth groups were then provided with information sheets and consent forms for parents and young people, a week before focus group interviews took place (Appendices 1 & 2). This was to ensure parents and young people were given time to consider participating in the research. Written consent was obtained from parents for young people under 18 years of age.

2.3 Interview Protocol and Procedure

The interview protocol and procedure are reported in Appendix 3. Interviews were structured in three parts: *Part One: The Flag System* was aimed at building capacity around GBV. *Part Two* involved a vignette used to structure interview questions related to the research (Daw, 2021). The vignette described a scenario of a young couple meeting and progressing to a relationship. Woven into this were real examples of toxic behaviours young people have experienced in relationships. *Part Three* focused on designing a specialised service for young women and girls.

At the beginning of each focus group interview, the researcher read aloud information about the research (Appendix 3) and obtained written consent. The protocol for the virtual interviews was identical except that before the interview, verbal consent was given by the young person to participate. Interviews lasted approximately two hours.

2.4 Data Management and Ethical Considerations

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' written consent and transcribed verbatim. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription, with participants assigned unique identification codes to protect anonymity. Transcripts and consent forms were stored on a password-protected computer with encryption and backed up on a secure server accessible only to the principal researcher. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription; transcripts will be retained for a period of 12 months post-publication.

The safety of all participants was an important consideration throughout the research process. As the research was discussing a topic that may evoke sensitivity for some, careful consideration was given to ensure that adequate safeguards had been put in place prior to and after interviews. Recognising the obligation to report if, at any point during this research, knowledge was received about circumstances which required action to be taken to protect a participant's welfare or the welfare of others, the researcher adhered to Women's Aid Safeguarding Disclosure Policy in relation to the management of unsought disclosure(s).

Key Ethical Considerations and Safeguards

Informed consent and voluntary participation: Participants under 18 and their parents gave written consent. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence or explanation. Participants were also made aware in the information provided that the only time we would need to share anything they told us was if we learned that they or someone else was at risk of harm.

Safeguarding and support: The designated safeguarding lead in participating schools and senior youth worker were informed of the research and the date and time of the interviews. The young women were reminded during the welcome and introduction that they could speak with the Women's Aid representative [name omitted] who was present (not during the interviews) with the researcher at the time of the interviews or a member of school/organisation safeguarding team. Clear protocols were established with participating schools and organisations for responding to any disclosures of harm or risk.

Non-intrusive methodology: The research design avoided asking participants about their personal experiences of abuse, instead positioning them as expert consultants reflecting on young people's experiences in general through a vignette and hypothetical scenarios.

Potential for disclosure: Recognition that discussing relationship dynamics might prompt personal reflections or concerns led to careful attention to participant wellbeing throughout. In one of the schools, a young woman approached the researcher after a focus group interview and asked to speak with the Women's Aid representative [name omitted] to enquire about their services, demonstrating the importance of having immediate support available.

Child rights framework: The research was conducted within a child rights-based approach following the Lundy Model, ensuring that careful consideration was given to creating a space where the participants felt welcome, valued, and respected in their own right.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity: As a chartered psychologist with extensive experience in domestic abuse research, the researcher maintained conscious awareness of power dynamics and potential impacts on participants, with regular reflection on the research process and participant responses.

2.5 Process of Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of the research interviews was undertaken by the researcher. Following the completion of interviews, recordings were transcribed. Data were extracted and coded in Excel for analysis.

In analysing the open text responses, themes were identified using a six-stage process (Braun & Clarke, 2022):

Data Familiarisation

- The researcher immerses themselves in the dataset by reading and re-reading.
- Begin noting initial ideas and observations.

The researcher’s aim at this stage is to develop a deep understanding of the content.

Data Coding

- The researcher systematically identifies meaningful features across the dataset.
- Codes are not fixed—they reflect the researcher's interpretive lens.
- Coding is organic and evolves as the researcher's understanding deepens.

Initial Theme Generation

- Group codes into potential themes based on shared meaning.
- Themes are not summaries—they are conceptual patterns.
- This phase is creative and interpretive, not mechanical.

Theme Development & Review

- Refine themes by checking coherence and relevance.
- Revisit the data to ensure themes accurately reflect it.
- Some themes may be split, merged, or discarded.

Theme Refining, Defining and Naming

- Clarify the essence of each theme.
- Define what each theme captures and how it relates to others.
- Assign concise, evocative names that reflect the theme's core.

Writing Up

- Weave together narrative and data extracts.
- Tell a compelling story about the findings.
- The researcher reflects on their analytic process and positionality.

2.6 Supplementary Data: RSE Teaching

To complement the interviews, supplementary data was collected from participating schools and youth organisations. These institutions provided accounts of their RSE provision, including curriculum content, delivery methods, external partnerships, teacher competence and confidence, and perceived gaps. This material was collected via a structured data form and used to contextualise the lived experiences shared by young women during semi-structured interviews.

Section Three: Findings

3.1 Demographic Information

Participants age ranged in age between 15 and 24, with most aged 16-18. A small number were in their early twenties, while data was missing for ten of the 31 participants.

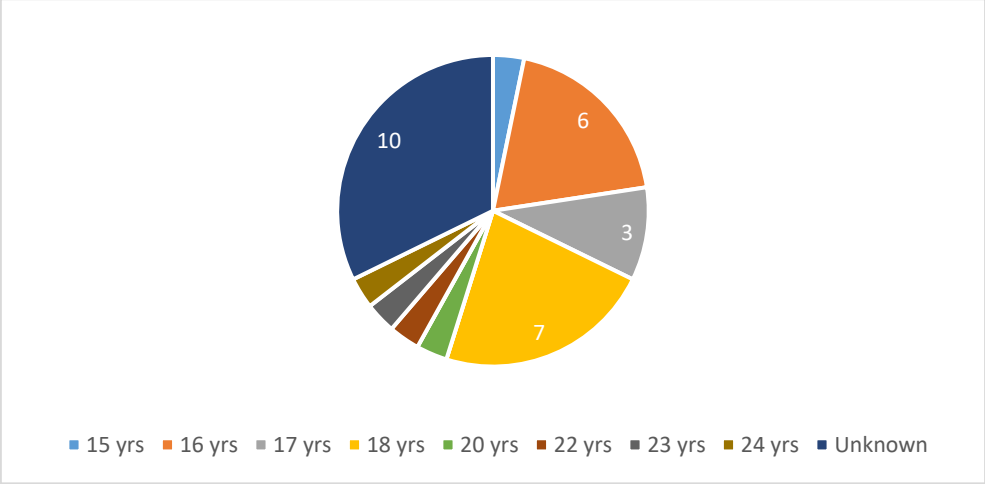


Figure 3: Age profile

Most participants (18) reported living in a town or city. A small number (5) reported living in a village or rural area. Data was missing for eight of the 31 participants.

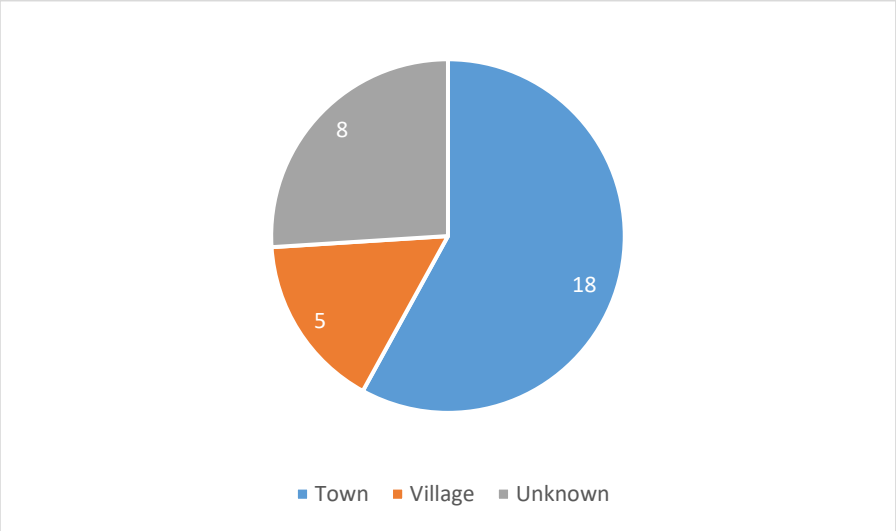


Figure 4: Area of residence

Twenty participants reported their gender as female, two reported their gender identity as non-binary, and one selected ‘prefer not to say’. Data was missing for eight of the 31 participants.

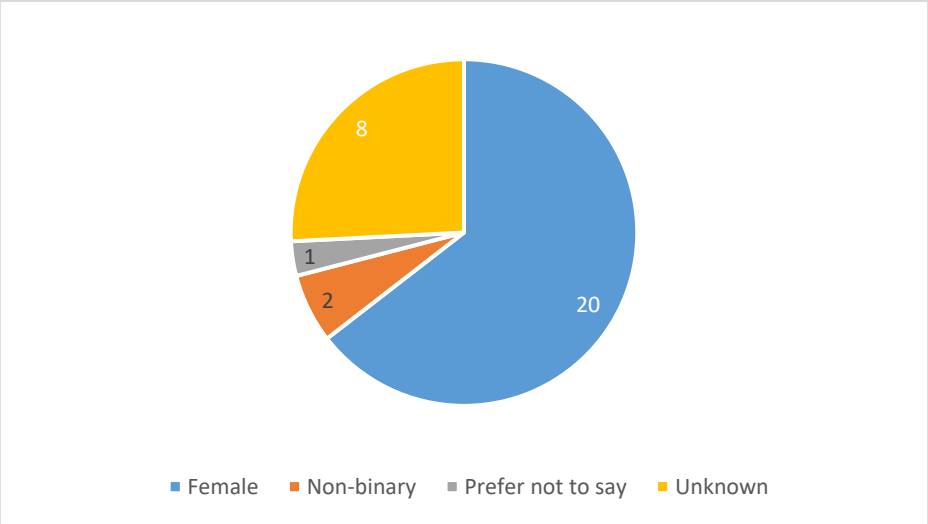


Figure 5: Gender identity

Eighteen participants identified as straight, three identified as bisexual, one identified as lesbian, and one selected ‘self-describe’. Data was missing for eight of the 31 participants.

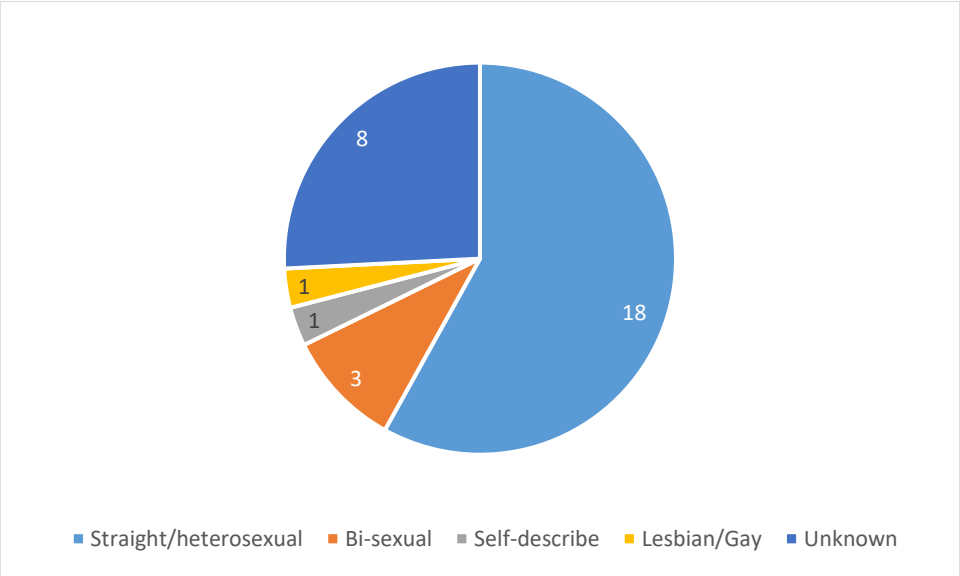


Figure 6: Sexual orientation

Twenty-three participants reported their ethnicity as White. Data was missing for eight of the 31 participants.

In addition to the information outlined above, two participants reported living in Women's Aid refuge at the time of the research, and two reported having children.

3.2 Responses to RSE Questions from Participating Schools and Youth Groups

Curriculum Content and Approach

The schools follow a structured, age-progressive curriculum covering healthy relationships, consent, sexual health, domestic violence awareness, and LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. The two schools from which some participants were drawn engage external specialists (Love for Life, Women's Aid, PSNI, Cara Friend) to deliver sensitive content.

The community organisations take a more flexible, needs-led approach, consulting directly with young people to shape programming:

> We recognise that there can be gaps in the RSE curriculum particularly as society, language, and the lived experiences of young people continue to evolve. As a needs-led community group, we are guided by what young people tell us they require in terms of knowledge, support, and understanding. This flexible and responsive approach ensures that our RSE delivery remains current and meaningful, even when aspects of the formal curriculum may lag behind the realities faced by young people.

Balancing Religious Ethos with Statutory Requirements

The Catholic schools navigate this tension by delivering comprehensive, scientifically accurate content followed by discussions of moral and ethical dimensions aligned with their ethos. Notably, both schools now include previously sensitive topics like abortion access, indicating adaptation to updated statutory requirements.

Implementation Challenges

Male teachers in particular express discomfort delivering certain RSE content, requiring alternative staffing arrangements. The youth centre reported having removed previous Catholic restrictions over the past 15 years, emphasising young people's need for factual information.

Student and Parent Engagement

All the organisations that participated in the current research actively seek student input through surveys, focus groups, and evaluations. Parent engagement varies—schools primarily inform rather than consult, while community organisations report that parents often feel relieved that RSE is being delivered professionally, reducing their own discomfort with these topics.

Notable Gaps

Only one organisation reported incidents of intimate partner violence (one case of controlling behaviour), suggesting possible underreporting. The data indicates ongoing evolution in curriculum content to address emerging issues such as digital safety and contemporary relationship dynamics.

Thematic Analysis: Young Women's Voices on Relationships and Support Services

Summary

This thematic analysis identified five major themes and sub-themes from interviews and focus groups with 31 young women aged 15-24 across two schools and two youth organisations. The research used a capacity-building exercise featuring a ‘flag system’ for gender-based violence (GBV) awareness, vignette discussion, and service co-design activity to explore young women's experiences of relationships, help-seeking behaviours, and service needs and preferences.

Key Findings

Young women demonstrate sophisticated awareness of GBV, accessing information primarily through digital and peer networks rather than formal education.

- Young women are navigating unprecedented digital relationship landscapes without established cultural guidance.
- Young women reject formal terminology in favour of their generational language around relationship experiences.
- Help-seeking follows clear hierarchies prioritising peers over adults, with strong resistance to formal authority figures such as teachers and police.
- Service design must prioritise discretion, informality, choice, and understanding of digital-native culture.

Theme 1: Gender-Based Violence Awareness and Knowledge Sources

Overview

As part of the child rights-based methodology, a capacity-building exercise was conducted using a ‘flag system’ to explore young women's awareness and understanding of different forms of gender-based violence (GBV). This exercise served dual purposes: building participants' knowledge base to support informed

participation (using the Lundy Model) while gathering data about their existing awareness, information sources, and understanding of relationship dynamics.

The exercise used a colour-coding system in which participants categorised different scenarios as red flags (serious concerns), yellow flags (warning signs), green flags (acceptable/positive behaviours) or blue flags (don't know) across six domains: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological/emotional abuse, economic abuse, digital abuse, and coercive control.

The capacity-building exercise revealed that young women demonstrate sophisticated baseline awareness of gender-based violence and access information primarily through digital platforms and peer networks rather than formal educational sources. Their knowledge is nuanced and contextual, informed by developmental, social, and cultural awareness. This challenges assumptions about young women's awareness levels while highlighting gaps in formal education approaches.

Sub-themes

1.1 High baseline awareness through diverse sources

Nearly all participants (all but two individuals) had heard of GBV, demonstrating significant awareness among this cohort. Young women access information primarily from digital sources such as TikTok and Instagram, and also from school during special assemblies, television shows, and external speakers. Some examples provided from interviews included the 'Love for Life' programme, delivered in schools, and talks from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) on keeping safe on nights out. It was clear from the interviews that young women receive a lot of information on topics related to GBV.

Importantly, for several participants, information provided a way to name behaviours that they experience both in their everyday lives and romantic relationships. Yet this very recognition can simultaneously empower and constrain, offering language for experiences while potentially creating unrealistic expectations (and fear) about one's ability to navigate or prevent such situations. This is an important finding for the application of this research:

> *I feel like, we recognise things nowadays, like, you know, if some man on the street is doing something, we would immediately recognise—'Ah, that's what this is.'* (Individual Interview 4)

> *It's just drilled into us, like, talks and stuff, so like, we always know that.* (Focus Group 1)

Participants spoke of social media's tendency to reduce complex interpersonal behaviours to discrete labels, which can serve as a valuable tool for identification and understanding. However, it can simultaneously lead to 'semantic bleaching', where repeated use strips these terms of their nuanced meaning, potentially leading to the trivialisation of serious issues.

Notably, in two of the focus group discussions, participants talked about hearing via a social media platform about the recent research from Northern Ireland on GBV (Kearney et al., 2024):

> *I think I saw it on like, something about, like it was on Instagram, I remember that, but sometimes people will post things or stories about it, uhm, gender-based violence, and just like, raising awareness about it and stuff. So, it was like—I think it was something to do with like, Northern Ireland being one of the worst countries for it.* (Focus Group 4)

> *Yeah, I think it was like, uhm, this lady was speaking in […] a formal situation, and she was saying how like, in Northern Ireland like, for women, it would be like, the most out of the UK, for women to be like, violent—get beat[en].* (Focus Group 3)

1.2 Understanding of GBV: Beyond a 'one-size-fits-all' approach

Young women demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the different types of GBV. Physical and sexual abuse and coercive control were consistently understood as serious 'red flags' and never acceptable. A number of participants reported that sexual abuse is 'harder to talk about'. However, there was a lot of discussion across interviews about the other types of GBV (psychological/emotional, economic and digital), suggesting much greater individual variation regarding what forms of behaviour constitute 'yellow flags' for young women. Responses revealed that, for

these participants, abuse exists on a spectrum, which can often start as a ‘yellow flag’ and evolve into a ‘red flag’, which is understood as something more serious:

> *There's also levels of that kind of behaviour, so it's easier to make excuses for it than just punching someone in the face. (*Individual Interview 4*)*

> *I think initially it can be harmful […]. But if he’s, like, making wee comments here and there [it might not seem that way].* (Focus Group 2)

This finding highlights the importance of providing services that enable young women to access support earlier and talk openly about their concerns.

Participants showed limited awareness of economic abuse, associating it primarily with married couples rather than their own demographic. While this could be related to younger women having less money/fewer financial resources, it also suggests that earlier preventive work with young women might be helpful:

> *Well, I was more thinking like, a marriage, maybe, if the person is like, an over-spender or something... I've just never really heard of a case of like, someone our age having like, being like, financially abused.* (Focus Group 4)

Technology-facilitated GBV is a growing concern among this population. This domain revealed the most complex responses, with participants recognising both problematic behaviours and their normalisation among peers. It is important to understand and be curious about the role technology plays in a young person’s romantic relationships. It is not helpful to apply a one-size-fits-all approach; indeed, this may be a barrier for some young women seeking advice and support. For example, sharing passwords to digital devices with your partner and knowing the location of your partner via a tracking app, such as Life360 (a family location-sharing and safety app), are common practice among this age group:

> *I think there’s a healthy amount of, you know, knowing what your partner is up to, and then there’s, you know, stalking. Yeah, ’cause like, my boyfriend would watch where I am on maps, like we have our locations turned on, and he can see whenever I’m like, leaving a*

location—whenever I leave the house, if he's at work and I leave the house, he can see that I leave the house, but he's not like, constantly looking at it, it's more just, you know, "Oh, she's doing this and that", you know. But I'm bad at replying to messages and stuff like that, so that's kind of where that comes. (Individual Interview 1)

I don't know if this is like a controversial thing to say or not, but I think it's like, very normalised nowadays for young people to like, look at like, their partner's phone, or look at like, what their partner does, or like, who their partner is following, like going through their messages, like with their friends and stuff, and like… I think at certain times, like that can be justified, like for example if the person is like, cheating on them, but like most of the time it's just because it's like, they're trying to like, gain, like. I don't know. Like I feel like sometimes, people are just like, feel out of control in their relationship and like, feel like they have to like, go through their partner's phone to like see, is that what you mean by digital abuse? Is that like, just like, they just have to go through their partner's phone and like see who they're talking to? So like, I just think it's quite like a controlling thing, to be digitally abusive. (Focus Group Interview 4)

Here, the participant identifies that phone-checking typically arises from feeling 'out of control' or feelings of insecurity rather than genuine concerns about infidelity, and an attempt to manage relationship anxiety through monitoring rather than communication. This quote reveals how digital surveillance in relationships has become normalised among some young people, despite being recognised as controlling behaviour and lasting impacts on their ability to trust in future relationships—issues which, as discussed under sub-theme 1.4, are often overlooked and minimised within the context of relationship education.

The phenomenon of 'ghosting' was discussed often in interviews. Ghosting is the practice of suddenly cutting off all communication with someone without explanation, which can be particularly devastating for young people who may lack the relationship

experience to understand or cope with such abrupt rejection, often leading to confusion, self-blame:

> *[G]hosting can happen a lot in relationships, where just they could text you one day and then the next day they will not—completely—and it's like—and then obviously maybe they want you to text them more—they want you to show that you're dedicated to them—but it's a really toxic way.* (Focus Group 1)

> *And you're trying to convince yourself and you're trying to convince your friends that he's busy, he's working, he's doing this, he's doing that, you know, you're making up the excuses, and then it doesn't, you don't know how to categorise it. Like is he just working, is he just busy, or is he ignoring me for a reason, is this a bad thing that he's not wanting to talk to me? Those kind of things would be kind of in the middle area.* (Individual Interview 2)

Based on the interview data, young women demonstrated awareness that coercive control should not be part of a relationship:

> *A relationship—it's a partnership between two people; the other person shouldn't be doing anything—they're there to help you, you're there to help each other, and like, controlling what people do, what they have access to, who they talk to—controlling like, if you send something of theirs—that's not a relationship, that's controlling.* (Focus Group 1)

> *I just think like, it's always a red flag, no matter—I think it like, can start off small, like I feel like with young people, I feel like phones is such like a big part of like young people's like relationships nowadays, like because I feel like it starts off with little things, like [name of participant] was saying, about how like, they'll be like, "Awh, why aren't you online?" or like, "Why are you not texting me back?" and it will progress to more serious things like—I feel like also it's very normalised, for like people to be controlling about where you are, like in relationships, like with regards to like having—like it's so normalised to have people's*

locations and all, and like I know people who have Life360 with their boyfriends. (Focus Group 4)

1.3 Awareness of gendered expectations and double standards

The exercise revealed recognition of how prevention messages disproportionately target young women:

> *We have the responsibility there—we have to cover our drinks—but they aren't told not to spike. I think that's a culture for boys—which is not alright—how would they know any different, they haven't been given a talk about it.* (Focus Group 1)

> *We're always warned—told to use protection and to be safe and dress a certain way […] you have to watch yourself, you can't really always relax almost.* (Focus Group 1)

1.4 Formal education vs. experiential learning

This sub-theme demonstrates that while young women possess a high level of awareness of GBV, current educational approaches fail to bridge the critical gap between knowledge and practical application in complex relationship situations. There is the sense that being told what to do is unhelpful, and what young women want are meaningful conversations:

> *The guidelines of a relationship—but then there's also, this is you and the other person who you should be like, very good friends with, and if they're telling you that you should do something... "Oh, that's what I'm meant to do then" […] it's kind of different in the actual relationship than whenever you're looking at an outside one.* (Focus Group 1)

Current approaches do not match young people's developmental stage or relationship experiences:

> *I feel like because people my age don't tend to have a lot of experience, and then they make that their full reality, they could believe that is reality, you know? They wouldn't have a lot of other experiences to reference.* (Individual Interview 4)

Education focuses on warning signs rather than teaching healthy relationship skills:

> *What if you didn't grow up in a house where you don't have like a healthy relationship to model off, what are you supposed to—what are you supposed to look at, what are you supposed to understand, like, how do you understand how a healthy relationship functions?* (Focus Group 1)

Implications

This exercise served as a tool to elicit views, challenge deficit-based assumptions about young women's knowledge, and highlight the need for education and services that build on their existing awareness while also addressing, in meaningful, culturally relevant, interactive ways, their developmental needs, individual circumstances, and the gap between education and lived experience.

Theme 2: [Digital] Evolution of Relationships

Overview

This section of the thematic analysis discusses the three key themes and sub-themes from a vignette telling the story of Brooke and Georgie. Technology plays a fundamental role in the lives of young people; while online and offline activities may appear physically separate, they form part of a holistic, integrated experience. Young women described their experiences of how relationships begin and develop, with technology creating dynamic social scripts that are constantly evolving. They also spoke of the lack of cultural guidance for navigating these interactions safely and authentically. They articulate a feeling that traditional social interaction and communication patterns have been disrupted in ways that adults may not fully comprehend, which can have implications for help-seeking when concerns or issues arise.

Sub-themes

2.1 "It's not primary school anymore"

Young women discussed engaging with peers and their friends via social media platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. They described meeting others in the "talking stages" of dating via social media platforms, generally through mutual friendship networks. However, young women also reported that "random people can pop up from anywhere in the world" (Individual Interview 1). As they get older, they reported becoming more discerning as to who they 'added' to their friendship network, keeping it strictly to friends or close associates of friends.

There was a feeling of loss from many of the participants, as children become teenagers, going beyond the walled containment of childhood, and opening up their [digital] world:

> *I think I had like five people on it when I was younger—like my auntie, and then my school friends from primary school, and that was it—and you just send silly photos.* (Focus Group 2)

> . . . *nobody would be texting well, "What do you look like?" You wouldn't be adding anybody random on your phone* (Focus Group 2)

Some participants felt that, as such platforms have evolved, they have attracted older users, opening up the risks to younger users:

> *[A] lot of older people [have] starting to learn how to use it.* (Focus Group 2).

Connecting online with new and existing friends is a positive experience, but it can also be a barrier to cultivating connections that are more authentic. Counter to cultural narratives and stereotypes regarding young people, many of the young women expressed a desire to have more opportunities to meet people offline, to experience connections beyond the often surface, performative, digital spaces:

> *Like for younger [people] there's youth clubs, you can do different activities, but then like, once you get older, you usually end up dropping most of them, you'll stick with a few but like, you'll just know that set of*

people, there isn't really anything for our age to do to meet more people. (Focus Group 1)

They are not honest with themselves and with the people they are talking to, [they] usually try to create a fake image of themselves. (Individual Interview 3)

2.2 The importance of understanding the digital world and discourse

Young women described the digital spaces they inhabit which form a central part of their everyday lives. Young people navigate online interactions that enrich their lives and contribute to their growth and development, but that can also present significant challenges for a developing sense of identity:

You have to be careful how you say things online, 'cause it can be—you know, people can take it differently than like, in person... Like if you were to say something online, it can be took in a negative way—where like in person it might be took as a joke. (Focus Group 3)

However, they describe a sophisticated understanding of platform-specific communication and unspoken rules and norms that adults often miss:

If you're angry at someone and you send them a message to show that you're annoyed at them, you put a full stop at the end of the sentence. If you're annoyed at them. (Focus Group 4)

No capital letters, and a full stop at the end, you know you've like done something wrong. (Focus Group 3)

Young women spoke of the pressure to send nude pictures early in an interaction with someone that they did not know very well, a common experience for this age group. A number of the young women stated this was a 'red flag' and often they would block the person on their account and would not proceed any further with the interaction. They shared common expressions reflecting generational understanding. The phrases "WYLL" and "do you send" appear casual but carry implicit assumptions that intimate image sharing is normative relationship behaviour. This phrasing

obscures the significant consent, power, and safety issues involved by positioning the request as routine rather than requiring explicit negotiation of boundaries:

> *Whenever boys add someone they don't know, […] they'll be like, "What do you look like?" They'll not even write "what you look like"—they'll write "W-Y-L-L", really disrespectful. And then if you don't send a photo of yourself, they block you.* (Focus Group 2)

> *Sometimes like, you will get added and the person will say, "Do you send" […]. It's just weird.* (Focus Group 2)

> *Like literally as soon as she hit the add button, he started texting her on Snapchat, and like, and she at first started out with like, your name, the typical stuff, your name, your age, and like what year you're in in school, and she told—she told him that she's sixteen, he said he was eighteen, and then he started being like very, starting getting like, started texting her very like sexual stuff and all, and he kept trying to get her to like send pictures of her, like not nudes or anything, just her face, but she didn't like that, so she… uhm, she blocked him and got rid of him, like removed him and all because she just… it freaked her out because like, it was, especially it started after she said she was sixteen, and he was eighteen I think, nearly nineteen.* (Focus Group Interview 4)

Young women face disproportionate risks including concerns about the potential for non-consensual sharing, reputation damage, and victim-blaming. The request creates a double-bind where compliance risks exploitation while refusal may result in relationship conflict or social judgment. Importantly for this research, developmental factors including limited experience with boundary-setting and pressure to appear mature may compromise decision-making:

> *Boys do that, there is dedicated group chats where they share photos that they get from girls, I've seen the group chats, that's why I know this […] this happened multiple times in school, not to myself but like, I've seen other girls' pictures in school, 'cause they would just like—a girl sends photos to a boy, the boy sends it a friend, it goes across the*

> *whole school, like there was a girl that actually had to leave our school because of it, because it went that public and everyone knew who she was, her face was in it, and it had a major impact on her life, so yeah, like that can happen. (*Individual Interview 1)

Young men may develop problematic expectations about women's availability and sexual consent. Peer pressure to make such requests can normalise entitled attitudes toward women's bodies and sex while exposing them to legal consequences they may not fully understand. The casual phrasing may prevent recognition of the power dynamics and potential harm involved.

Responses also indicated that trying to control what someone is wearing was recognised as a sign of controlling behaviour as well as lack of trust, which can signal early warning signs in a relationship.

2.3 Generational communication gaps

Participants highlight how adults don't understand young people's digital lives and communication methods. One young person's response highlights that a lack of understanding of the role of technology in their lives may be a barrier to discussing concerns and seeking support from family members or adults in general, who did not grow up with technology:

> *The way they talk. Sometimes demanding nudes, demanding straight away, all of that. I feel like a lot of older people don't understand that as well, like parents wouldn't understand if somebody was texting and says something...that I could tell...and she goes, "How do you know they're being aggressive with that?" They don't understand the tone.* (Focus Group 2)

2.4 Lack of digital accountability

Participants identify how digital platforms enable harmful behaviours without consequences. This can be a barrier to young women seeking advice and support:

> *You can delete the message, there's no proof of it, how are you going to do anything about it if they're bad to you?* (Focus Group 1)

> *People say what they want on social media 'cause they can just walk away from the phone.* (Focus Group 1)

Implications

This theme reveals how young women are developing new social scripts in real-time without established cultural guidance, highlighting the need for support services and education that understand this digital-native experience. It is important to encourage young women to honour their gut feelings and take protective action when someone's behaviour feels 'off'. The reports of young women's experiences highlight the urgent need to work with boys and young men. The recent concerns over examples of hyper-masculinity, such as Andrew Tate, have also provided important questioning around what it means to be male in today's society, highlighting the important role of education and schools (Klencakova, 2023; Maguire, 2020). Similarly, as was evident in the interviews, female gender stereotypes are also experiencing change, creating equally important discussions around female gender stereotypes and expectations.

Theme 3: Language and Generational Identity

Overview

Respondents were asked to describe any behaviours they found concerning from the second part of the vignette. Responses described Georgie's behaviour using strong, direct language, with reactions ranging from "I think he's out of his mind" and "Ah just dump him" to more measured responses such as "The whole thing is unhealthy", demonstrating both the emotional intensity these scenarios evoked and the young women's clear recognition of problematic relationship dynamics, while also revealing how personal experience influenced their responses: Those with lived experience showed more nuanced understanding of the complexity and difficulty of leaving such relationships:

> [*Y]ou're not responsible for anyone else, if they're going to be manipulating you like that.* (Focus Group 1)

Because she loves him, she's still attached to him, she might need him for some kind of needs, like he fulfils some kind of needs of hers that she doesn't get from somewhere else, you know? So losing him might be scary, even if he does those things. (Individual Interview 4)

Young women reject formal terminology such as the term 'domestic abuse' around relationship abuse, using generational language that reflects their developmental stage and lived experiences. These linguistic choices serve as both generational differentiation and identity protection.

Sub-themes

3.1 Rejection of formal/legal terminology

Participants consistently reject terms like 'domestic abuse' as inappropriate for their experiences (unless the abuse was physical) and saw its use as more of a term that applied to adults (who are married) and in a more formal settings:

That's [domestic violence is] too big of a word […] Women's Aid, the police, would use that […] the word itself feels intimidating. (Individual Interview 1)

Only if I'm at my solicitor's office [would I use this term]. (Individual Interview 3)

That's more seen as, a married couple who, you know, are together for some time and that's the way I feel like young people would see domestic abuse. [Young] people usually say 'toxic', 'manipulative', 'abusive'. (Individual Interview 4)

I just think it's like very heavy in terms like, a lot of implications when you can't really call anything domestic abuse unless you're 100% sure that's what it is. (Focus Group 1)

Young women consistently spoke of their discomfort with the term 'domestic abuse', which carries complex meanings, creating barriers to identification and help-seeking. They also expressed the fear that once you acknowledge something as

abuse (by using formal terms or seeking help), you can no longer pretend it didn't happen or wasn't serious:

> *I think that's why a lot of people, like girls my age, would get scared because they don't want it to be real, it's like a way they can pretend it never happened and move on.* (Individual Interview 2)

Based on the research data, young women consistently used the following terms to describe unhealthy relationships: 'toxic', 'controlling', 'red flag', 'manipulative':

> *Toxic is a very common word, toxic and abusive.* (Individual Interview 1)

> *Like they [friends] wouldn't like actually use like, they wouldn't be like, 'Oh he's coercively controlling her' or like 'He's emotionally abusing her'—well, maybe emotional abuse […], but I feel like 'controlling' is definitely the big one people would say.* (Focus Group 4)

Importantly, the language young women use is intimately connected to the origin stories (Foulkes, 2024) young people tell themselves about the abuse, which become deeply embedded in their developing sense of identity, as discussed in Theme 5. This finding highlights the urgent need to provide specialised services and support for young people to explore concerns in a safe environment.

Implications

Services and education must adapt their language to meet young women where they are, using terminology that resonates with their generational identity rather than imposing formal, legal language that creates barriers to understanding unhealthy behaviour and seeking support.

Theme 4: Help-Seeking Hierarchies and Barriers

Overview

Young women demonstrate clear preferences for informal support networks over formal authority figures, with strong emphasis on maintaining agency and control over information sharing and decision-making processes. However, multiple barriers

create delays in disclosure, including social pressures to maintain certain appearances, shame arising from thinking that 'should know better' (i.e. recognise the warning signs), the black-and-white approach that tends to view relationships as either good or bad, and complex emotional factors that prevent immediate help-seeking.

Sub-themes

4.1 Friend-first support preferences

Participants consistently prioritise peer support as their first choice. Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram were also mentioned as common sources of information regarding their relationships, demonstrating a paradoxical trust in online sources over formal support services. Young women described these platforms as more accessible and less intimidating than professional services, highlighting how digital anonymity can feel safer than face-to-face support, even when the quality of the information is uncertain. A number of older participants also shared that they would first try to remove themselves from a situation before reaching out to someone:

> *Definitely friends first—if it gets bad, I would go to my parents. I would rather drop dead than talk to a teacher about it [abuse].* (Focus Group 1)

> *If I need advice, I'm not going to a person, I'm going to go check TikTok.* (Individual Interview 1)

A large majority of young women expressed strong resistance to seeking support from teachers and formal authority figures stemming from past experiences:

> *In my experience when I, when I like said a problem to one of my teachers, they did this like, plan of action, and then sent it to every teacher of mine, and like, people higher up in the school about all my problems—and kind of being sympathetic throughout the school—It made me so uncomfortable because that wasn't my choice for everyone to know that. So it is a barrier, I think.* (Focus Group 1)

> *I think I can say our school is not a very open place. I think we can't talk about anything when we're in school—like, we go to the counsellor, and we were told that our year group is the most unhappy year group in school—we've done like five questionnaires, and all just being brutally honest with the teachers and the teacher attitude and teaching method and all that stuff, and we were told that we are the least—we are the most unhappy.* (Focus Group 2)

Speaking with parents or family was seen as less complicated but not without some challenges. Family dynamics, for example, had prevented two of the young women from seeking family support.

One of the young women shared that she had confided in her midwife, who then put her in touch with Women's Aid, which she had found helpful, while another had contacted the police directly. The following quotes reveal the complex emotional landscape that surrounds help-seeking decisions and challenges the assumption that education alone can prevent relationship harm. They reveal a generational divide in understanding relationship dynamics and abuse recognition. The participants identify a fundamental disconnect between young people's awareness of relationship violence and older generations' perspectives, creating barriers to intergenerational support and help-seeking. They highlight the need for non-judgmental support approaches that acknowledge young people's agency while recognising the barriers they face in leaving harmful relationships:

> *I would normally say my mum, but I feel like, in a serious situation like that like—I would even be a wee bit scared to go to my mum about it, because I have been advised not to—like continue on with the relationship by others—and like I didn't take their advice, so I feel like she would be disappointed in me—that I let myself get into that situation. And that, I carried on with that, knowing that it's wrong—like they'd so many talks in school about how—domestic violence, any violence in a relationship is wrong, and I've seen that, and I've… disregarded that and went in the relationship.* (Focus Group 3)

> *Yeah, but parents are in that olden age where like if a relationship doesn't work you stick at it until one dies, like there's no divorce like that or that would be their mindset. Parents would be, "Abuse doesn't really happen in relationships," like they don't have that mindset in which young people do. I think it's just like their views on things are different, so like if I went to my mum and told her things she would be like, "Oh that's not abuse, that's just normal […] We're picking up it [GBV]'s not normal.* (Individual Interview 2)

Based on young women's experiences, supporting parents and schools to have open conversations requires fundamental shifts in approach: Parents need training to understand digital relationship dynamics and respond without judgment, moving away from generational assumptions that relationships should be endured rather than evaluated for health; schools must abandon automatic 'action plan' responses that remove young people's control and instead develop supportive listening skills that respect student choice in disclosure.

4.2 Delayed disclosure and social pressures

Young women often delay opening up about relationship concerns and abuse due to pressure to maintain certain appearances and social expectations, which often get reinforced by social media:

> *I feel like there's like, a pressure for like, young people to be in relationships, and like, the high standard of them, so I feel like they just have to like, hide what's going on from like, their friends.* (Focus Group 4)

Young women want to maintain control over what information they share and with whom, often testing reactions before full disclosure:

> *And then like even if you do tell your friends, you wouldn't tell them everything either—like you'd hide things that you yourself know are bad, but you don't want other people to tell you are bad, like you'll tell them a majority of the things to see how they react—then you'll know not to go past it, but like—if*

you're out of the situation after and it gets brought up again you'd tell them the information and they'll go, "Oh we didn't know that." (Focus Group 1)

4.3 "I would get a lecture": The information paradox

Having received education about abuse creates additional barriers, as young women feel they should have recognised warning signs. Confiding in family was seen complicated, risking judgement, which presents emotional barriers for young women:

If anything I feel like, embarrassed when we have to ask for help. 'Cause like, I don't know how to say it, people sort of like, "Oh, you're supposed to know, how like, to solve your own problems," and so if you're going to access help, like you're weak […]. (Focus Group 4)

Young women identified that polarised responses from friends and family can create barriers to opening up about relationship concerns. When supporters respond with immediate outrage or absolute judgments ("dump him," "he's terrible"), this can shut down further communication rather than encourage it.

I feel like young people struggle to zoom out, as you say, because they're a bit too black and white […] I feel it's [that kind of simplistic reaction's] a part of being young. (Individual Interview 4)

This pattern reflects a broader issue of black-and-white thinking—viewing relationships as entirely good or bad, partners as completely right or wrong—which fails to acknowledge the complexity young women experience in their relationships. Such responses, while well-intentioned, can be a barrier for young women seeking advice and support.

This insight suggests that while extreme reactions may be developmentally normal among peers, they create practical barriers to the kind of ongoing dialogue that might help young women process relationship concerns safely. Support systems—whether friends, family, or professionals—need to develop more nuanced responses that can hold complexity and avoid forcing young women into defensive positions about their relationship choices.

4.4 Complex relationship dynamics and holding on

> Without the trappings of a marriage or a mortgage or children, teenagers are freer than adults to press the eject button when a relationship isn't working for them (Foulkes, 2024, p. 123).

Despite the perception that young people are relatively free to end romantic relationships, they still face barriers when it comes to "holding on" to a relationship that appears not to be working for them. In interviews, young people shared insights about their experiences and expressed a desire for adults to take their relationships and experiences more seriously*:*

> *It's sort of like an addiction though, isn't it? You can say the same thing about alcohol or drugs, it's like an addiction, you just go back to it over and over again. The first step is always the hardest, but then if there's a problem like—getting help.* (Focus Group 1)

> *[S]ome days they're like, really like, kind, or like, loving, and then other days they're like, really like, abusive towards them […]. I definitely think, like, sometimes, like, that can like, make it harder for a person to leave.* (Focus Group 4)

At this stage in their development, young people may also seek romantic relationships to maintain a sense of belonging and connection to friends despite recognising problematic behaviours, which may be a barrier to disclosure:

> *That there's like, whenever you say, "Oh, like your friend's in a relationship, and like I would know like some of my friends would be in relationships and they'd be like dating boys in the same friendship group, so like, they'd like go on double dates and all and you'd be like, "Awh." They'd be like, "Oh, you should date this boy, like, this boy's friend" and all, and like, you're sort of like—not—I don't think it's like, a very severe form of peer pressure, like I don't think it's like really, really severe like other forms, but—that's just, that's just my opinion, but like, but I think like sometimes, like you sort of say that and you're like, "Oh I*

wish I was going out with someone in their friend group, so I could like, be with my friend", you know what I mean? (Focus Group 4)

Implications

Services must be designed to respect young women's autonomy and choice, providing multiple entry points and ensuring confidentiality while avoiding the 'action plan' approach that removes agency. Whatever the approach, it must be one that works for young women, for example, a Women's Aid TikTok channel and youth worker rather than support worker. Services must also address the complex social pressures that delay disclosure and create shame-free environments that acknowledge the gap between knowledge and lived experience, recognising that knowing about abuse doesn't automatically make it easier to leave a relationship or seek help.

Theme 5: Developmental Context, Origin Stories, and Identity Formation

Overview

Adolescent relationships are characterised by intensity, identity exploration and formation, and formative experiences that shape future relationship patterns. Young women demonstrated sophisticated understanding of how early experiences impact long-term relationship development and recognised their developmental vulnerability while acknowledging growth over time.

Young women recognised how relationships fundamentally shape their developing sense of self, often in ways that can be harmful:

It makes you wonder what's wrong with you, not what's wrong with them. [Then] you have to strive to be better for them, and then that's just harming yourself. (Focus Group 1)

Participants also recognised that early relationship experiences create lasting patterns that are difficult to change if left unchallenged:

Early experiences leave scars. (Individual Interview 3)

> *If someone were to stick a label on me—I don't think that I would ever be able to let it go, like it would always be a part of me.* (Focus Group 3)

Implications

Services and education must be developmentally appropriate, recognising that adolescent relationships are both formative and intense experiences that shape young people's emerging identities. This developmental stage presents both vulnerability—where negative experiences can become embedded in young people's sense of self—and opportunity for growth and intervention that can disrupt harmful patterns before they solidify.

Supporting young women to reframe negative self-beliefs that emerge from relationship experiences represents a critical form of prevention work. When young women internalise messages like "This is what I deserve" or "I should have known better", early intervention can help them construct healthier narratives about themselves and their worth. This identity work—helping young women recognise their agency and value beyond their relationship experiences—constitutes a fundamental approach to addressing violence against women and girls at its roots.

Theme 6: Designing a Specialised Service for Young Women and Girls

Overview

Young women across interviews expressed a clear need for a service that is:

- Discreet and accessible
- Emotionally safe and non-judgmental
- Tailored to their lived experiences and digital realities
- Empowering rather than prescriptive

This section outlines key design principles derived from their voices.

Service Design Features

6.1 Discretion and Anonymity

- Many young women fear judgment, escalation, or loss of control when seeking help.
- Formal settings (e.g., schools, hospitals) are perceived as intimidating and often trigger automatic 'action plans' that remove agency.
- Anonymity is essential: *"You don't have an image stuck to you. If you're anonymous, no one knows it's you that has that problem."* (Focus Group 3)

Design implication: Offer anonymous webchat, discreet app features (e.g. hidden browsing history), and informal drop-in spaces.

6.2 Digital Accessibility

- Development of a Women's Aid social media channel. TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram are primary platforms for communication and information.
- Youth prefer concise, visual formats like infographics and short videos.
- They often turn to social media before formal services: *"If I need advice, I'm not going to go to a person, I'm going to go check it on TikTok, if I can't find the answer on TikTok, I'll check it on Google, uhm, and if I can't find it on Google, I will go to an actual—like I'll go try find a person."* (Individual Interview 1)
- Because young people often live at home, it is important to offer flexible access to support.
- Young people prefer human support as opposed to chatbots in the digital space.

Design implication: Develop a strong online presence with relatable content, peer-led videos, and interactive tools. Avoid overly clinical or institutional branding.

6.3 Language and Tone

- Terms like 'domestic violence" and 'Women's Aid' are seen as intimidating or irrelevant to young people's experiences.

- Preferred terms include ‘toxic’, ‘manipulative’, ‘gaslighting’, and ‘controlling’.
- Youth want conversational, empathetic language: *“Kind of less like a legal feeling—more like a conversational friendship.”* (Focus Group 1)

Design implication: Use youth-informed language. Frame services around relationship health and empowerment rather than pathology.

6.4 Representation and Inclusivity

- Young people want to see themselves reflected in services—across gender identities, sexual orientations, and cultural backgrounds They want a service designed to counter the performative nature of social media, one which offers young women a space for authentic dialogue about relationships without the need to curate, edit, or perform their experiences for an audience.
- Queer and non-binary youth emphasised the need for inclusive support: *“There’s more queer representation nowadays, they might still need to seek these services.”* (Individual Interview 4)
- *“[R]ealising, like it happens to everyone, like as you said, those figures at the start, it does happen to nearly every single woman so I think being amongst other people who have experienced it can help a person because then they’re like “I’m not the only one”, and they can take that self-blame off themselves as well, like that’s important for a girl like [me], to not blame themself, because they will live with that for, for life […].”* (Individual Interview 2)

Design implication: Ensure diverse representation in staff, materials, and outreach. Include LGBTQIA+ perspectives and avoid heteronormative assumptions.

6.5 Trust and Relational Safety

- Employing a youth worker as opposed to a support worker.
- Youth value being listened to without judgment or immediate intervention.
- They prefer speaking to older women with lived experience: *“Someone like your granny.”* (Focus Group 3)
- Building trust takes time: *“Get to know me first.”* (Focus Group 3)

Design implication: Train staff in trauma-informed care and active listening. Prioritise relational safety over rapid resolution. In the interviews, young women talked about not disclosing the full extent of their experience straight away; they take time to open up and share what is happening for them. A specialised service will provide support for young women and girls to prevent further victimisation and recovery from their experiences.

Importantly, service design must extend beyond direct service provision to include systemic work with the adults in their lives—parents and schools—who often serve as gatekeepers to support or create barriers to disclosure. Equally critical is the need to support parents and schools as key stakeholders in creating environments conducive to open dialogue. Parents require training to understand digital relationship dynamics and respond without judgment, moving beyond generational assumptions that relationships should be endured rather than evaluated for health. Schools must abandon automatic intervention responses that remove young people's control and instead develop supportive listening skills that respect student choice in disclosure. Both parents and schools need capacity building to create interactive learning spaces that allow for questions and individual exploration rather than didactic approaches, while recognising the complexity and nuance in young people's relationships rather than applying simplistic thinking that discourages honest communication. Without addressing these systemic barriers within young women's primary support networks, even well-designed specialist services will struggle to overcome the fundamental trust and communication gaps that prevent initial disclosure.

6.6 Empowerment, Choice and Skill-building

- Young women want advice, not directives. They resist being told what to do. This reflects an understanding of their own developmental needs and a rejection of paternalistic approaches.
- Services should support self-discovery and decision-making: *"Somewhere to go that would understand your situation without taking control."* (Focus Group 1)

- Young women want to develop practical relationship communication skills rather than receive prescriptive guidance.

Design implication: Design tools that help young people assess their relationships, explore options, and set boundaries—without pressure.

Service Features Based on Youth Input

Feature	Description
Anonymous Webchat	No login required; discreet and confidential
Youth-Led Content	TikTok-style videos, infographics, and peer stories
Inclusive Language	Avoid ‘DV’; use terms like ‘toxic’, ‘controlling’, ‘unhealthy’
App with Safety Tools	Info on red flags, reporting, and relationship health; hidden mode available
Physical Drop-In Spaces	Informal, welcoming environments with experienced staff
24-Hour Helpline	Accessible during private hours; avoids family interference
Peer Support Forums	Moderated spaces for sharing experiences and advice
Relationship Education	Info on healthy dynamics, boundaries, and digital abuse

Research Limitations

Whilst not without constraints, it is important to acknowledge that, given the limited time available, this research consultation achieved a great deal. Nevertheless, several limitations should be noted. This study involved methodological constraints that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The sample was drawn from four settings within Northern Ireland, restricting generalisability to broader

populations or different educational systems. In addition, because the participants identified from predominantly White populations, the perspectives of ethnic minority communities, who may face distinct cultural considerations, were potentially missed, further limiting the transferability of findings. Finally, there was limited representation from the LGBTQI population.

Final Reflections

Young women today are navigating increasingly complex relationship dynamics within a rapidly evolving digital environment. They demonstrate a high level of awareness, articulation, and a clear desire for meaningful support. It is therefore imperative to recognise and respect both their agency and their vulnerability. Any successful service must be designed to meet them where they are—across both digital platforms and offline contexts—delivering timely, intuitive, and emotionally intelligent support.

Moreover, such services must be developed not merely *for* young women, but in active collaboration *with* them. This requires a commitment to participatory design, continuous feedback mechanisms, and inclusive representation that reflects the diversity of their lived experiences. Emphasis should be placed on empowerment rather than protection, ensuring that support systems foster autonomy, resilience, and trust. By positioning young women as co-creators rather than passive recipients, services can become more responsive, inclusive, and effective—ultimately contributing to their well-being and capacity to navigate the challenges of contemporary life with confidence.

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Appendix 1a: Research Information Sheet (Participants)
(v. 1 February 2025)

Help us make support services better for young women and girls.

Study Title: Designing Specialised Support Services for Young Women & Girls

Researcher: Dr. Annemarie Millar

What is the study about?

Women's Aid Armagh Down (WAAD) wants to understand how to support young women and girls better in their intimate relationships.

The people who work at WAAD are working to create services that work for young people like you. We know that:

- Young women under 25 often experience different types of unhealthy behaviours in their intimate relationships
- It's not always easy to know what is okay and what isn't in relationships
- Finding the right support can be challenging
- Digital and social media can sometimes be used in unhealthy ways in intimate relationships

Why am I being contacted?

Your experiences and views matter.

For example, we want to learn from young women like you:

- Your thoughts on dating and relationships
- Where you would go if you needed advice and support
- What kind of advice and support would be most helpful

What will taking part involve?

Annemarie will ask you questions about how intimate relationships begin and explore healthy and unhealthy relationships by discussing attitudes and dynamics of intimate relationships.

We will use focus group discussions or an online program to ask you questions one-to-one with a researcher onscreen. The discussion itself will be relaxed and informal.

Annemarie will record the discussion to make sure we capture your views accurately. This recording will be deleted after we type up the notes.

How long will it take?

The research will take about 2 hours.

Your Privacy and Rights

We take your privacy seriously.

- Your name and contact details will be stored securely and separately from your responses.
- Nothing you say will be linked to you personally in our reports.

- You can stop participating at any time and do not have to give a reason.
- You will have access to a Women's Aid support worker who will be present on the day of the interview, if you would like to talk more.

Important: The only time we would need to share anything you tell us is if we learn that you or someone else is at risk of harm. We will always talk to you first if this happens.

What happens afterwards?

- Your responses will be kept secure for 12 months, then destroyed**.**
- We will email you a copy of the final report using the contact details you provided.
- We will use what you told us to design services to better support young women and girls like you. We may share the report with other professionals and organisations.

What are the benefits of taking part?

By sharing your views, you will contribute to vital research that helps design better support services for young women and girls in Northern Ireland. Your participation could also help organisations like Women's Aid better understand and raise awareness of dating and relationship violence among younger women, enabling them to recognise warning signs earlier and seek help when they need it.

What are the possible disadvantages?

We anticipate few disadvantages to taking part in this research, and previous research has found that young people who take part find it a positive experience. As the research involves answering questions of a private and sensitive nature, a possible concern is that you may become upset talking about some of these issues. However, your participation in the research is voluntary and you are free to stop the interview and withdraw at any time.

You will have the opportunity to speak with a support worker from Women's Aid if you wish to talk more or become upset.

Important: The only time we would need to share anything you tell us is if we learn that you or someone else is at risk of harm. We will always talk to you first if this happens.

Yes, I would like to take part. What do I do next?

Please read and sign the attached consent form and demographic information form. Return it to your teacher at your school or college. If you are taking part in one-to-one interviews, please read and sign the attached consent form and return it to WAAD. Annemarie will then contact you using the details provided to arrange a date and time that suits you.

What if I have questions or concerns?

For any questions about the research study, you can contact any member of the research team:

Dr. Annemarie Millar at contact@annemariemillar.com

Fiona Mc Naughton Fionam@womensaidarmaghdown.org

Helen Cranney helen@womensaidarmaghdown.org

If you have any questions or concerns about the study and would like to speak to someone who is NOT part of the research team, you can contact: Eileen Murphy (CEO Women's Aid Armagh Down) eileen@womensaidarmaghdown.org

Appendix 1b: Research Information Sheet (Parents/Carers) (v. 1 February 2025)

Study Title: Designing Specialised Support Services for Young Women & Girls

Researcher: Dr. Annemarie Millar

Invitation and Introduction

Hello. My name is Dr Annemarie Millar.

Thank you for your interest in this research**.**

I am looking for suitable participants and would like you to consider allowing the researcher to speak to your child about taking part in the research. Please read this overview before making your decision – it will provide information about the research and what your child will be asked to do. If you would like more information, please feel free to contact me. My details are at the end of this document.

You might find it helpful to discuss the research together with your child.

About the researcher

My name is Annemarie. I am a Chartered Psychologist and researcher registered with the British Psychological Society.

The research has received funding from the Department of Health and the Department of Justice.

What is the study about?

Women's Aid Armagh Down (WAAD) aims to raise awareness and design appropriate services for young women and girls who may be experiencing unhealthy behaviours in their intimate relationships. Research shows that young women under 25 are at greater risk of non-physical abuse, such as coercive control and emotional abuse, which young people themselves often normalize. However, there are few services designed specifically to meet their needs. Young women in this age group are less likely to seek advice and support through agencies such as schools, youth services, and police.

Digital and social media can sometimes be used in unhealthy ways in dating and intimate relationships. Young women and girls need support on how to keep themselves safe both online and offline, so they can confidently respond to unwanted communication and requests, and understand what is abusive to get help and support earlier.

Why am I being contacted?

We are looking to speak with young women and girls 17-25 years old to learn:

- Their views and experiences of dating and relationships
- Where they would go if they needed advice and support
- What kind of support would be most helpful

It is also important that as the parent/guardian, you understand what the research is about, why it is being carried out, and what it will involve for your child so that you can make an informed decision about their participation.

What will my child be asked to do

The study will involve your child answering some questions about their views of intimate relationships. The discussion itself will be relaxed and informal. We will use focus group discussions, or an online program at a time that is suitable for your child, to ask them questions one-to-one with a researcher onscreen.

The session should last no more than 2 hours. With your child's permission, this interview will be audio-recorded. This recording will be deleted after we type up the notes.

Is participation optional?

Participation is entirely voluntary. Both you and your child will be asked to sign a consent form. However, if you or your child change your mind about taking part, your child can withdraw at any point, either by simply telling us or by contacting the researcher using the contact details provided. Reasons for their withdrawal will not be required. If you or your child decide to withdraw, all your information will be destroyed, and none will be used for the research.

What information will you keep about my child?

All information which is collected during the research will be strictly confidential, stored securely, and will comply with data protection guidelines. No personal information will be traced back to any individual taking part in the study. The findings from the study will be written up and published in a variety of formats but your child will not be personally identifiable from anything that is written up or published. The final report will be completely anonymous.

How long will you keep the responses gathered?

We will keep your responses for at most 12 months. After that, we will destroy the responses.

What will happen afterwards?

We will be writing a report based on the research interviews with young women that will be available at the end of the research. Someone from Women's Aid will send this to you via email using the details you provided.

What are the benefits of my child taking part in the research?

It is important when designing services for young women and girls that they have been provided the opportunity to share their views and experiences, which can often differ from what adults think is important.

The ultimate aim is to improve our understanding of what is most helpful to young women and girls with a view to improving and providing helpful services to meet their needs. Previous research with children showed that they find this a very enjoyable and positive experience as it also provides an opportunity for children to talk about things that matter to them in a supportive environment.

What are the possible disadvantages?

We anticipate few disadvantages for your child taking part in this research, and previous research has found that children who take part find it a positive experience. As the research involves answering questions of a private and sensitive nature, a possible concern is that your child may become upset talking about some of these issues. However, your child's participation in the study is voluntary and your child is free to stop the interview and may withdraw at any time.

Your child will be given the opportunity to speak with a support worker from Women's Aid who will be present on the day of the interviews, if they wish to talk more or become upset.

Important: The only time we would need to share anything your child tells us is if we learn that your child or someone else is at risk of harm. We will always talk to you and your child first if this happens.

I am happy for Annemarie to talk to my child about taking part in the research.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information. Please complete the consent form below and return it to the school/college your child attends.

If you child is taking part in one-to-one interviews, please read and sign the attached consent form and return it to the WAAD support worker. Annemarie will then contact your child to arrange a date and time to speak with them.

What if I have any questions about the study?

For any questions about the research study, please contact any member of the research team:

Dr. Annemarie Millar at contact@annemariemillar.com

Helen Cranney helen@womensaidarmaghdown.org

Fiona Mc Naughton Fionam@womensaidarmaghdown.org

If you have any questions or concerns about the study and would like to speak to someone who is NOT part of the research team, please contact the Eileen Murphy (CEO Women's Aid Armagh Down) eileen@womensaidarmaghdown.org

Appendix 2a: Participant Consent Form and Demographic Survey (v. 1 February 2025)

Study Title: Designing responsive services for young women and girls

Researcher: Dr. Annemarie Millar

Please initial box

1. I have read and I understand the Research Information Sheet. ☐
2. I have received details of how to contact the researcher involved should I wish to request further information about the research. ☐
3. I have been able to ask questions about the research and any questions I had were answered. ☐
4. I agree that I am participating because I want to, and I can change my mind and stop the study at any time. I do not need to give a reason if I want to stop the study and there will be no consequences if I choose to stop. ☐
5. I understand that my responses will be kept for at most 12 months. My responses will not be saved with my name; they will be saved with an identification number. ☐
6. I agree that my responses can be audio recorded so that Annemarie can transcribe anything she might have missed while I am talking to her. After she transcribes the recording, it will be deleted. ☐
7. I agree that the research team can tell a Women's Aid support worker the date and time of my interview (so that Women's Aid can offer me a time to speak with a support worker, if I choose to). ☐
8. I agree to take part in this study. ☐

Name of person giving consent	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Mobile number		Email Address
_____		_____

Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____

Demographic information

We ask for information about your identity to help us better understand the diverse experiences of young women in Northern Ireland. Your responses will help in designing specialised services for young women in Northern Ireland.

All responses are confidential and will be stored securely. You have the option to skip questions you prefer not to answer.

How old are you: _____

Which of the following best describes where you live:

A town or city	
A village or in the country	
I'm not sure/prefer not to say	

Which of the following best describes your ethnicity. Please tick one box:

White • English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, or British • Irish • Gypsy or Irish Traveller • Roma • Any other White background	
Asian/Asian British • Indian • Pakistani • Bangladeshi • Chinese • Any other Asian background	
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African • Caribbean • African	

• Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background	
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups • White and Black Caribbean • White and Black African • White and Asian • Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background	
Other ethnic group	

Which of the following best describes your gender identity. Please tick one box:

Female	
Transgender	
Non-binary/Genderqueer	
Prefer to self-describe	
Prefer not to answer	

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation. Please tick one box:

Heterosexual/Straight	
Lesbian/Gay	
Bisexual	
Queer	
Prefer to self-describe	
Prefer not to answer	

Appendix 2B: Consent Form (Parents/Carers)
(v. 1 February 2025)

Study Title: Designing responsive services for young women and girls

Researcher: Dr. Annemarie Millar

Please initial box

1. I have read and I understand the Research Information Sheet outlining the purpose of the research ☐
2. I have received details of how to contact the researcher involved should I wish to request further information about the research ☐
3. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and any questions I had were answered. ☐
4. I give my consent for the researcher to talk to my child about the research and for my child to participate if they wish to do so. ☐
5. I agree that my child can withdraw from participating in the research and they do not need to give a reason if they want to stop the study and there will be no consequences if they choose to stop. ☐
6. I understand that my child's responses will be kept for at most 12 months. Their responses will not be saved with their name; they will be saved with an identification number. Any information supplied during this research will not be disclosed to any other parties. ☐
7. I agree that my child's responses can be audio recorded so that the researcher can transcribe anything she might have missed while they are talking to her. After she transcribes the recording, it will be deleted. ☐

Name of person giving consent	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Mobile number		Email Address
_____		_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____

Appendix 3: Interview Protocol and Procedure

Title: Designing Responsive Services for Young Women & Girls

Note: We will adapt this interview schedule as needed on a case-by-case basis for any specific learning challenges (or learning disabilities).

Introduction and Assent

Welcome. I want to explore what young people like you understand about healthy and unhealthy behaviour and dynamics in dating and romantic relationships; where you would go if you needed advice and support, and barriers to accessing help and support; and how you would design a specialised support service for young people like you living in Northern Ireland and beyond.

We're not looking for you to talk directly about your romantic relationships and experiences but rather, as an expert group, to reflect on the experiences on young people in general about how adults and professionals can understand and provide support that meets the needs of young people like you – a service that is designed for young people by young people.

You're the experts here, and you are completely in control of what you share and what you'd like to tell us. There are no right or wrong answers. You can ask to take a break, you can skip any questions that you don't want to answer, and you can stop or end the interview anytime. You're in control here and we will follow your lead.

That said, I know that you are answering questions of a private and sensitive nature and if it looks like you are distressed, I will pause asking questions and recommend we take a break for a bit. That doesn't mean you can't be emotional or show emotions; you are in control of what you share and how you share. I just also want to make sure I am respecting you as a person and respecting that we are talking about things of a private and sensitive nature. Just to repeat it again, you can also ask for a break anytime.

I'd also like to record your answers so that I can write them down in case I forget anything you said. Once I've written my notes, I will delete the recording. Is this okay with you?

I will also blank out any names that you mention, and just refer to people by their title, like 'teacher' or 'parent' or 'carer'.

I won't share your answers with anyone, unless you tell me that you or someone else is in danger, in which case I would have to share with your [teacher, youth leader] and with Fiona, who is here today, and another staff member from Women's Aid who is part of the research team, to follow their safeguarding policy, and for your or the other person's safety. If you say something that I think I might need to share with [your teacher], or Fiona, I will talk to you first just so that you are aware. Do you have any questions about this?

I'll be talking to other young people and will be putting all of your answers together to write a report about young people's attitudes to relationships, what happens when you need help, and what can be done to support young people better. Women's Aid, who funded this research, will be sharing this report with people like the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, who helps to make sure that the rights of children and

young people in Northern Ireland are being respected through the laws and through the way things are done. When they share with these people, they will not use your or anyone else's name, and they won't share any specific details from the responses that you give me; they will talk about young people's responses more broadly so that no specific young person can be identified. I will keep your responses, separately from your name, for at most three years, and then I will destroy them.

Some of your teachers and parents know you are speaking with me today and taking part in this research. If you would like to speak to someone, speak to me or Fiona after the discussion is over. I will not share your responses with them unless you ask me to. Is this okay with you?

We will begin with a warm-up exercise, and then we will discuss your views on healthy and unhealthy behaviours in romantic relationships by discussing an example. Finally, I will ask you to design a support service for young women and girls.

- How does all of this sound to you?
- Do you have any questions for me?
- Are you okay to get started?

Stage 1: Capacity Building (15-20 minutes)

Relationship Traffic Lights: Understanding Gender-Based Violence

Brief introduction:

The Relationship Traffic Lights exercise provides a framework to identify and discuss behaviours along a spectrum from healthy to unhealthy, with a specific focus on recognizing gender-based violence (GBV).

Researcher reads out to participants:

How many of you have heard of the term "gender-based violence"?

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term that refers to harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. In a recent survey with young women and girls in Northern Ireland, 98% said they had experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime. Things like race, class, and disability can make young women more vulnerable.

Gender-based violence has evolved from being viewed solely as a private matter to a public health concern, something that is not just physical abuse but encompasses psychological, economic, and digital forms of control and harm. Modern frameworks now recognise how these behaviours are reinforced by social media, online harassment, and coercive control tactics that may appear subtle but create significant power imbalances in relationships.

GBV is rooted in gender inequality, power imbalances, and harmful gender norms. GBV can take many forms, including:

- Physical violence (hitting, pushing, restraining)
- Sexual violence and harassment
- Psychological/emotional abuse (cat calling, controlling behaviours, isolation, degradation)
- Economic abuse (controlling access to resources)

- Digital abuse (monitoring online activities, sharing private content without consent)
- Coercive control (patterns of intimidation, isolation, and control)

Using the traffic light system, please categorise the different forms of GBV as:

- Green: Healthy, respectful behaviours based on equality and consent
- Yellow: Potentially problematic behaviours that may indicate warning signs
- Red: Clearly harmful or abusive behaviours that constitute gender-based violence
- Blue: Don't know or unsure

Time: 20 minutes

Materials: Red, yellow, green and blue cards for each participant

Discussion:

Following the exercise, the researcher will ask the group to share how they reached their decisions and what factors influenced their decisions.

- How did you find doing that exercise?
- How confident did you feel?
- What made it easy?
- What made it hard?
- Is there anything you would add/take out of the list?

Stage 2: Discussion to explore healthy/unhealthy relationship behaviours and dynamics (40 minutes)

I am now going to read a story in two parts. Each part will be followed by some questions for discussion around healthy/unhealthy behaviours.

I am now going to read a story in two parts. After each part, I will take a break to ask some questions. Is that okay? I want to say again there are no right or wrong answers.

Vignette: Part One

Brooke (17) and Georgie (22) met online. They started FaceTiming each other and meeting up. Brooke thought Georgie was kind, caring and loving – and treated her like an adult.

After a few weeks, Georgie started asking Brooke to send nudes. Brooke wasn't sure but Georgie said it would make them closer. Georgie said, "If you don't feel the same, we may need some time apart."

Brooke wanted to buy Georgie a surprise present, so she turned her location off in Snapchat. When Brooke saw Georgie, Georgie started shouting and calling her names saying she was cheating. When Brooke tried to walk away, Georgie grabbed her wrist and looked really angry.

Brooke began to see more of Georgie and spent less time hanging out with her friends so they could stay together and be happy. Georgie asked Brooke to send pictures of what she was wearing every day as Georgie didn't want others staring at her, because she was special, and they were in love.

1. Can you talk about the typical ways young people your age are approached and start chatting/connecting?

   Prompt: What makes you want to chat further?

   Prompt: What puts you off or makes you feel uncomfortable?

   Prompt: Is their story common for young people when they first start seeing each other?

   Prompt: What other behaviours can happen when young people start seeing each other that aren't mentioned in Brooke and Georgie's story?

2. What are your thoughts about Brooke and Georgie's story so far?

   Prompt: Is there a point where you meet up in person? Who decides things at this stage?

3. How confident do you feel in your ability to recognise, communicate, and speak up for your own needs and boundaries in romantic relationships?

   Prompt: What factors influence your confidence level? (For example, support of parents/siblings, learning in school, peers, another adult, faith, etc.)

Vignette: Part Two

Brooke and Georgie had been dating for nearly 6 months. With friends around, Georgie would be nice but when they were on their own, Georgie could yell and swear at Brooke over nothing. Sometimes Georgie would make fun of her body but when Brooke got upset, Georgie would say, "Lighten up, it was just a joke."

Brooke didn't like the way Georgie was treating her, so she broke it off. Georgie constantly sent Brooke texts and called her crying, begging for her to go back, saying, "I'm sorry, I'll change, I can't live without you" – and they got back together.

Brooke started to see less and less of her friends as Georgie said, "They don't like me." To reassure Georgie she wasn't speaking to others, Brooke handed over the passcode to her phone and Facebook account.

Sometimes Georgie would pressure Brooke to do things she didn't want to do. If she said no, Georgie would ignore her for days. Brooke felt confused, and was worried about upsetting Georgie, because the last time they had a row, Georgie threatened to hit her. Brooke told her friend that she was scared but her friend said, "Just tell Georgie, 'You're dumped'."

4. If Brooke was your friend, what would you think about Georgie's behaviour?

   Prompt: Are there any behaviours you would have found concerning?

   Prompt: Would you talk to your friend or offer any advice about Georgie's behaviour?

   Prompt: What would stop you talking to her or giving advice?

   Prompt: What language would you use to describe the behaviours in Brooke and Georgie's situation?

   Prompt: Would you ever use the term "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence"?

5. Would you consider reaching out to any other person such as a teacher or doctor or a professional organisation like Women's Aid for advice

   Prompt: What would stop you talking to them?

Prompt: Who would you turn to for advice if you were Brooke? What would make it easier to reach out for support or help?

6. What impact, if any, do you think the dynamics in the relationship have on Brooke's life?

Stage 3: Designing a specialised service for young women and girls (40 minutes)

As is clear from our discussions, you are the experts on your own lives. I now want to invite you to reimagine what a specialised service would look like if it was truly built around the experiences and needs of young women and girls in the context of dating and romantic relationships.

Key Questions to Guide the Conversation

- What are some of the benefits for your generation in the approach to dating and romantic relationships?
- What are some of the challenges?
- What current services or supports have felt meaningful to you, and why?
- Where do you feel existing services or supports miss the mark or create barriers?
- Can you give some examples of barriers?
- If you could design something from scratch, what would it look like? For example, what kind of help would be most helpful? What are the topics young women might need support with?
- How would you want to interact with this service? Think about location, style of communication, and who delivers it.
- Can you think of what you would call this service?
- What sort of things would make you feel truly seen, heard, and respected by this service or the people who deliver this service?
- Is there anything else you would like to share before we finish our discussion today?

De-brief

Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and ideas with me today. I'm sure it wasn't easy, and I appreciate you taking part.

By sharing your views, you will contribute to vital research that helps design specialised support services for young women and girls in Northern Ireland. Your participation could also help organisations like Women's Aid better understand and raise awareness of dating and relationship violence among younger women and help them to recognise warning signs earlier and seek help when they need it.

If you would like to speak with someone after this discussion, you can talk to me or Fiona.



With gratitude to all the young women and girls who shared their time, thoughts, and talents in this research. Your contributions give meaning and purpose to this work

Thank you