



## Safeguarding Teenage Intimate Relationships (STIR) Connecting online and offline contexts and risks

### Briefing Paper 1: Policy and Practice Awareness in Europe on Teenage Intimate Relationships and New Technology

#### Funded by DAPHNE III European Commission

This STIR Briefing Paper aims to map relevant policy, practice and knowledge on interpersonal violence and abuse (IPVA) in teenage intimate relationships across five European countries. Each partner in the STIR project – England, Norway, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Italy - have on two occasions convened a group of national experts to identify what is known about IPVA in young people's intimate relationships in each country, and to identify relevant policy and practice developments. The main findings are:

- **Bullying/cyberbullying has been used as a concept to include all forms of violence and aggression against children.**
- **The topic of teenage IPVA, online and offline, is either absent or acknowledged only to a limited degree in law, policies and action plans.**
- **Awareness of teenage IPVA is low amongst both young people and professionals.**
- **Training for professionals and young people is offered in all countries, but is usually one-off and is not delivered on a systematic and continuous basis.**
- **The extent to which the role of gender is recognized in prevention and intervention policies/practices on IPVA in teenage relationships varies greatly between the European countries participating in this study.**





**AIM AND OBJECTIVES** The STIR project's aim was to document young people's own experiences of online and face-to-face forms of interpersonal violence and abuse (IPVA) in five European countries: Bulgaria; Cyprus; England; Italy and Norway (see [www.stiritup.eu](http://www.stiritup.eu)). The specific objectives included exploring:

- the incidence of online and offline physical, emotional and sexual forms of IPVA in young relationships
- sending and receiving sexual images between intimate partners
- the subjective impact
- associated risk and protective factors
- help-seeking
- young people's experiences and perspectives on what would help.



## **METHODOLOGY**

STIR was based on a four stage mixed-method approach:

- Stage 1: Expert workshops to map policy and practice in five European countries.
- Stage 2: School-based survey of 4,500 young people aged 14-17 year-olds.
- Stage 3: Interviews with 100 young people
- Stage 4: Development of an app resource for young people ([www.stiritapp](http://www.stiritapp))

A young people's advisory group was convened in each country to comment on all aspects of the study.



## **FINDINGS**

### **Concepts and Definitions**

In England, experts identified polarized discourses on IPVA in young people's relationships ('lock them up' vs 'they're just kids'), depicting children as 'angels' or 'devils'. The media can contribute to public perceptions that online abuse or bullying is more widespread than is in fact the case.

Schools may define online IPV as bullying because they are familiar with that definition and have policies for managing bullying but young people may not see it in this way. Some behaviours such as the original sharing of sexual images with a partner may be perceived as consensual by victims so they don't define wider distribution of such images as bullying or abuse.

A further conflict of definitions concerns whether or not images or activities are judged as criminal and as noted below, this field is characterized by a lack of legislation. The experts contributing to the consultation discussions were themselves uncertain as to what aspects of abuse perpetrated online were criminal and it was noted that young people don't know what is illegal or not. Furthermore, young people's conceptions of consent might differ from those of professionals.

In Norway, there has been a focus on bullying in recent years, especially in regards to the *Olweus Programme* which has had a substantial impact on Norwegian schools and their approaches to handling issues of violence and abuse between students. The negative aspect of this is a tendency to define all negative behaviour between young people as bullying. IPVA as well as child abuse and neglect has for a number of years been a focus in Norway, but the IPVA is less acknowledged as a feature of young people's relationships.

In Cyprus, violence in the family has dominated public debate and the political agenda. Indeed, it is the form of violence most widely recognized and offers a framework within which other forms of violence (such as gender-based violence, violence against women, sexual abuse and intimate partner violence) are conceptualized and addressed. IPVA (especially IPVA in young people's relationships) is seldom referred to in the media or every day speech or literature. Sexual abuse in young people's relationships would be likely to be identified as a case of child pornography and addressed as such. Low levels of awareness in respect of IPVA and its impact on the well-being of young people have resulted in a very limited evidence base which could serve as a basis for the formulation of policy and practice.

Bulgarian experts mostly use concepts such as online bullying, gender-based violence and psychological abuse to refer to IPVA in young people's relationships. If an abusive behaviour is illegal, it is classified as a sexual crime or some more specific class of crime such as the production or dissemination of child abuse material.

In Bulgaria, media coverage of such cases is rarely in accordance with the best interests of the child. Labels like stalker, rape, and paedophile are used to sensationalise the issue. The social discourse rarely allows for unheated discussion of teenage sexuality, so the topic is unpleasant for many parents and teachers.

In Italy, no systematic or coherent data collection activity has been yet implemented so different behaviours – such as paedophilia, sexual abuse in the family, child pornography, child trafficking for sexual exploitation, bullying (and cyber bullying), IPVA, gender-based violence, domestic violence – often get conflated and confused.

## **Policy and Practice Initiatives on Prevention and Intervention**

In England, the experts agreed that there is a general lack of guidance for professionals and services. IPVA in young people's relationships is recognized in some Government policy documents as well as in national media campaigns, but not in other areas of policy such as the Government's child protection guidance in England. NGOs working on domestic violence and children's rights usually recognize the issue in their documents, while NGOs working in the field of bullying do not. There are fewer policy initiatives with regard to online IPVA. This form of harm is

recognized in Home Office guidance, and by some NGO projects, but not in Home Office domestic violence policy, anti-bullying and anti-cyberbullying policies, nor in publications from Internet safety organisations.

In Norway, the Government's four consecutive action plans on IPVA have to a limited extent acknowledged IPVA in young people's relationships. In the recent government report, *Strategy to Combat Violence and Sexual Abuse of Children and Adolescents*, IPVA both online and offline, is mentioned specifically. However, the strategy places more emphasis on cyberbullying (as well as grooming and other adult crimes against children online) than digital violence and abuse. A number of these laws and policies are new, such as prohibiting the posting of pictures without the consent of the persons portrayed, as the topic has received increasing attention in the last years. NGOs in Norway have to a limited extent acknowledged teenage intimate partner violence, offline and online. There are, however, a couple of exceptions where organizations such as Reform, the Oslo refuge for abused women and Jentevakta, an online volunteer service for young women, have worked extensively on preventing IPVA in young people's offline relationships. There are also a number of violence prevention programmes in schools, but none of them, to our knowledge, specifically acknowledge IPVA in young people's relationships.

In Cyprus, the topic of violence in teenage intimate relationships is absent from policy and practice. Laws and policies regarding domestic violence are not effective for young people's relationships as these take place outside the family (as defined by law). There are, however, policies and laws that could apply to both offline and online cases of sexual abuse/exploitation within young people's relationships. Other forms of IPVA in young people's relationships, both offline and online, are not directly regulated by any law or policy and are addressed under laws on general harassment if reported to the police. There are no clear guidelines on how to best deal with incidents of IPVA in young people's relationships, which relevant State services need to be involved and on how victims can be best protected and supported.

In Bulgaria, there are several policy documents relevant to prevention and intervention in cases of IPVA. Although IPVA in young people's relationships is not mentioned in the Bulgarian Child Protection Act (2010), there was consensus among the experts that such cases are a risk to the health and development of children and, as such, are child protection issues. In accordance with the National Plan for Prevention of Violence against Children 2012-2014, a special mechanism for counteracting bullying and cyberbullying was established by the Ministry of Education. This plan includes support for the Bulgarian Safer Internet Helpline. Projects aimed at prevention of violence and bullying/cyberbullying have been implemented, and methodologies developed, by the NGO sector.

In Italy, all levels of government in Italy have set up policies and actions to support and protect children. In 2007, the Public Education Ministry issued a directive for all schools, underlining the risks related to bullying and cyber-bullying specifically, and set up a phone line and website, as well as permanent observatories on bullying in each region. Italian experts agreed on the relevance of one particular project conducted at national level: Connected Generations, developed by Telefono Azzurro and Save the Children Italy, to reduce online risks for children with special attention to cyber-bullying.

## Barriers to Prevention and Intervention

The expert groups in all countries noted a lack of evidence regarding effective policies or interventions. Evaluations tended to be local and small-scale and no systematic data collection has been yet implemented for creating a database of best practices. There were no national systems for monitoring and analyzing IPVA in young people's relationships. However, a scoping review of preventive interventions addressing IPVA in young people's relationships has been completed in the UK (Stanley et al 2015).

In England, the barriers to prevention and intervention in this field were understood as being related to school environments. Schools were seen to be reluctant to talk about sexual bullying and trying to make them address the issue in their policies or teaching was described as very difficult. The extent to which they responded to disclosures of online abuse in young people's relationships was usually dependent on one teacher acting as a champion. Experts argued that instead prevention should be seen as a whole school issue and that an institutional level response was needed.

In Norway, schools are recognised as one of the main arenas for prevention work. However, schools are similarly reluctant to work with issues of violence and abuse. The 2013/2014 curricula for elementary schools and upper secondary schools include issues of violence and sexual abuse but do not specify IPVA in young people's relationships. As in other countries, NGOs working on IPVA in young people's relationships have recently experienced restrictions in funding which has impacted on these services.

At the expert meeting in Bulgaria, the participants pointed out that the current policies and practices are not very effective for several reasons. First, trust between agencies is low and professionals are reluctant to report cases due to concerns about secondary victimization when multiple agencies have to intervene and interrogate the child several times. Conflicting procedures and the limited use of child-friendly interrogation facilities also pose a problem when a child enters the judicial system. Second, there are insufficient resources to ensure the implementation of comprehensive prevention measures across the country. Third, there is a high staff turnover in child protection services which impedes continuous training and the development of the expertise required to address child abuse especially in its latest online manifestations. Last but not least, the training delivered NGO organizations might be relevant and up-to-date, but its reach is usually limited to a few schools or municipalities.

In Cyprus, all experts recognized that interventions in the field of bullying and cyber bullying are primarily focused on prevention and awareness-raising whilst interventions remain relatively weak. In absence of a comprehensive policy framework, there are no clear guidelines on how schools can best proceed with handling IPVA incidents in the school environment, what actions need to be taken and which relevant authorities or professionals need to be involved. With regards to service provision, there are few government services that can offer victims support. Instead, NGOs fill this gap in service provision, providing psychological support

through their helplines. Also, awareness-raising campaigns take place in an ad-hoc and piecemeal manner, lacking systematic and joined-up approaches. In Italy, the implementation of policies and guidance varies considerably between regions. In the current economic crisis, NGOs who have contributed to work in this field have suffered from cuts in public funding. Whilst incidents of IPVA in young people's relationships may be identified, there is a lack of resources and expertise to implement effective forms of support for young people. A risk-management perspective focused on managing the perpetrator seemed to prevail rather than an approach that would emphasise protecting the victim and preventing future violence.

## Levels of Awareness

In England, awareness of teenage intimate partner violence is generally low amongst young people and professionals, although recent initiatives such as the Home Office's *This Is Abuse* campaign may have had some impact in this respect. However, most initiatives and campaigns focus on the victim rather than perpetrator. There is a lack of relevant language to challenge the behaviour of perpetrators. Recognition of abusive behaviour may be compromised by the normalization of violence and abuse both online and in intimate relationships generally and young people may lack of understanding of what a respectful relationship might look or feel like. However, some experts considered that young people may get involved in abusive behaviour online despite having exposure to models of respectful relationships. In such cases, involvement in online forms of IPVA might be explained by access to technology or exposure to pornography together with natural sexual exploration and a propensity for risky behaviour among teenagers.

Additionally, the problem of IPVA in young people's relationships, whether online or offline, is often hidden from adults and professionals. Their lack of awareness is partly attributable to the fact that knowledge of actual incidents is confined to peer groups.

In Norway, awareness is low among professionals. Campaigns and awareness material have been targeted at adults. Awareness of IPVA appears higher among young people since this is an issue that affects them and their friends, but victims seldom communicate with or seek help from adults.

In Cyprus, there is little information disseminated and very few awareness-raising activities that address IPVA in young people's relationships. The most important awareness raising activity in this field was the development and dissemination of the *Youth 4 Youth* manual for professionals. Although this manual was devised as tool to combat gender-based violence, it includes a specific chapter on IPVA in young people's relationships as well guidelines for both prevention and the management of such incidents.

In Bulgaria, experts consider aggressive interaction between peers in general to be increasing. However, IPVA in young people's relationships is rarely discussed, so most professionals are not aware either of its manifestations or the prevalence of this phenomenon in schools. Some NGOs also organize interactive discussions for young people, which the experts considered more effective than the distribution of fliers and brochures, since they assist young people to develop skills to cope with challenging situations.

In Italy, the expert group could not identify any awareness raising initiatives specifically addressing IPVA in young people's relationships.

## Training for Professionals

The English experts agreed that there were differences discernible in levels of training and awareness amongst both the police and education professionals. In general however, practitioners are wary about intruding into area of intimate relationships – these are seen as private territory but, for young people, privacy rules are shifting. Practitioners are not confident about working with new technology and need to learn how to ask questions about cyberlives. There are a few training initiatives mainly delivered by NGOs such as Tender which trains teachers to deliver a programme aimed at tackling IPVA to children and young people in schools. However, the topic of IPVA in young people's relationships is not routinely addressed in teacher training.

In Norway, as in England, practitioners are wary about addressing the issue of teenage IPV both online and offline. The expert group considered that the generation gap that exists in respect of new technologies makes it difficult for young people and adults/professionals to address issues together in a fruitful way. Professionals, such as teachers and the police, are to varying degrees equipped to deal with these cases; they usually lack relevant training but rather rely on personal interest and engagement. Refuges for abused women provide expertise on IPV, but, until recently, they have had a limited focus on teenagers and their relationships. Teachers in Norway receive very limited training, if any, on these topics during their professional education and there are few opportunities for them to receive any further training on these issues after qualifying.

In Cyprus, the experts agreed that even though there have been attempts to educate teachers on cyberbullying, substantial gaps in knowledge and skills are still evident. Trainings is often ad-hoc and lacks continuity and consistency. Young people's intimate relationships are not a topic of priority for teachers' continuing education and teachers therefore lack the required skills and do not feel confident to teach the subject of relationships. While the Ministry of Education and the Pedagogical Institute have trained a considerable number of parents and educators on (cyber)bullying and on safer Internet use, this training was not systematic and continuous. NGOs also deliver occasional training on cyberbullying and online risks for educators and other professionals.

Participants in the expert meeting in Bulgaria felt that professionals working with young people were not adequately prepared to address issues such as bullying and gender-based violence. They emphasised that professionals are especially uncertain in situations that involved new technologies due to their own lack of confidence in this area. Training for teachers on IPVA was judged unsatisfactory and the training that was available was not delivered on a regular basis. As in other countries, there is a reliance on NGOs to develop these training initiatives.

In Italy, the experts noted that schools are a primary setting for prevention of IPVA. However, teachers lack the training they need to identify and deal with events of

abuse and violence. Instead, they resort to referral to social services which is often inappropriate or at too late a stage.

## Education for Children and Young People

In England, there are a number of preventive programmes for young people. Most of these target IPVA, and some explicitly address IPVA that is perpetrated online. However, such interventions tend to be delivered in schools on a one-off basis, sometimes in response to an incident, rather than being embedded into the curriculum. In Norway there are a number of school-based prevention programmes that focus on bullying and relational work however, none of them focus specifically on IPVA in young people's relationships. The experts agreed that such training is usually delivered in response to an NGO's outreach initiatives in schools or as an ad-hoc initiative organized by an individual teacher or youth leader.

There is material available for educating young people on cyber-bullying and safe use of the internet. Sex education includes a focus on interpersonal relationships but gender plays little part in this teaching. In Bulgaria, education on IPVA for young people consists mainly of one-off on issues such as bullying and gender-based violence and delivery is determined by the interests of the individual teacher or school policy. Juvenile delinquency services are also responsible for preventive interventions, so they may organise discussions on the topic with young people but again this is at the discretion of the local office. Some NGOs visit schools or organise training for young people outside school on issues such as bullying and cyberbullying. There are also some peer research and mentoring programmes addressing bullying and online safety.

In Italy, many schools deliver teaching to students, usually through class discussion, on bullying/cyberbullying. Gender-based violence is infrequently addressed and the issue of IPVA is not tackled in school settings. The experts noted that no information was available on which schools and NGOs were working on this issue, in what ways and with what levels of effectiveness.

## Gender Perspectives

In England, the gender dimension of teenage IPV was fully recognised by members of the expert group and they identified two campaigns that had addressed issues of gender. However they concluded that whilst IPVA is a gendered issue in England, interventions for young people often lack a gendered approach. The gendered aspect of the issue is conveyed in everyday speech and the use of stereotypical and misogynist language. Some experts suggested that schools avoided the gendered dimension by default, framing the issue as bullying rather than the more 'difficult', 'embarrassing' and 'sexual' issue of IPVA. It was thought particularly important to engage young men in interventions that would allow and enable them to change abusive behaviour.

In Norway, the gender dimension of IPVA as well as IPVA in young people's relationships is recognized by experts, although official documents and laws may be gender neutral.

In Cyprus, the gender perspective is completely absent from the legal framework, policy and practice addressing any form of violence. Experts lacked knowledge and awareness of what it would mean to have a gender perspective incorporated in policy and practice. This lack of any gender perspective in policies and practices that address violence and abuse resulted in women going unrecognized as the primary victims. Moreover, as a gender perspective was absent, there was limited data available regarding how women and men, young people experience violence and are affected by it in different ways.

In Bulgaria, according to the participants in the experts' meeting, a gender perspective on violence and abuse is confined to social workers and is rarely found outside social services. Teachers and policy makers tend to be insensitive to gender issues. Including the gender perspective in policy and practice was considered important for ensuring that the wellbeing of both men and women was adequately addressed.

Experts in Italy reported that little attention was given to gender in prevention and intervention policies and practices on violence/bullying/cyber-bullying in young people's intimate relationships.

The logo for STIR (Supporting Teachers in Resolving Incidents) features the word "STIR" in bold, orange, sans-serif capital letters on a blue rectangular background that resembles a torn piece of paper.

## IMPLICATIONS

1. IPVA should be clearly distinguished from bullying or cyber-bullying in policy documents and the gendered nature of this form of harm and abuse should be identified.
2. Awareness of IPVA in young people's relationships is at different levels in different European countries so a European wide policy should start with promoting awareness of both online and offline IPVA in young people's interpersonal relationships.
3. European governments should clarify and publicise existing law that can be used to protect young people from IPVA in both their online and offline intimate relationships. Further research should examine the value and feasibility of strengthening the law to protect young people from this form of harm.
4. Although schools are key sites for prevention and intervention regarding IPVA in young people's relationships, teachers across Europe appear to lack confidence and expertise to address the issue. The EU should promote integrating training on this issue into qualifying education for teachers.

5. Much education for young people on this issue is delivered in an ad-hoc way. Integrating teaching on this issue into the national curricula would make for a more sustained and consistent approach to prevention.
6. Strategies for preventing and intervening in IPVA in young people's relationships should include the development of appropriate and acceptable services for victims. Young people themselves should be consulted about what form such services could take.



### Briefing Papers

1. *Policy and Practice Awareness in Europe on Teenage Intimate Relationships and New Technology*
2. *Incidence Rates and Impact of Experiencing Interpersonal Violence and Abuse in Young People's Relationships*
3. *Risk and Protective (Predictive) Factors for IPVA Victimisation and Instigation*
4. *Young People's Views on Prevention and Intervention for Interpersonal Violence and Abuse in Young People's Relationships*
5. *Young People's Perspectives on Interpersonal Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationships*



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The publication has been produced with the financial support of the DAPHNE Programme of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of The STIR Team and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.