



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

Briefing Paper 5: Young People's Perspectives on Interpersonal Violence and Abuse in Intimate Relationships

Funded by DAPHNE III European Commission

This briefing paper reports findings from interviews undertaken with young people in five European countries on their experience of: online and offline control and surveillance; sending sexual images ('sexting') and sexual pressure and physical and emotional violence as well as their views on what constitute a positive relationship. The main findings are:

- **In all five countries, online and offline control and surveillance was accepted as normal by many young people.**
- **Verbal abuse was extensive and tolerated by many young people interviewed; physical violence was also normalised, especially when alcohol was involved.**
- **Offline sexual pressure was extensive for some young women in all five countries and was normalised to the extent that rape was sometimes not recognised.**
- **Young people in four countries had sent sexual images of themselves and in the England in particular this was perceived as normal behaviour. Online control and surveillance and offline abuse were closely related.**
- **Using social networking as a means of perpetrating abuse intensified the impact.**
- **Impact varied according to gender with young women reporting substantially more harmful impact than young men.**





AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The STIR project's aim was to document young people's own experiences of online and face-to-face forms of intimate violence and abuse in five European countries: Bulgaria; Cyprus; England; Italy and Norway (see www.stiritup.eu). This working paper explores the following issues:

1. What is a positive relationship?
2. Experiences of control and surveillance online and offline
3. Experiences of sending sexual images and sexual pressure
4. Experiences of physical and emotional violence
5. Gendered dimensions and impacts of interpersonal violence and abuse (IPVA)
6. The role of new technologies in offline abuse.



METHODOLOGY

For the qualitative arm of the study, a total of 100 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with young people: 91 of these interviews were included in the analysis as not all young people recruited had direct experiences of intimate violence. The interview respondents were recruited from schools via pastoral services, settings such as youth camps and workshops for young people or specialist services such as those working with IPVA. Young people gave their consent to participate and were assured confidentiality unless they disclosed current significant harm. If the young person was aged under 16 years-old, signed consent was also obtained from their parents. Interviews were completed with 67 young women and 24 young men. Interviews were semi-structured, using an interview schedule and vignettes (that young people's advisory groups had helped to develop) and analysed using a Framework approach, to ensure that comparable issues were identified and understood in context.



INTERVIEW FINDINGS

What is a good relationship?

A good relationship is a relationship where you and your partner really trust each other, feel that you can talk to each other about everything and you can be yourself with the other person... In a good relationship

you can feel free to act spontaneously without thinking beforehand if you need to say something. (Smaragda,17, Cyprus).

The most important thing is the respect and after that comes trust and allowing personal space to the other. That is it! (Sophia,18, Bulgaria)

Almost all young people responded to our question about what comprises a good relationship with comprehensive descriptions of healthy relationship attributes. These included: mutual trust; honesty; effective communication; giving each other space; boosting each other's confidence; liking you for who you are; emotional support and care; feeling safe and mutual respect. Trust was the most common theme identified across the 91 interviews.

Experiences of control and surveillance online and offline

The trouble happened when I told him I had to go to church or do some activities with my friends from the parish... shouting and fighting was the rule... (Gaia, 17, Italy).

In all five countries, some young people we interviewed had experienced control and surveillance, and in four countries (not Norway) a few reported using these behaviours themselves. Online control included: being instructed not to chat with specific people or to delete contacts; being pressured or forced to give passwords for online accounts; having their text conversations monitored or receiving constant phone calls to check on their whereabouts. Offline control included: limiting contact with friends; telling their partners what to wear; turning up uninvited and getting upset, annoyed and angry if their partner wanted to take part in activities without them.

Normalisation of online and offline control and surveillance was apparent in some of the accounts. Although most of those interviewed considered that decision making was shared equally in their relationships it became apparent in the course of the interviews that some young people were in controlling relationships. This contradiction may be explained by the fact that some young people accept controlling behaviour and see it as a normal part of a 'caring' relationship. Sharing passwords appeared to be accepted as standard by many young people; control and surveillance was seen as a sign of care, love or protection:

Initially I thought it [him calling to ask where I was and wanting details of who I met and what I was doing] was ok... I even kind of liked it, you know... I thought it was a sign he really cared for me. (Claudia, 15, Italy)

To have your girlfriend 'like' photos of people she doesn't know isn't such a nice thing to see in Facebook...when she does that it's as if she is saying she doesn't want me. (Chrysanthos, 16, Cyprus)

Where controlling behaviour was not normalised, it was still accepted by a few young people who were willing to be controlled in order to make their partner happy or to avoid confrontation: *'it's like you'll do anything to make them happy'*. However, some young people were starting to question their acceptance of controlling behaviour *'If he trusts me why is he doing so? Does he want to control me? Isn't this blackmailing?'*

Those young people who had put an end to control and surveillance in their relationships had achieved this by either ignoring it - *'I can do what I want [no matter what they say]'* - by ending the relationship or by making joint decisions to give each other equal freedom: *'He realised that if he wanted to have friends that were like girls he had to like lay off'*.

Sending sexual images and sexual pressure

In four countries, some young people we interviewed had sent sexual images of themselves to their partners. In Cyprus, no-one had sent an image but a few young people knew of people who had. Being asked for a sexual image by partners was accepted as normal by young people in England (almost all had been asked at one time or another). Sending sexual images was sometimes mutual and freely chosen but normalisation of this in some peer cultures (all but Cyprus) led to expectations that sometimes caused pressure and anxiety for those young women who were afraid that their refusal might end the relationship: *'I do not want to put a barrier between us [by refusing to send nude pictures of myself], but at the same time I do not want to get hurt'*. In Bulgaria, those interviewed felt that they had a choice whether to send such pictures, but some considered that this was normal practice for younger girls:

'The Internet is full of girls as young as 12-13 with naked photos or clips. For example, they dance and strip. One was only 8 and had such a clip.... Young girls just don't understand. For them, this is something normal'. (Lois, 17, Bulgaria)

Most young people refused to send images because they did not trust their partners and were afraid of the possibility of the photos being shared with others after the break once the relationship ended:

I have never shared pictures with guys I have been going out with, one tried, but I thought it was unnecessary, he called when he was drunk and asked why I wouldn't...I didn't trust him, he could have used that picture, it has consequences, if I would break up he could have used that picture against me.
(Julia, 16, Norway)

Creating and sharing sexual images and text was occasionally described as a 'regular mutual exchange' (Italy, female 16), in which images might be sent without pressure. One young woman also described initial hesitation that turned into enjoyment 'after a while I liked it too ...I didn't get completely naked but almost. I liked it... I thought it was going to be our little secret'. But when such images were shared with other people it caused a lot of distress especially for participants from religious families or small communities.

Even when images and intimate texts had not been shared, knowing that their partner or ex-partner had them in their possession caused anxiety for some young people, especially young women:

He walks along with her 'whole life', in his mobile phone, ready to share it with anyone at any time. (Erika, 17, Norway)

None of the young people interviewed said that they had put anyone under any sexual pressure. Experience of being pressured online was evident among young people in England, Italy and Norway. Offline sexual pressure and abuse was more extensive and experienced mainly by young women in all five countries. This included forced touching, kissing, oral sex and rape. Sexual pressure was normalised: 'When you are going out with someone when you are 15, you have sex', and rape within relationships was not sometimes recognised: 'I know I didn't want it, but regardless, it happened, but I don't see it as that [rape]'.

Young female participants sometimes were forced to send more explicit sexual images against their wishes. In some instances they continued to do so because their partner applied pressure or threats if more photos were not sent:

This other guy said that if I did not send him a picture of 'down there', he would post it [the photo he already had] (Mia, 15, Norway)

Most young people had talked to a close friend about such incidents, but had not contacted the police due to fear of their parents' reactions. Other young people reported abuse and sharing of images if they felt confident of support from family or teachers but one young English woman who had done so noted that the police 'didn't really do anything, they just spoke to me about it and they spoke to him about it'. (See STIR Briefing Paper 4 for more discussion of young people's disclosure patterns).

Experiences of physical and emotional violence

I beat them with words. This is most hurtful. (Stefan, 18, Bulgaria)

The vast majority of young people interviewed in all five countries had experienced behaviours that can be described as emotionally abusive. In four countries (not Norway) a few or even a large minority described perpetrating these behaviours.

Emotional violence included: deceit; derogatory comments; being humiliated; betraying privacy; violent outbursts; and extremes of rejection followed by devotion.

In many instances, verbal insults came from both partners and were generally not viewed as abusive behaviour. But emotional abuse could also be one sided and normalised as *'just the way he was. He would tell me how good I was for putting up with him'*. However, the significance of emotional violence was highlighted both by those who had experienced it and those who perpetrated it:

I'd rather, to be honest I'd rather be beaten then have emotional pain because I don't deal with things like that very well. (Bethany, 15, England)

Physical violence had been experienced by at least one person interviewed in each country, and by nearly half of the young people interviewed in Italy. In Bulgaria and Italy, a few young people also described perpetrating physical violence. Perpetration of physical violence appeared to be normalised, especially where alcohol was involved. Again, this was both by those who perpetrated it and those who experienced it:

It was stupid to beat her, though it does not count when you are drunk...She didn't feel bad because she [had refused to dance with me] out of stubbornness. (Peter, 18, Bulgaria)

...you know, he was a bit drunk because we were coming back from a party and – true – maybe I shouldn't have looked at messages without telling him. (Marta, 16, Italy)

Young people almost always described physical violence as a form of retaliation. Some saw physical violence as an understandable reaction to disobeying their partner's wishes, invading their privacy, or just when it was part of someone's personality: *'I would tell myself, it's his anger talking'*. Young women also blamed themselves for their partner's violence: *'I felt like I annoyed him and kind of led him to do it'*. Others, like this young man from Italy, made a clear distinction between emotional and physical violence: *'fighting and arguing verbally is ok but never, never use physical violence!'*

These issues were rarely discussed with adults, who were often seen as dismissive of young people's relationship concerns and were described as making comments like: *'you are too young to be depressed ... your problems are not real'*.

The role of new technologies in offline abuse

He had asked me never to speak to a particular boy who had made a comment on one of the pictures I posted on Facebook. Once when he saw me talk to this boy he was so angry he almost slapped me (Tatiana, 16, Cyprus).

It is perhaps more useful to identify new technologies of abuse than to consistently distinguish between online and offline abuse as the line between online and offline worlds is blurred for young people. Monitoring of messages could lead to actual physical violence. One young woman from Italy described being repeatedly slapped for having looked at her partner's phone.

Phones could be used to report offline activities, as when an 18 year old young women discovered by chance an SMS sent to her partner by his friend which reported details of her activities at a party her partner had not attended. She described feeling *'controlled as not even my parents had ever done!'* The SMS then became the cause of a face to face argument as he *'convinced me that I was the one to blame because I had looked at his private messages'*.

Sexual pressure tended to be applied offline. Although digital technology had been used to circulate images, a few instances of sharing occurred by physically showing pictures on phones rather than through digital forwarding. For some, sexting did not lead to images being shared and being sexually intimate online could avoid the challenges of sex *'for real... well, that's another story... you could get pregnant... and you have to find the place'*.

Technology played a significant role in online insults: *'he would write different things on his wall that put me down'* and virtual rows where *'you'll soon be like, 'Oh I shouldn't have sent that!' And then you're having to apologise and then it gets even worse'*. But at the same time, some young people preferred discussions via text as this enabled them to take a break; with face to face arguments *'you do not have the luxury of a time-out'*.

Gendered Impact of IPV

If a naked picture of mine goes around the web, no problem... for a girl it is different... her reputation would be in trouble... (Carlo, 17, Italy)

In common with the findings from the STIR survey (see STIR Briefing Paper 2), the impact of the control and surveillance described by interviewees was gendered with young men emerging as more likely to feel angry, end contact or end the relationship:

I left her immediately because I don't accept these things. There is no reason to. (Stefano, 16, Italy).

Some young women also resisted being controlled, but others blamed themselves: *'[I] feel guilty for having talked to [ex-boyfriend]'* and they were more likely than boys to describe a feeling sad, hurt, unconfident or isolated as a consequence of IPVA. Different standards for the two partners within a relationship were described and

these were usually gendered: *'he knows the password ...but he won't let me have his'*.

The impact of sharing of sexual images and sexual pressure was much more problematic for young women as they were vulnerable to damage to their reputation whereas young men were not. Female virginity and chastity emerged as be important in Cyprus where: *'It is her only dowry'*. In every country where we conducted interviews sexual pressure was generally reported to be directed at young women.

Young women described stronger feelings of hurt and fear as a consequence of physical violence: *'he scares me,...actually I feel really overpowered and terrified.'* In contrast, young men tended to *'just laugh'* or *'got annoyed and ended the relationship'*. Verbal taunts which some young men saw as a joke, could feel crushing:

At first he was, it's obviously like jokey stuff ... I don't want to hear this all the time, ...I want to hear you say something nice for once rather than just all the time saying something horrible.. (Molly, 15, England)



IMPLICATIONS

1. Recognising coercion and violence in intimate relationships is crucial if IPVA is to be challenged and ended, yet many of those young people interviewed accepted such behaviour as normal. Raising awareness of IPVA in both its offline and online forms among young people and their parents should be a priority for EU governments.
2. Online and offline forms of control and abuse intersect in young people's lives. Recognition of this interrelation will be key to developing appropriate strategies and interventions to prevent IPVA in young people's intimate relationships.
3. Schools can play a key role in developing young people's understandings of what constitutes a positive relationship and what kinds of behaviours are unacceptable. Any programme offered to young people needs to be aimed at both victims and perpetrators. This is particularly important as the distinction between victims and perpetrators was not always clear; some young people saw themselves as victims of some abusive behaviours whilst perpetrating other forms of violence. In order to avoid polarising positions, learning in non-judgemental environments about appropriate behaviour and boundaries is an essential first step.

4. Both schools and media campaigns could be used to deliver messages about the possible negative outcomes of sharing sexual images. These should be targeted at younger groups of children and young people as well as at older teenagers.
5. Gender inequality structures and sustains IPVA in young people's relationships and its influence should be addressed in education and campaigns. Some of the young men interviewed for this study showed an awareness of gender inequality. Involving young men in campaigns and initiatives, so that male stereotypes are challenged by young men themselves who can provide role models for alternative masculinities is one approach that may prove valuable. Measures promoting gender equality in schools should be embedded across the curriculum and in all aspects of school life.



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.