No knives
Better lives

the Lassies are No Feart

Violence Between Girls in Scotland

April 2024

YouthLink Scotland

Contents

18+

This report necessarily engages with potentially distressing material, including violence, suicide, and misogyny which are essential to exploring and understanding the experiences of girls and young women in Scotland.

We have kept true to the young women's own words so there are swear words and offensive language within the quotations throughout.

The report contains quotes from both young people and practitioners participating in the research. Young people quotes are in **pink.** Practitioner quotes are in **grey.**

Foreword

Through No Knives, Better Lives, we have sought to better understand the experiences of boys and young men through our Imagine A Man project, but what are the experiences of girls and young women in relation to interpersonal violence? We first need to understand these experiences and involve young women in developing the solutions to reducing and preventing violence.

The young women we spoke to were loyal friends, protective of their families, brave and funny. For the majority of them, violence was woven into their lives, through exposure on social media and through involvement in physical violence with other young people (and occasionally adults).

The line between those responsible for violence and those harmed by violence was blurred, as is often the case. The young women were navigating issues that make it more difficult for them to make positive choices to keep themselves and their peers safe. They talked of their challenges with mental health, often due to bullying, and their perception of the lack of adult support available.

The young women we spoke to left a long tail. Their experiences have stayed with us, impacting us and our practice. We want to thank all the participants for their openness and honesty in sharing their experiences and opinions with us.

We ask that when you are reading this report to consider the totality of the young women and their experiences.

Nadine and Emily.

A note about the title and front cover design

The title, 'The Lassies are No Feart', is part of a direct quote from a youth work practitioner. Although the practitioner was highlighting the bravado of the young women they've worked with, we felt the quote also symbolised bravery in the face of adversity. Throughout this report you can see young women are asking in their own way for support to navigate friendships, social media, and relationships.

As part of putting young women front and centre of this report, we have used hand lettering, doodles and colours in the design that were used and inspired by young workshops participants.

YouthLink Scotland's CEO

As the report demonstrates, violence between girls is quick to gain public interest, but for too long, the issues faced by girls and young women have been minimised or normalised. The report is a call to action for the youth work sector and beyond to work collaboratively to tackle these challenges head-on.

It stands as a vital addition to the ongoing initiatives led by YouthLink Scotland, employing a gendered lens to improve violence prevention strategies.

It acknowledges the experiences of girls and young women, whilst recognising the complexity of the world they're navigating.

At the heart of youth work lies positive change, offering crucial avenues for addressing the central concerns raised by young women in this report – nurturing relationships with trusted adults and establishing safe physical spaces within communities. By participating in youth work, young people not only build confidence and resilience but foster healthy relationships and learn to navigate risks effectively.

As part of a broader collection focused on preventative measures with young people, this report amplifies the call for inclusive, holistic approaches to safeguarding young people and fostering an equitable and safe future for all.

Tim Frew,
CEO, YouthLink Scotland

Executive Summary

The past year has seen an increase in attention on social and mainstream media about physical violence between girls and young women. Although this does not appear in official crime statistics or research with children, we wanted to learn more from young women about their experiences of violence.

We spoke with four groups of young women across Scotland and four adult practitioners. For most of the young women, there was violence in different areas of their lives, such as on social media, in school and the community.

This report aims to increase our understanding of young women's experiences of and involvement in violence, in order to better support them to reach their full potential.

Relationships, Support and Community

- Many young people felt families, often mothers, supported involvement in violence.
- Disrespect towards family and friends was a common trigger of violence.
- Young women found it difficult to get support to resolve conflict from adults.
- Perceptions of limited support from adults led young women to solving conflict or bullying with violence.
- Young people attempted to support each other, however, were not always equipped with the skills or knowledge to do this effectively.
- Relationships with the police, including campus officers, were generally negative.
- Friends are expected to stand up for each other, including physical violence.
- Friendships could be transient, moving between friendship and violence.
- Practitioners felt there was a lack of understanding about healthy relationships and friendships.
- There is a lack of spaces within communities where young women felt safe to go with their friends.

"Yeah, your anger just builds up and up because the teachers aren't doing anything. Like you have nothing to do but do something yourself."

Perceptions of and Influences on Violence

- Young women perceived there to be lots of violence in their lives.
- Disrespect, including verbal abuse and non-verbal cues, was a significant trigger of violence.
- Limited impulse control and emotional regulation meant young women turned to violence to solve conflict.
- Exclusion was a common experience and older young women saw it as a deterrent.
- Young women said alcohol consumption increased likelihood of involvement in violence.
- Misogyny was a common everyday experience for young women, from peers and adults.
- Young women had little hope for a brighter future.

"You just need to watch your back. That's just the way it is. You just need watch your back at all times."

Social Media

- Young women were both 'viewers' and 'producers' of harmful content online.
- Daily exposure to violent content online led to desensitisation.
- Perceptions of limited responsibility when a 'viewer'.
- Serious negative impact of being filmed on individuals, families and communities.
- Large group chats were used as part of bullying and cyberaggression, and could lead to in-person violence.
- Videos of serious graphic violence had a lasting impact.
- Some young women experienced harmful contact with other young people outside of Scotland.

"It doesn't involve any of us. Like we didn't create that fight so it's like we're just watching it because it's there."

About No Knives Better Lives

No Knives, Better Lives is run by YouthLink Scotland, the national agency for youth work and the collective voice of the sector. We works in partnership with young people and practitioners to understand and address the drivers of youth violence within a sustainable public health model, focused on primary and secondary prevention.

Through the programme, practitioners working with young people in Scotland engage in professional training on youth violence prevention and access a range of high-quality resources with the ambition of reducing youth violence and supporting young people to fulfil their potential.

For more information, visit our website [No Knives, Better Lives](#).

About the Research

Research was carried out between May and December 2023 using the following methods:

- Literature review of existing research on girls and young women.
- Four focus groups with 16 young women, two within a school setting and two within a youth work setting.
- Four practitioner interviews with youth workers and a teacher.

Interest was first sought through youth work practitioner networks. Further information was provided to be shared with young women to assess their interest in participating in the research. Researchers explained the research process again with the young women at the start of the focus groups, with emphasis placed on voluntary participation, including during the focus group. Each young participant was given a £10 voucher to recognise their contribution.

During the analysis phase, we convened a roundtable session with practitioners from relevant fields and ran two further workshops with young women to discuss the findings of the focus groups and practitioner interviews.

Strengths of the study

Physical violence amongst young people, especially girls, is an uncomfortable topic. As such, there are limited perspectives directly from young people. This research aims to centre the views and experiences of young women in Scotland, giving them a platform to make change.

Limitations of the study

The main limitation of the study is that the focus group participants cannot be said to be representative of the total population of girls and young women in Scotland. The focus group and interviews participants primarily represented urban (large city and town) settings.

Whilst we did not specify a profile of the type of young people we wanted to speak to, apart from that it should be self-identifying young women, it was clear that practitioners selectively approached young women within their settings who they knew to have direct experiences with violence at various levels. As a result, the focus group participants were particularly marginalised, experiencing heightened levels of adversity.

We cannot be sure that the experiences shared reflect the common experience of all girls and young women in Scotland, though the groups we spoke to had very similar experiences. This was also apparent in our additional workshops with young women, where upon reflection, they were able to recognise and identify similarities between their own experiences and those of the participants in the focus groups.

We recommend that there should be wider qualitative research to explore whether the experiences reported here are more widespread.

One group of young women withdrew their consent to participate after the focus group. Their words are not within this report.

Composite Stories

For each of the three themes explored within this report, we have written a short composite story. The stories blend the real experiences shared during the focus groups to maintain anonymity whist giving an accurate portrayal of life for some young women in Scotland. The storylines were chosen to reflect common experiences shared in the focus groups, and quotes from the research participants (both young women and practitioners) are used to give the stories authenticity. Quotation marks are used to indicate a direct quote.

The stories were shown to young women at our additional workshops, who related to the narratives and shared similar experiences to those depicted in the stories.
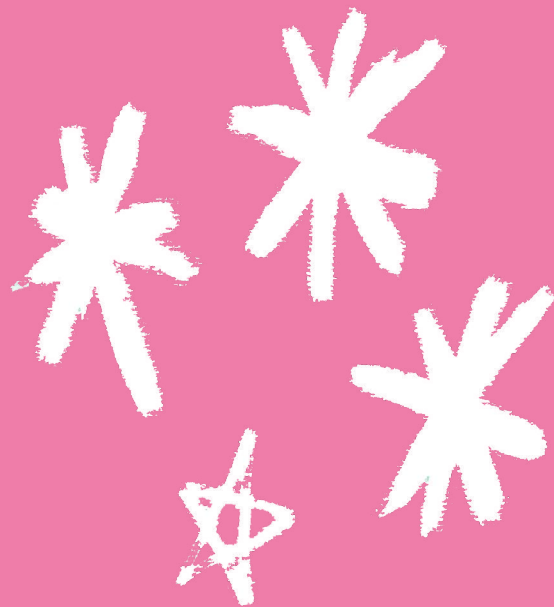
Background - Life for girls and young women in Scotland

Over the past couple of years, there has been increased attention on violence between girls fuelled by viral videos and media attention of physical violence in schools.

This was echoed by practitioners in the No Knives, Better Lives network, who reported that violence between girls was increasing in frequency and severity.

Despite these perceptions, an increase in violence between girls is not reflected in police reporting or in qualitative research on children and young people. In Scotland, the majority of girls and young women do not engage in anti-social or violent behaviour.

The disparity between research and reporting figures compared to what practitioners are hearing and witnessing was one of the driving factors behind this report.

History

The increased attention on girls' violence we have seen from the mainstream media and on social media is not new. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was similarly public outrage in Scotland about girl violence, fuelled by the mainstream media.[i]

A study conducted with 800 girls aged 13-16 in the early 2000s in Scotland found there was 'little evidence that girls are using physical violence to any great extent[ii] that girls experienced a broad range of violence (though they did not necessarily call it such) with the most common experience reported being verbal abuse (including threats, name-calling and insults, ridicule, and intimidation by shouting or swearing).

Witnessing violence was a majority experience, with a substantial proportion viewing these experiences as "normal" and "unremarkable". A minority of girls (10%) in the study reported being routinely physically violent. This cohort reported higher levels of violent victimisation and self-harm.

Violence in Scotland

While the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey indicates a significant decrease in violent crime across Scotland since 2008-09,[iii] the decrease has stalled in recent years[iv] and pockets of violence and victimisation persist, particularly within deprived communities.[v]

Statistically, boys and men are overrepresented as both responsible for and harmed by violence. This has meant that most prevention work, including our own, has focused on boys and men.

Without a gendered lens, prevention programmes risk masking the specific issues faced by girls and young women and ignoring their experiences.

Findings from the Growing Up in Scotland study showed 90% of girls aged 14/15 report not having hit, kicked or punched someone in the last year.[vi] Less than 1% of this cohort reported having carried a knife or a weapon, or used force, threats or a weapon.[vii]
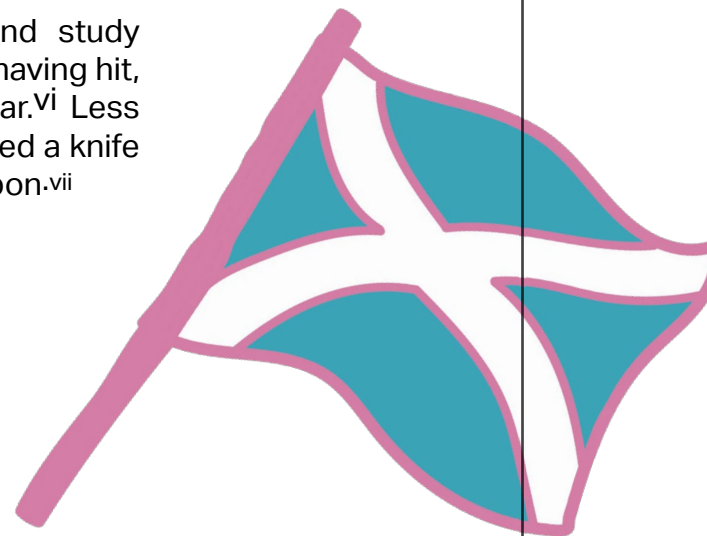
These statistics were roughly reflected in our Imagine A Man research in 2022:

- 13% of girls reported that they had hit, kicked or punched someone with the intention of hurting or injuring them;
- 11% of girls reported they had threatened someone;
- 14% of girls reported harassing or bothering someone via mobile phone, email or social media;
- 1% of girls said they had carried a knife or a weapon in case it was needed in a fight.[viii]

Importantly, research has shown that for young people, violence is both a response to adversity and used as method to overcome adversity and vulnerability.[ix]

Life for girls and young women

Life for girls and young women in Scotland is complex and multifaceted, shaped by various societal influences and systemic factors. They face a decreasing state of wellbeing, with girls today reporting the lowest confidence in 24 years.[x]

From self-esteem to social interactions and future outlooks, numerous aspects of their lives reflected a distressing trend. Specific challenges are discussed throughout the report.

The recent stigmatisation of girls and young women responsible for harm runs the risk of pushing young people further from support to meet their needs.

Listening to girls and taking them seriously

In its most recent set of recommendations, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended the UK "adopt a child rights-based approach to addressing violence or other disturbances in schools." A crucial element of taking a rights-based approach is listening to children and taking them seriously. This report aims to shine a light on the experiences of girls and young women and add to understanding about their experiences by putting them at the centre.

We hope this is the first step to taking these perspectives into consideration in order to do better for girls and young women in Scotland.

Note: This research does not posit that violence between girls is more prevalent or more serious than men and boys' violence against women and girls. In order to address all forms of violence affecting young women, we specifically sought to consider violence between girls.

Relationships, Support and Community

Sixteen-year-old Jess found herself at a breaking point after she had endured relentless bullying from other girls at school. Jess felt isolated and unsupported at school.

"The teachers don't care until it's a fight… Until you actually do something. Until you actually try kill yourself.". The taunts, which often involved mentioning her family, became a breaking point. **"That's just a no-go. Like if you mention family, that's it. All cards are off the table."**

Under immense pressure from her family to retaliate and in the absence of support from the school, Jess decided to confront the group of girls head-on, convinced that fighting was her only choice. **"My mum was so happy when I hit her." she admitted. "If you come from a hard family, then you are expected to be hard yourself."**

Background

Young women's familial relationships can play a significant role in violence, both as a protective and a risk factor. Research in Scotland has shown that daughters, not sons, are more likely to offend when their mother has offended since their birth.[xi] With the knowledge that criminality and victimisation can both be intergenerational,[xii] it is crucial to consider whole-family support to prevent violence.

On the other hand, positive and trusted relationships with adults and peers are key protective factors against offending for young people. Learnings from the Edinburgh Study on Youth Crime and Transitions has shown that the quality of familial relationships is more important than family structure to prevent offending.[xiii]

In the most recent Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children study, girls report lower family, peer and trusted adult support than boys. This is further affected by family affluence, with lower affluence equating to lower support with all three groupings. Notably, there has been a decrease in family support reported by girls since 2014. In 2022, 51% of girls reported high family support, compared with 65% in 2014.[xiv]

In relation to local communities, a combination of factors (COVID-19 disruption, significant funding cuts across public and third sector) mean that physical 'safe spaces' are harder for young people to access.[xv]

Findings

The young women had strong feelings of loyalty towards their family and friends, and we found this could lead to violence. There were significant barriers to accessing support from adults and often young women felt they needed to take matters into their own hands.

The pressure to independently navigate and confront disrespectful situations was a recurring narrative, with family expectations often placing the onus on individuals to handle such issues themselves.

Family

The young women we spoke with were loyal to and protective of their families and spoke in detail about how disrespect towards their families was a significant, and in their opinion, rightful trigger of physical violence. It is worth noting that mothers were almost exclusively spoken about, compared with fathers. This likely reflects the reality that most primary care-givers remain women, rather than necessarily increased prevalence of violent attitudes in women.

YP1: "But she had a good reason to hit her […]"
YP2: "Like she wished my baby sister dead and like called my mum like a fat slut and everything for no reason."

YP1: "Because if you're talking about someone's family like…"
YP2: "That's a bit personal. So obviously you're going to get mad and hit them for it. "
YP1: "Yeah when people talk about my mum and nan, like I just hit them. I don't really care."

"That seems to be a big trigger for it. Like if you mention family, that's it. All cards are off the table."

Some of the young people and practitioners also shared how families, predominantly mothers, play a role in accepting and promoting violence.

YP1: "My mum was so happy when I hit [name]."
Interviewer: "How come?"
YP1: "Because [name] was like telling my brother… telling me to kill myself…"
YP2: "Stalking her auntie and everything."

"And it was her mum that was like stood there to watch it to make sure it was a fair fight. To make sure nobody else jumped in."

"In the playground in a local school because the two girls had fallen out. The two girls didnae fight. […] The mums were. Physically fighting in the playground."

One young woman spoke about her mother's refusal to view videos of physical violence between young people showing the strength of a different narrative.

YP1: "My mum, like, she like, refused to, like, watch stuff like that because it's like she thinks it's horrible […] She thinks it's pure like a sin and that. She won't watch it. Like she'll get told about it and like, she'll get told there's like a video and she's like don't show me it."

The longer-term, intergenerational reputation of individual families as 'hard' (and the expectations this manifested as) was also mentioned by practitioners as a reason for young women being involved in violence.

"So some people who are prone to violence, their family are prone to violence too. So it started from a really young age. You dinnae just wake up one day at 14 and think I'm going fighting. It's no that. There's none of that."

"If you come from a hard family, then you are expected to be hard yourself."

"So, if you are a well-known family within [City], you know that young person's almost got to live up to that name. And I think that plays a bit part in the role as well, as in whether or not that young person actually wants to fight isn't really up for discussion. It's if somebody's offered you a fight, you won't walk away."

For practitioners, the loyalty to their family made it difficult to challenge values and behaviours.

"Because you can try and have those conversations and challenge that behaviour and that mindset, but it's quite a hard one to get through because obviously the loyalty is with their family."

One practitioner spoke of the intergenerational cycles of trauma and violence.

"But again, [parents] were brought up in violence so violence is the answer. But who am I to say that's totally wrong? That's how these people have been educated and that's what they think. […] Because if you're coming from trauma and you didnae want to be harmed you need to be tough."

Young women were protective of their families and often did not want them to know about their difficulties.

"Sometimes you don't want to tell your parents that you're struggling [with bullying and poor mental health] because you don't want to worry them on top of all their other worries."

Support from other adults (teachers, police)

The young women talked of attempting to seek support from adults in relation to resolving conflict or about mental health support and adults dismissing or misunderstanding their concerns, or not caring.

"They [teachers] just… they don't realise when you tell them stuff you're genuinely, you're asking for help. You're trying to get them to help you and sort the situation out or something but they just wait until you're in hospital."

"Say I got in a fight or something and I had the option to go tell Mrs [Teacher] or Mr [Teacher], it would be Mr [Teacher]. Because like Mrs [Teacher] would just like moan."

For many, confiding in any adult about involvement in violence either before or after an incident was not seen as a possible choice due to the kickback from peers.

"If you go tell someone, if you go tell your parents, teachers and that you get called a snitch. And if you don't, you're just sitting there worrying about everything."

"Sometimes I think people don't tell the teachers because they don't want to look scared"

For others, they were concerned about the reaction and judgement from adults.

"I think see instead of shouting at them for what they did. I think they should like, let them like talk like let them like explain."

"We work with a network of young women and actually what they're telling us is that it's getting worse for them but there's also no help. There's no support there. They feel like if they go to the police, they'll be judged. It's like a wider societal thing."

Many of the young women we spoke with had the perception that there was a lack of support to resolve bullying or conflict that led to violence, and for mental health support. For some, they felt there needed to be an emergency situation before support could be accessed. This led them to feel physical violence was the only way to resolve conflict.

"The teachers don't care until it's a fight. They don't care until it's a fight."

"Yeah, your anger just builds up and up because the teachers aren't doing anything. Like you have nothing to do but do something yourself."

One practitioner talked of the impact of COVID19 lockdowns on support for young people transitioning to secondary school.

"They were the P7s that never got transitions or anything because of the pandemic. So, I think that has had a lot to play in it. Like I feel like they've had no support with how to socialise properly."

Overall, the young women did not report positive relationships or interactions with the police.

"I think almost everyone in the [focus group] has almost been charged by the police."

For some young women, they felt police involvement was not happening for the right incidents.

For example, police being involved in a less serious incident but not being involved in something much more violent.

"It's annoying when, like […] if it's like really petty fighting and like police get involved in all that. It's just like, can't be bothered with it."

YP1: *"Did she get polis involved? For hitting her?"*
YP2: *"No."*
YP1: *"I would have!"*
YP3: *"It's disgusting."*

Some young people spoke about the relationship with their campus police officer.

Interviewer: *"And does having a campus cop, do think that helps?"*
YP1: *"No"*
YP2: *"Does it fuck, it makes your life like 10 times worse. I didn't even go to the school and I still hated him."*

Interviewer: *"Do you think having a police officer on campus has made a difference? "*
YP1: *"I hardly see him."*
YP2: *"I forgot he existed."*
YP3: *"Yeah but he's never in."*

For some young women, a campus officer made a positive difference when a relationship between the officer and young people was formed.

"I think our old one, he like PC [Name], he had an impact on people […] No, he was, he was here like three days a week but it was like, he had a good bond with everyone. I always see him and he waves at me."

Practitioners spoke of attempting to foster positive relationships with police through youth work and school. Practitioners reported impact in the immediacy, such as young people deleting content from their phones, but did not feel there was a longer-term, sustained impact.

"And I even had a community police officer coming on one of my sessions and it's not like… they're respectful and chatted but they also didn't care that she was the police and they openly told her everything as well."

Two of the adult practitioners felt young women they worked with were unafraid to get involved in violence and of the potential consequences.

"They think they're untouchable. Like they don't care. So, they don't care about police. Don't care about the impact it's having on other young people."

"The lassies are no feart to smack somebody."

This was not echoed by the young women. In fact, across the focus young women spoke of being scared of different aspects of violence.

"See if someone did that to me man, I'd be so para [paranoid] to go out and do it again."

"I didn't tell her to hit her because I'm scared to hit her but she seen her and she hit her."

Friends

Loyalty and standing up for friends emerged as strategies, with fighting being a common response to perceived disrespect.

"If your pals arguing with somebody then you're probably going to end up added into the group chat and if you don't back your pal up then you get called a worst cunt and all that, but at the end of the day, you're going to back your pal up anyway unless it's some cunt 12 times bigger than you, then nah I'll see you later. You can fight yourself."

YP1: *"I don't feel worried because I know I've got my pals."*
YP2: *"You know coz you know they will stick up for you. Say if like someone didn't have that it would be kinda bad."*

YP1: I've been there for [YP3] when like she was getting like…
YP2: "She like hit someone for it and she nearly got charged for it."
Interviewer: "And what was that like then?"
YP3: "Well, I mean she was sticking up for me, innit? So that's that."

The young women and practitioners admitted that their friendships were transient, moving rapidly from best friends to enemies, and back again. Practitioners felt there was a lack of understanding from young women about what constitutes healthy relationships and friendships.

YP1: "Sometimes your pals can turn on you."
YP2: "That is true…we've all been there, done that."

"I'm pals with [Name] now so I feel like when I see that video [of us fighting] I'm going to be sick."

"Like they're friends with that person one week and then the next week they're not friends with them."

"And I do think that a lot of it is friendship groups where […] they're all trying to be as good as each other. And it's like who can shout the loudest […] And then within that the bullying does happen and I'm like 'you's are being horrible to each other'."

Some young women talked about the difficulties of supporting each other when they are experiencing the same challenges.

"Me and [friend's name] like we struggle to tell each other because me and [friend's name], we feel the same most of the time. So, it's like me and [friend's name] do struggle to give each other advice."

Community

The young people felt as though there was a lack of spaces within their community that they could use to meet up with their friends.

"Aye because there's nothing to do if [youth club] isn't on we've got nowhere else to go apart from McDonalds. But you can't hang about there."
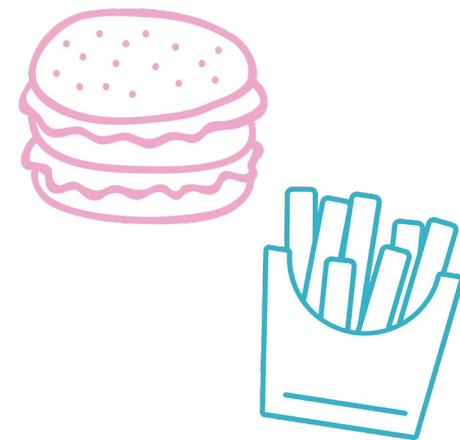
Summary

- Many young people felt families, often mothers, supported involvement in violence.
- Disrespect towards family and friends was a common trigger of violence.
- Young women found it difficult to get support to resolve conflict from other adults.
- Perceptions of limited support from adults led young women to solving conflict or bullying with violence.
- Young people attempted to support each other, however, were not always equipped with the skills or knowledge to do this effectively.
- Relationships with the police, including campus officers, were generally negative.
- Friends are expected to stand up for each other, including physical violence.
- Friendships could be transient, moving between friendship and violence.
- Practitioners felt there was a lack of understanding about healthy relationships and friendships.
- There is a lack of spaces within communities where young women felt safe to go with their friends.

Perceptions of and Influences on Violence

Danielle is 14 years old and was excluded last year from school for violence. Danielle does not access any other educational or skills support programmes.

Danielle and her friends have **"nowhere else to go apart from McDonalds"** in their area. They get involved with fights on social media because it gives them something to do and because they find it entertaining. Danielle says she **"gets a buzz"** from arguing with people on social media.

She sometimes has physical fights with other girls because **"it's easier just to fight"**, rather than talk it out. Some of her friends have been seriously hurt in fights, some have even been charged by the police.

Danielle isn't sure anything is going to change – **"that's just the way it's always been."**

Background

As already discussed earlier in this report, violent crime has reduced significantly in Scotland since 2008/09. However, this is not always reflected in public perceptions safety. Women and people living in the most deprived areas of Scotland are less likely to feel safe than men and people living in the rest of Scotland. xvi

The prevalence of drunkenness amongst 15-year-olds (boys and girls) in Scotland is at its lowest level in 32 years, though girls aged 15 are more likely to have drunk alcohol in their lifetime compared to boys (73% versus 64%). xvii

In 2024, girls and women in Scotland continue to face gender inequality. This can manifest as discrimination and violence. In the recent Behaviour in Scottish Schools research, school staff reported increasing sexist, misogynistic and explicitly sexualised language among male pupils. xviii

Under this patriarchal system, girls and women may look to distance themselves from femininity and from other girls and women in order to gain respect and power. This is called internalised misogyny. By making themselves seem less 'feminine', saying that they are not like the other girls, or engaging in misogyny towards other girls, such as slut shaming, girls can gain more respect from boys or other girls, or help themselves feel less vulnerable to men and boys' violence.

Ultimately, internalised misogyny benefits men and holds up the patriarchal system whereby femininity, and therefore women and girls, are seen as less good than masculinity, men and boys, allowing men to continue to hold on to social power.

Findings

Perceptions of violence

The young women we spoke with experienced violence in different aspects of their lives, including at school, in the community, online and in the media. For many participants, violence was normalised.

"[Suburb] is just known for its fighting. […] I don't think it's [violence] really affected us, because we've grown up knowing it."

"Just the nature isn't it. […] Grew up seeing everyone else do [online bullying] so."

YP1: "I hate it. Not a day goes by and I don't hear anyone say [kill yourself]. I hear it in corridors, like the whole school."
YP2: "Yeah. Like I get told to kill myself on like a daily basis."

"You just need to watch your back. That's just the way it is. You just need watch your back at all times."

For those living in cities, city centres were perceived as especially violent and volatile.

*"Glasgow, like town. It's very like, a violent place."*

"Town's worse than here. Towns worse than anywhere […] Everybody just gets stabbed and that and you just get chased about. Everywhere."

There was knowledge of the local places where violence commonly took place.

YP: "And everybody just fights there."
Interviewer: "And why do you think they tend to go there?"
YP: "There's hardly any cameras down there."
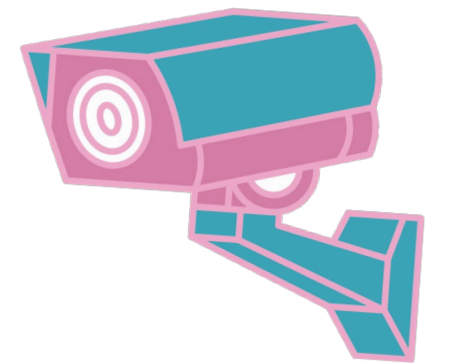
Disrespect was a significant trigger of physical, verbal and online violence for the young women. Disrespect manifested through verbal abuse and non-verbal cues, such as 'growling' and hostile looks.

"Breathing, just looking in my direction. And I just go off my nut, innit."

"If someone says something to you that you really didn't like it, you could get all your friends on that person as well and then it just causes just like loads of danger for that one person."

"So like see if you like see if someone thinks they're like so much better than you and all that and like you are really like you get really angry really easily, then it could just lead to like violence. if you think about it."

"Wee lassies being fucking cheeky for no reason."

Practitioners spoke about miscommunication, offensive communication and rumours as being the catalysts for physical violence.

Impact of Substance Use

The young women agreed that alcohol consumption increased the likelihood of being involved in violence.

"See how, like young people drink alcohol? I think that can make people very violent."

"Aye, every time I drink I fight. Every single time."

The inverse was also true. When young women abstained from alcohol consumption, they engaged less in physical violence.

"I don't go out anymore, so I just keep myself out of bother. Don't drink as much."

The perception of the impact of drugs was more mixed, with some young women advocating for drugs as relaxants, whereas practitioners felt it made young people more violent.

"A joint. Give me a joint if I'm arguing with someone and I'll sit there and like just no."

"Drugs are playing a massive part in young folk's lives and that just changes their behaviours. They lash out under the influence and they wake up in the morning going what did I do?"

Violence as a tool

The young women talked of their challenges with managing their emotions and reactions to disrespect.

The ways in which they could resolve conflict was limited, with physical violence being a main tool. In fact, some participants saw physical violence as an 'easier' solution.

"You're using violence as an answer. And violence is not the answer but you do because you're just so angry."

"Yeah, sometimes when like people push your buttons or whatever and say something to them, you've hit them because you don't know what else to do. Then you end up just using violence."

"And a lot of them lash out first before they think about it and then it's then became a bigger issue."

"I think it's easier to just fight."

We heard that physical violence does not necessarily end conflict, in fact it often fuelled further incidents.

"So, the consequences are you're going to get it again. It's no gonna end. Because you've battered me this time I'm gonna get you the next time."

In this cycle, young people could develop violent reputations amongst peers and the wider community.

"And that'll be the kinda person they maybe always rely on that if somebody needs a battering or whatever, that'll be the person that does it cause that's the reputation they've got. They hold that bravado and that's just what they do. And then that obviously has that knock on impact on that young person within the community, within their school life, with their home life, in terms of just being the trouble maker."

The young women and practitioners spoke about the consequences and aftermath of physical violence. The young women were very aware of the consequences within education, with many participants being on the edge of, or already having experienced exclusion.

YP1: "It's only S1s to S4s that actually fight."
Interviewer: "Why do you think that is?"
YP1: "Because maybe getting kicked out. Yeah."
YP2: "Because when you're at that age you can get kicked out of school."

"I've been excluded two-three times this year from fighting […] They're saying like there's a really high chance and possibility like if I get in any more fights this year, I'm done for. Like with school and like charges."

For practitioners, there was some frustration about the appropriateness of consequences and whether other partners, like schools, followed through with guidance.

"The school don't enforce the bullying policy that they've got in place. They pretty much don't enforce it at all, so they get away with whatever when it comes to bullying."

"But also, about what was then the repercussions for the group of young folk who did it? And what the repercussions were was they got a slap on the wrist and got told not to do it again."

One practitioner spoke about the consequences in a youth work setting.

"But if you're no kind in our group and use kind language, then you are no being in the group. And I didnae hold anything…. I'm strict. I'm really big on kindness and it's from day one they know that kindness, language, the way we speak to each other is so, so important."

A few young women pointed out that they did not believe that violence should be the go-to solution to conflict, even if this was not necessarily their reality. In one interaction a young woman was quickly shut down by peers for expressing this view.

YP1: "Violence is never the answer."
YP2: "Shut up."

Misogyny

Hatred, harassment, assault and discrimination against girls and young women, both direct and indirect, was prevalent in participants' lives. This came primarily from boys and young men in school and the community. As reported by the young women, the verbal abuse was particularly violent and sexualised.

YP1: "Yeah they call us like… they're like 'aw kill yourself. Slit your wrists. No one likes you. Hang yourself.'"
YP2: "'You're a slag. You're a whore.'"

"If we walk away from the boys then we're called tramps and all that and we need to come back and stay with the boys all night."

"And boys always have a lot to say about girls' appearances."

"Like one wee girl had her top, like her school shirt, ripped off and they were still filming, you know? And everybody was sayin', 'did you see such and such's tits?'"

Verbal abuse extended towards girls and women within their families and friendship circles.

"Like she wished my baby sister dead and like called my mum like a fat slut and everything for no reason."

One group were cognisant that boys' behaviour as part of a misogynistic culture had the effect of creating and/or amplifying conflict between girls.

"But like the girls don't understand it's like the guy's fault, but like the guys are turning girls against girls."

Practitioners questioned whether their perceived increase in violence between girls was young women's response to a wider culture of boys and men's violence against women and girls.

"Not only are girls carrying knives to protect themselves from their peers, they're also carrying knives to protect themselves from adults because they've already dealt with trauma that we could not imagine what has happened to young… some young girls. So if someone's coming for me, I'm protected. Because they have to protect themselves."

"I think there's so much media presence, especially at the moment, about girls being like attacked on the street, or murdered on the street, or go missing and stuff like that. And it's like is this just a response because they're starting to get like a natural defence?"

"Like girls arenae safe to walk the streets, effectively. And I think there is a real feeling for that as well at the moment."

"It feels like we've kinda took a step back in time when it comes to women in general, and a kind of move back down the pecking order and men think [women are] inferior and the rest of it. […] how do we make society different and better for girls to grow up and be safe within their communities and not need to resort to violence to be able to get their voices heard?"

One practitioner spoke about violent responses from police when dealing with young women.

"I think sometimes if the likes of the police or whatever just intervene and they're kind of violent almost in terms of the way they put hands on to, especially young girls, that then gets their back up even more."

It was clear that the majority of young women had internalised the misogyny they experienced, blaming other young women for causing physical violence.

Universally across the focus groups, young women sought to distance themselves from 'other' girls.

"Lasses are cows and bitches man. Like every lassie is a cow. Every lassie is a bitch, like they are. They all talk about each other. They all slag each other and then all pure pals the next day."

"Yeah. They're all bitches."

"They call it a resting bitch face but I'm sorry hen, you don't have a resting bitch face you're just a cow who likes to growl."

Preventing violence for a positive future

Young women across the focus groups thought the way to prevent violence between girls was to stop disrespect, though some were sceptical this was possible.

"Keep the growls off their face."

"Just don't say it."

For practitioners, education, addressing trauma and a multi-agency approach were suggested prevention tools.

"I think you're always just trying to look to see what's the next thing you can do to put in place to try and combat the issues that arise because they do change."

The young women had a bleak and despondent outlook on the future. Many were convinced nothing would change or improve. There was little hope or optimism.

"There's no way of stopping it. Just people are going to be horrible for the rest of their lives. There's no way of doing it."

**YP1: "It's not going to change."**
YP2: "Aye, I mean it's just how it is."
Interviewer: "Do you want it to change?"
YP2: "It'd be good for people with that change, but it won't."

One practitioner had a different perspective. They made historical comparisons to their time as young people and how things had already improved in Scotland.

"People's attitudes towards violence has changed. People no hitting their kids has changed. People speaking to their kids in a certain tone or using certain language has changed. Society has changed. Housing has changed, you know?"
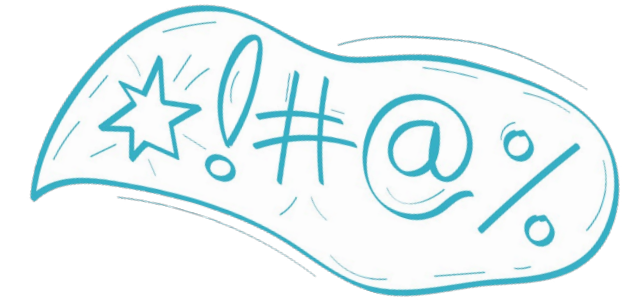
Summary

- Young women perceived there to be lots of violence in their lives.
- Disrespect, including verbal abuse and non-verbal cues, was a significant trigger of violence.
- Limited impulse control and emotional regulation meant young women turned to violence to solve conflict.
- Exclusion was a common experience and older young women saw it as a deterrent.
- Young women said alcohol consumption increased likelihood of involvement in violence.
- Misogyny was a common everyday experience for young women, from peers and adults.
- Young women had little hope for a brighter future.

Social Media

Sarah, 13, was recently attacked by a girl from a rival school. The fight had been filmed and was posted on an anonymous Instagram page named Local Scraps. The person who filmed it did so **"because it's funny"**.

Sarah felt humiliated that everyone in the school had seen her being battered. The thought of the videos out there forever had a big impact on her mental health and she stopped going out as much.

Her friends know that, **"at the end of the day, they're going to back their pal up."** They create a group chat on Snapchat and lots of people are added to the group. After some back and forth, a time and place for a fight is arranged. They decide on the back of some local shops as **"there's hardly any cameras down there"**. Sarah's friend, Emma, doesn't want to fight but she knows that **"there's basically no way out"** once you are in the Snapchat group. She's gonna have to do it.

Background

Young people use the internet and social media for a variety of reasons and for numerous benefits. For young people, their online and offline lives are fully intertwined.

Although risk is only one aspect of children and young people's online experience,[xix] a majority of children have reported harmful experiences online.[xx]
This is heightened for young people with vulnerabilities, and even more so for young people with multiple vulnerabilities.[xxi]

In the recent Behaviour in Scottish Schools research, school staff report an increase in pupils using digital technology/mobile phones abusively since 2016, with more than half (52%) of secondary school staff reporting pupils using/looking at mobile phones or tablets when they should not as the behaviour having the greatest negative impact.[xxii]

The six C's of online safety risks[xxiii] give us a framework to identify different and specific risks, whilst also recognising their interconnectedness. It also ensures we see both perspectives of children experiencing harm, and children responsible for harm.

- **Content -** *Exposure to violent content.*
- **Contact –** *Experiencing potentially harmful contact.*
- **Conduct –** *Witnessing or participating in potentially harmful conduct.*
- **Contract –** *Party to or exploited by potentially harmful contract.*
- **Cyberaggression –** *Cyberbullying and witnessing discriminatory content.*
- **Compulsion –** *Problematic or unbalanced social media use.*

The translation of online harm to physical violence is currently not well understood, particularly as it pertains to girls and young women.

Findings

Social media plays a central role in violence, being brought up by both young women and practitioners without prompting. Amongst the girls we spoke to, we heard about harmful experiences spanning all six Cs. We will focus here on *content, contact, cyberaggression and compulsion.*

Content

The young women spoke about being both 'viewers' and 'producers' of violent content. The young women were exposed to near constant videos of violence on social media, as well as other types of violence content such as serious animal cruelty. The focus groups highlighted the normality of fights being filmed and then being widely, and quickly, distributed either through sharing within school and communities or on public platforms.

Interviewer: "How frequently do you see violence between girls on social media? Like videos of fights?"
YP1: "All the time."
YP2: "Loads."
YP3: "A lot like yeah."

"Because […] stuff gets about like so fast, like something could happen 10 minutes ago and the whole of [Town] would know about it by now."

For the young women, violent content was easy to find via search functions or through accounts dedicated to local school violence. The young women knew which social media platforms were more likely to take down violent content (TikTok), and which were more likely to host violent content (Twitter).

Anonymous accounts dedicated to violence requested videos from young people and also used marketing techniques to prompt clicks and views, such as 'teasers' of fights and sending videos in direct messaging. Violence could also be seen unintentionally, for example when opening someone's 'Story'.

"Like you can't control if they post it on their story and we just click it. We don't know that they posted it. Like we just click a story and there's a mad scrap."

"You get these Snapchats and it's like 'seemo' and that means like, if you like tag them in your story, then they'll send you videos of fights."

This was normalised for the young people and there was a level of desensitisation to the violence.

"I'm so used to seeing like videos like all the time, so it's just got to the point where it just doesn't [affect me]. I'm just seeing them all the time and I hear about it all the time. Like it happens too often. To like be like, oh, that's a shame, because there's like too much videos."
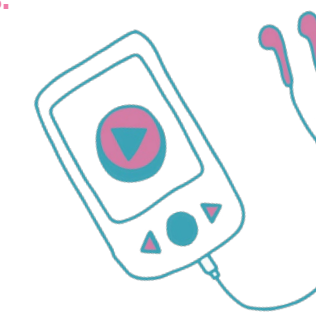
Some of the young people spoke about watching fights as a form of entertainment, particularly when the people involved were not known to them.

Interviewer: "How does [seeing videos of fights] make you feel?"
YP1: "Entertained. I don't know why."
YP2: "It doesn't involve any of us. Like we didn't create that fight so it's like we're just watching it because it's there."
YP3: "Sometimes they're funny. Sometimes they're not like proper fights."

Young people were aware that adults also watched videos of violence between young people, with videos being used as evidence to identify perpetrator.

"Yeah, the teachers say to us like don't watch it but they watch our ones."

When young people were in the role of 'viewers' of violence, they had clear red lines on what they deemed to be acceptable viewing. Excessive violence, blood or unfair violence against someone unable to fight back were deemed unacceptable. On the surface, some participants didn't think they were affected by witnessing violence, however, through discussions the young women started to recognise the impact it did have and spoke of changes to their behaviour as a result.

"I hate seeing blood, like anything like that. If I see a bit of blood then I can't watch it any longer. I feel like I'm going to be sick."

"I'll sit there and watch the full thing, but like I could watch one and think 'aw that's funny, they deserved that' but I'll watch another one and think 'that's vile'".

They were able to recall many specific details about the violence within the videos, indicating the videos had left a lasting impression.

"I wish I had never seen that one."

"I can hear the boy's foot hitting off his head."

"Dragged off a bench and booted in the face like loads."

The young women generally seemed familiar with in-app reporting and moderating mechanisms, some participants reporting they had used these functions, but held little faith in them.

YP1: "But do they get banned? Do the accounts get banned? Nothing."
YP2: "Like nothing gets banned out of it."

As 'producers' of violent content, young women said their motivation was around proof and status associated with being the victor.

Practitioners also reiterated entertainment, proof of achievement and bravado as reasons young women had explained their actions to them.

YP1: "Yeah, I wanted to see the fight."
Interviewer: "But you were involved. You did see the fight."
YP1: "It goes so fast."
YP2: "Like she wanted to see her doing it."
YP1: "I wanted to watch myself [laughs]."
YP3: "Like everyone wants to do that."
YP1: "I wanted to look at how good of a job I'd done [laughs]."

The young women acknowledged the personal toll videos of violence take on those involved.

Young people reported experiencing embarrassment, shame and a heightened sense of vulnerability when they found themselves in videos depicting confrontations, especially if they were on the losing end.

"Like everybody will start slagging you in the comments of the video [if you 'lose' the fight]."
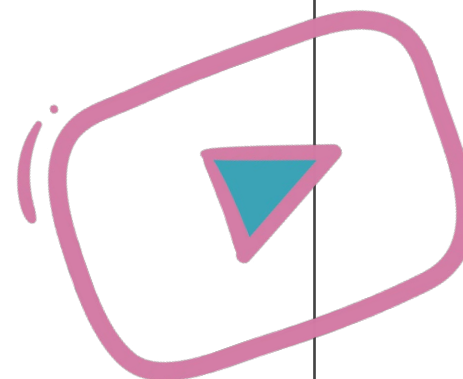
"See when I see other videos I don't really like, I don't like pay attention to them to be honest because it's like I've been through, it's just like, you know what it's like, so I don't like I don't get involved with other things."

"Like you see if you get in a fight and there's a video of it and it gets spread about the whole school, that could, like affect you mentally and it could make you depressed."

"So not only was the girl physically assaulted, she then had to endure the fact that everybody in the school had seen it […] They know the videos are going to be there forever. So not only physical but the mental torture as well that comes with that. It's no just here and now."

Not only were young people affected, but there was a ripple effect on families and communities too. Practitioners explained the trauma in knowing people are viewing and sharing harmful content involving their child.

"Just knowing that your child is on social media being battered is horrendous."

The young women felt limited responsibility when in the 'viewer' and 'filmer' role. Practitioners, however, were keen to emphasise the passiveness was just as bad as being the aggressor.

"It doesn't involve any of us. Like we didn't create that fight so it's like we're just watching it because it's there."

"Doesn't bother me. It's not me or anybody I know then it's nothing to do with me."

"And I'm like 'but do you think it makes it better for you to stand there and record that?' You might as well be doing it. And they say 'I never touched them.' And I say 'well you might as well have been because you never done anything to stop it.'"

"Use your voice, don't just sit and watch it."

Cyberaggression and Contact

Social media, particularly Snapchat, was utilised by young people to escalate violence amongst themselves and other young people.

"My God, I love arguing with people. It's fun, I get a buzz from it."

A concerning trend was raised in all focus groups whereby individuals were added to large groups on Snapchat where arguments and disagreements would unfold, exacerbating tensions and conflicts.

"Nobody argues just one on one if you're arguing with someone you're arguing with them and all their pals. Nobody will argue with anybody one on one. There's always someone else with them."

With the ability to connect with people instantly, some young women described using and receiving threatening language, including death threats with young people outwith their locality, in particular from England. Many found this as a form of entertainment, thinking they could say what they wanted without any repercussions.

"I always argue with people from England […] just add you on Snapchat getting wide."

"I've been in one of those group chats before and I was getting like death threats, stabbing threats, everything."

The utilisation of Snapchat extended beyond verbal disputes, as the platform was identified as a tool for organising physical fights.

"You go back and forward like go through where you're meeting and when you're meeting and how many people you're allowed to bring with you."

Once added to one of these large group chats on Snapchat, young people spoke about the inevitability and inescapability of in-person violence.

"Like it's… as soon as you're added to that group chat and you're getting ganged up on, there's basically no way out. You're going to get hurt. You're gonna… something going to happen to you."

The immediacy and real-time nature of Snapchat messaging appeared to contribute to the swift organisation of these conflicts, posing challenges for intervention and prevention. Fights were purposely organised to take place in spaces where there were no cameras or adults present.

Compulsion

No young women said they were addicted to social media, although the perception of practitioners differed.

One young person shared an experience of not having access to a mobile phone for a prolonged period. Despite the recognition that this reduced conflict, ultimately the young woman preferred access to social media.

Interviewer: "And how was that?"
YP: "Fucking terrible. […] I didn't argue as much with people. Because obviously I wasn't talking to all sorts of random people so I couldn't see what people were saying anyway. […] I'd rather have it. I'd rather have it. I'd rather argue than sit there bored."

Even during the focus groups when it had been requested to keep phones away, young women were observed frequently checking their phones and receiving notifications (audibly heard by interviewers).

Preventing violence on social media

Young women were sceptical about user behaviours and social media platforms changing to eliminate violence. One young woman expressed the futility in moderating social media as the conflict could just as easily take place via a different medium.

Interviewer: "What do you need to use social media in a positive way?"
YP2: "How are you supposed to use it in a positive way if every cunt can just say what they want?"
YP2: "The videos get taken down but what else will happen, nothing? They can just text you."

There was a perception that communication through social media was so crucial, it could not be avoided.

"It's the only way to communicate with people innit […] I'm not gonna send handwritten letters to people, am I? We're no back in the 1900s."

Some participants thought increased monitoring from the companies would improve the situation.

YP: "I think like the people that run the apps should start to like mod… like moderating. Like moderating like the chats and all that to see what's being said."

Interviewer: "Even in private chats?"
YP: "Even in private chats to see what's being said."

Summary

- Young women were both 'viewers' and 'producers' of harmful content online.
- Experienced daily exposure to violent content online leading to desensitisation.
- Perceptions of limited responsibility when a 'viewer'.
- Serious negative impact of being filmed on individuals, families and communities.
- Large group chats were used as part of bullying and cyberaggression, and could lead to in-person violence.
- Videos of serious graphic violence had a lasting impact.
- Some young women experienced harmful contact with other young people outside of Scotland.

Conclusion

In many ways, young women's experiences of violence in 2024 are largely similar to those of nearly 25 years ago,[xxiv] highlighting both the cyclical and challenging nature of violence prevention.

Though this study was conducted only with a small number of young women, the commonality of their experiences highlights the need for a better understanding of the challenges faced by young women in Scotland and, crucially, the need to involve young women in the solutions.

Social Media

Social media plays a central role in causing, promoting and normalising physical violence amongst young women. Young women were both 'viewers' and 'producers' of harmful social media content, and felt simultaneously distanced and disempowered from taking action as active bystanders.

Disrespect

Young women felt justified in physical violence if it was preceded by disrespect, usually in the form of verbal abuse about their family or friends.

Young women need support to develop non-violent responses to disrespect and there needs to be broader recognition amongst adults of the impact of low-level bullying.

Trusted and caring adults

Young women generally felt there was limited support available from adults. This was due to their perceptions of whether adults understood or cared, and their hesitancy over being called 'a grass'. Trust, consistency, reliability and demonstrating care were important to the young women.

Family ties

Family was very important to the young women. They were fiercely loyal of their parents and siblings and cared about their parents' feelings. They also clearly understood and listened to their parents' views on violence. Prevention programmes need to incorporate family members in a way that acknowledges their perspectives and experiences in a non-stigmatising and trauma-informed way.

Hopeful future?

Young women had little confidence that things would change to make violence less of a feature in their lives. With the tide against them, it is understandable why so many of the young people we spoke with lacked hope. From unhealthy relationships to the desensitisation of violence through social media, our young people felt unsupported in the world they're facing.

Recommendations

We echo the recommendation of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child who recommended a child rights-based approach to tackling violence amongst young people. A rights-based approach must run through all of the following recommendations.

This means putting children at the centre of designing and delivery services and systems. Any solution to reduce and prevent violence should also build the capacity of children to claim their rights.

Funding for larger research of young women and girls' experiences of violence and social media usage.

Whilst there is growing literature on the ways in which young people use social media and the resulting impacts, we found there to be a significant gap examining the conduct and content accessed by young women. This report begins to shed light on how social media interactions can translate into real-life physical violence, but this is not understood on a larger population scale.

Tackle gender-based violence in schools.

We are encouraged by current and ongoing work to tackle gender-based violence in schools, which explores universal, targeted and specialist responses. We would like to add that supportive challenge and critical reflection for girls demonstrating internalised misogyny must also form part of this universal approach.

Whole family support to challenge attitudes around violence.

Young people and practitioners told us it was difficult to challenge attitudes around violence if families were supportive of violence. As well as working with young people, we must adopt a joined-up approach to work alongside families to support violence prevention.

Increased mental health support for young people including emotional regulation and impulse control.

Young women were struggling to access appropriate and timely mental health support. Additionally, focus on emotional regulation and impulse control could better support young women to manage conflict in a healthy and productive way.

Require social media companies to strengthen reporting mechanisms.

Young women had limited faith in the reporting mechanisms built into social media platforms. From their perspective, it took too many reports to have content removed and the process was opaque.

Support young people experiencing bullying.

Young people were often turning to violence to resolve low-level bullying or disrespect. We believe with more support for young people harmed by bullying, we could limit the transition to aggressor.

Support young people to be active online bystanders.

Young women need support to understand how they can act as active online bystanders to reduce and prevent discrimination and violence.

Support an increase in knowledge and skills for parents, carers, teachers and practitioners on harmful online behaviour and its impact

Many of the young women were navigating difficult situations on social media without the help of adults. It is important that all adults around young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support young people in an open, supportive, non-stigmatising way. Updating national guidance for schools in partnership with young people on responsible, safe and rights-respecting use of mobile technology is also required.
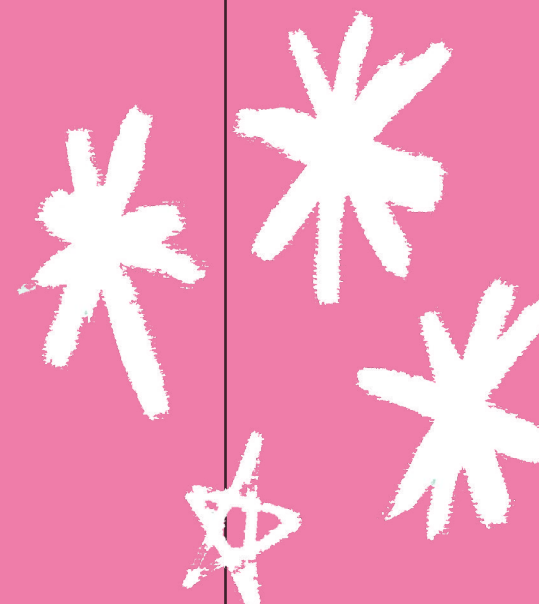
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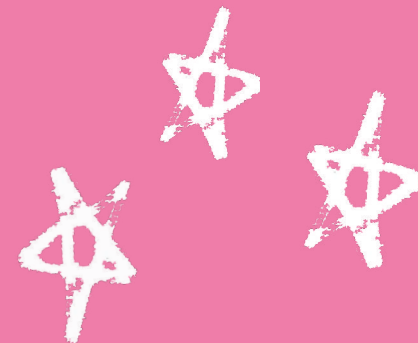
Many thanks to all those who took part in the research and contributed to this resource.

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