A Research Study into Domestic Abuse:

The Prevalence of, and Issues Affecting, LGBTQIA+ Victims in Northern Ireland

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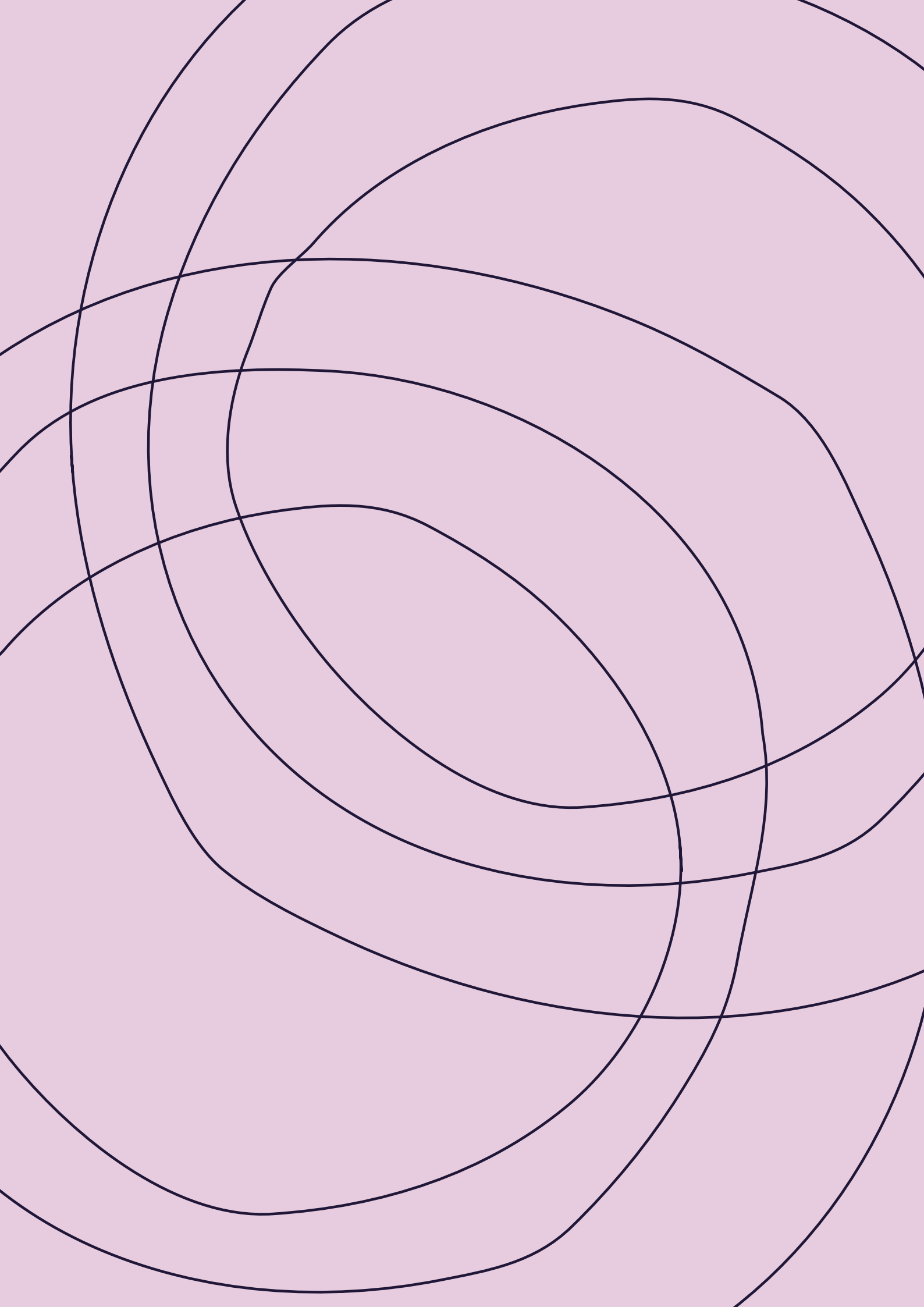
LGBTQIA+ Domestic Abuse Research Officer, HEReNI

here
a place for lesbian & bisexual women

The Rainbow Project

Cara-Friend



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Executive Summary

THIS RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED BY HEReNI in partnership with Cara-Friend and The Rainbow Project, and was supported through funding from the Northern Ireland Department of Justice (DoJ). This study was funded from 1 October 2024 to 31 March 2025, and is based on findings from 16 open-ended interviews and 87 survey responses collected from 15 November 2024 to 28 February 2025. The research aims to assess the prevalence of domestic violence and abuse (DVA[1]) among the LGBTQIA+ community[2] in Northern Ireland (NI), and assess the efficacy of existing support services for LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA.

As part of this study, the research team also provided LGBTQIA+ sector representation at domestic abuse advisory groups, including the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) Review Advisory Group. Through representation at these advisory groups, the research team ensured that the reforms to the domestic abuse reporting process considered perspectives of LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA.

This research found that emotional and psychological abuse were the most frequent types of abuse experienced by NI's LGBTQIA+ community from both family members and intimate partners. Physical violence was slightly more frequent in cases of family violence, and sexual abuse was slightly more frequent in cases of intimate partner violence. Financial abuse also occurred equally between abuse from family members and intimate partners.

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1 This paper uses the phrase 'domestic violence and abuse' and 'DVA' to describe these patterns of abusive behavior and violence from family members and intimate partners. The phrases 'domestic and sexual violence and abuse', 'domestic abuse', and 'domestic violence' are also common phrases. However, the research team acknowledged that while violence frequently occurs in abusive situations, not all cases of abuse are inherently violent – including emotional abuse, stalking, and coercive control. Therefore, the research team agreed that 'DVA' better represents the overall findings of the study.

2 This acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and all other identities, to represent all members of the community.

Although a majority of the reported abuse took place in the home, participants also indicated that abuse frequently occurred while out socialising with friends or even at their workplace.

Only one-third of the participants reported or disclosed the abusive behaviour. Of the participants who reported the abuse, they most frequently went to police services, domestic abuse support organisations, and social workers or general practitioners (GPs). Of the participants who did not report the abuse, the primary reasons for failing to report included not recognising the situation as abusive, self-blame for the abuse, and concerns of worsening the abuse.

Approximately 60% of survey respondents felt that the existing legal, policy, and practice initiatives in NI for LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA were 'not so effective' or 'not at all effective'. A majority of interviewees also agreed that the current services must be reformed or amended to better support LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA living in NI.

The conclusion of this report provides policy recommendations for improving the available support services for LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA in NI. These recommendations include funding for the LGBTQIA+ sector in NI to hire credible domestic abuse support workers within the sector, increased LGBTQIA+ awareness training for domestic abuse support organisations, the need for LGBTQIA+ representation in DVA public awareness campaigns, inclusion of LGBTQIA+ relationships in NI's relationship and sexuality education (RSE), and intersectional approaches to developing these policies.

Introduction

SINCE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the rates of political violence in NI have dramatically decreased; however, rates of DVA have generally increased in NI over the past two decades.[3][4] The rates of DVA and violence against women has recently received widespread media attention after eight Northern Irish women were murdered in 2024 alone, with a total of 42 women murdered in NI since 2017.[5]

As a result, there are currently numerous activism and advocacy campaigns which aim to tackle domestic abuse and gender based violence in NI, including Reclaim the Agenda, ROSA Socialist Feminist Movement, Safe Night NI, Stay Safe NI, and Wise Up NI. These grassroots-led organisations and campaigns have done incredible work in raising awareness of DVA and violence against women and girls. However, most approaches to addressing DVA in NI are overwhelmingly heteronormative and promote the idea that DVA exists only between a male perpetrator and a female victim.[6] Not only is this view misleading – as men have also been victims of DVA and women can also be perpetrators – it also ignores the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals affected by DVA.[7]

To address this gap, this research will highlight the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA and highlight these perspectives for stakeholders and workers in the domestic abuse support sector. By bringing forth their stories and voices, this research will develop an evidence base for the sector to lobby and obtain resources that will support LGBTQIA+ individuals impacted by domestic abuse.

The research team consisted of Allison Newey as lead Research Officer and a steering group of leaders from Northern Ireland's LGBTQIA+ sector – Cara McCann, Director at HEReNI; Amanda McGurk, Hate Crime Advocacy Officer at The Rainbow Project; and Adam Murray, Community Development Manager at Cara-Friend. Additional academic support was provided by Dr. Danielle Mackle, Board Member for HEReNI.

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[3] Travers, Á., et al., (2022). Trauma exposure and domestic violence offending severity in a probation sample from post-conflict Northern Ireland. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(3-4), pp.1566-1587.

[4] Killean, R. (2020). 'A Leap Forward'? Critiquing the Criminalisation of Domestic Abuse in Northern Ireland. N. Ir. Legal Q., 71, 595.

[5] Morris, A. (2024). 'The 42 females who have been killed in NI in the last eight years'. 21 October. *Belfast Telegraph.*

[6] Harvey, S., et al. (2014). Barriers faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in accessing domestic abuse, stalking and harassment, and sexual violence services. *Welsh Government.*

[7] Seelau, S. M., & Seelau, E. P. (2005). Gender-role stereotypes and perceptions of heterosexual, gay and lesbian domestic violence. *Journal of Family Violence*, 20, 363-371.

Research Aims

- **What is domestic abuse, and how/why does it occur?**
  - How prevalent is domestic abuse among the LGBTQIA+ population of Northern Ireland?
  - Are certain demographics of the LGBTQIA+ population more vulnerable than others?
- **What are the primary barriers faced by LGBTQIA+ people in reporting domestic abuse incidents to police or primary reasons for not seeking support?**
- **What are LGBTQIA+ people's experiences with the criminal justice system and support agencies?**
- **What is the impact of domestic abuse on people's lives?**
- **What are the current legal, policy, and practice initiatives for supporting LGBTQIA+ people experiencing domestic abuse?**
- **Are these initiatives and structures fit for purpose?**

Literature Review

IN A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF UK-based studies on intimate partner violence (IPV), there was a notable gap regarding statistics among the LGBTQIA+ populations; this is largely because police statistics and crime surveys do not collect data relating to sexual orientation.[8]

The research that has exclusively focused on LGBTQIA+ experiences is usually international in scope or country-specific. For example, there are a plethora of published works addressing DVA among the LGBTQIA+ communities in Australia,[9] Canada,[10] China, Europe, Nigeria,[11] the United States, or the United Kingdom in general.[12] Indeed, these findings are important contributions to the growing subfield of DVA among the LGBTQIA+ community

Additionally, any studies that address DVA in the LGBTQIA+ community only assess its prevalence in comparison to heterosexual cases. For example, research from both Safe Lives UK[13] and Interventions Alliance UK[14] found that bisexual women are more likely to experience distinct forms of DVA (including sexual abuse) in their lifetime compared to heterosexual women. Additionally, a study conducted in the U.S. state of Colorado found that LGBTQIA+ people are at equal or higher risk of experiencing DVA compared to heterosexual individuals; the risk is even higher for transgender individuals compared to their cisgender LGBTQIA+

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8 Ali, P., et al. (2021). How accurate and useful are published UK prevalence rates of intimate partner violence (IPV)? Rapid review and methodological commentary. *Journal of Criminal Psychology, 11*(2), 129-140.

9 Bourne, A., et al. (2023). Naming and recognition of intimate partner violence and family of origin violence among LGBTQ communities in Australia. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 38*(5-6), 4589-4615.

10 Siemieniuk, R. A. C., et al. (2013). Prevalence, clinical associations, and impact of intimate partner violence among HIV-infected gay and bisexual men: A population-based study. *HIV Medicine, 14*(5), 293-302.

11 Ogunbajo, A., et al. (2022). Experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) is associated with psychosocial health problems among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM) in Nigeria, Africa. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 37*(9-10), 7394-7425.

12 McGregor, K. (2023). 'Domestic Violence and Abuse in LGBTQ+ Communities.' In *Gender-Based Violence: A Comprehensive Guide*

13 Stokes, N. (2021). Comparison of Bisexual and Heterosexual Women's Experiences of Domestic Abuse. *Safe Lives UK.*

14 'Domestic Abuse in LGBT Communities' (2021). *Interventions Alliance.*

peers.[15] While these findings are important, they do not highlight the unique needs and experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community, and place their experiences in comparison to heterosexual individuals rather than analysing them as a separate issue.

Northern Ireland has such a long and complex history with violence linked to the Troubles, a period of civil and political unrest from the 1960s-1990s. As a result, there is some, albeit limited, research into the rates of DVA in NI.[16] For example, there has been research into the rates of trauma exposure experienced by DVA survivors in NI[17]; NI as a case study for the rates of DVA in post-conflict societies[18]; and the legal processes of criminalising DVA in Northern Ireland[19]. Statistics from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) have also indicated an upward trend in the rates of DVA[20]. However, the PSNI does not include information about sexual orientation or gender identity when collecting this data. Therefore, perspectives from LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA in NI are rarely, if ever, included in the existing literature. This dearth makes ground-breaking research into the rates of DVA among NI's LGBTQIA+ community all the more important and pressing.

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15 Langenderfer-Magruder, L., et al. (2016). Experiences of intimate partner violence and subsequent police reporting among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer adults in Colorado: Comparing rates of cisgender and transgender victimization. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 31*(5), 855-871.

16 McGlinchey, E., Spikol, E., & Armour, C. (2023). *Experiences and mental health impacts of intimate partner violence against men and boys: a rapid review.* Stress Trauma & Related Conditions Research Centre (STARC). Queen's University Belfast, School of Psychology.

17 Travers, Á., et al., (2022).

18 Doyle, J. L., & McWilliams, M. (2018). *Intimate partner violence in conflict and post-conflict societies: Insights and lessons from Northern Ireland*. Transitional Justice Institute, Ulster University.

19 Graham, I. and Murphy, C. (2025). T*he Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021-Prosecutions at Courts and Case Processing time for Domestic Abuse related cases dealt with in 2022/23-2023/24.*

20 PSNI. (2025). Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland. 27 February.

Legal Framework

IN NORTHERN IRELAND, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE and Abuse (DVA) is defined as any threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse inflicted on anyone by a current or former intimate partner or family member.[21] DVA can also include psychological, verbal, sexual, physical, emotional, economic, and virtual/ online abuse.[22] Coercive control is also included in the legal remit of DVA, and is defined as "a pattern of abusive behaviour by an individual with a goal of forcing their target into a dependent/ subordinate role, working to isolate them from their support network".[23] Abusers control their victims through isolation, blackmail, regulation of sexual activity, monitoring day-to-day activities, denying or restricting freedom, and financial control.[24]

According to the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, 'abusive behaviour' is defined as follows:

Behaviour (including towards others) that would have the effect of:

- making the victim dependent on the abuser;
- isolating them from friends, family members or other sources of social interaction or support;
- controlling, regulating or monitoring their day to day activities;
- depriving or restricting their freedom of action; or
- making them feel frightened, humiliated, degraded, punished or intimidated.
- Violent behaviour (includes both physical and sexual); or
- Threatening behaviour[25]

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[21] Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031' (2024). *Northern Ireland Department of Health and Northern Ireland Department of Justice.*

[22] 'Domestic Violence and Abuse: Legal Remedies – Information about the criminal and civil law surrounding domestic violence and abuse in Northern Ireland' (2024). *Belfast Area Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse Partnership.*

[23] Spikol, E., McGlinchey, E., & Armour, C. (2024). Male Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence. *Stress Trauma & Related Conditions Research Centre (STARC), Queen's University Belfast.*

[24] 'Controlling or Coercive Behaviour: Statutory Guidance – What the police and organisations should do to keep victims safe'. (2022). *UK Home Office.*

[25] 'Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland)' (2021). *Northern Ireland Assembly.*

To be legally considered abuse, the behaviour must be likely to cause physical and/or psychological harm, be carried out either intentionally or recklessly, and occur on at least two occasions. The legislation also includes two child aggravators – one for if the victim is under the age of 18; and one for if a child was present for the abuse, used to abuse another person, or abuse was directed or threatened towards a child.

DVA can happen to anyone regardless of age, ethnicity, gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and socio-economic status and can be perpetrated by anyone – including former and current spouses/partners, parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, siblings, aunts/uncles, and nieces/nephews. Perpetrators can also be step-parents/grandparents, step-siblings, step-children/grandchildren, or in-laws.[26]

LGBTQIA+ specific patterns and behaviours of DVA can manifest in many patterns. Some abusers invalidate the victim's LGBTQIA+ identity due to previous relationships; for example, an LGBTQIA+ individual may have previously identified as heterosexual and/or cisgender and dated individuals of the opposite gender before living as an LGBTQIA+ person. Additionally, abusers can target the victim's gender identity by criticising how the victim publicly presents, intentionally deadnaming the victim (calling a transgender/nonbinary person by their birth name after they have chosen a new name), or using incorrect pronouns.[27] Furthermore, abusers may target the victim's LGBTQIA+ identity by threatening to disclose the victim's sexual orientation and/or gender identity to family, employers, religious community, or friends[28]; withholding hormone medication[29]; and threatening pets or children.

DVA from family members is unfortunately prevalent for LGBTQIA+ people; according to a 2022 survey and report released by Galop (a UK-based LGBTQ+ abuse support organisation), nearly 30% of LGBT+ respondents had experienced abuse from family members or relatives in their lifetime.[30] However, many studies on the prevalence of

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[26] 'Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland)' (2021)

[27] Walker, T., et al. (2020). *Developing LGBTQ programs for perpetrators and victims/survivors of domestic and family violence.* ANROWS.

[28] Albright, M., & Alcantara-Thompson, D. (2011). Contextualizing Domestic Violence from a LGBTQ Perspective. Seattle, WA: *Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Abuse.*

[29] Rogers, M. M. (2021). Exploring the domestic abuse narratives of trans and nonbinary people and the role of cisgenderism in identity abuse, misgendering, and pathologizing. *Violence Against Women, 27*(12-13), 2187-2207.

[30] 'LGBT+ Experiences of Abuse from Family Members' (2022). *Galop.*

DVA in the LGBTQIA+ community tends to focus on intimate partner abuse.[31] As a result, there is inadequate support across the board for LGBTQIA+ people who have experienced domestic abuse.

Although most reported cases of DVA occur in a person's home, it is not exclusively an at-home phenomenon. For example, abuse can take place while the victim is out socialising, at work, on holiday, online, or through stalking. Therefore, DVA is not necessarily a singular, individual event, but rather manifests in any environment where the perpetrator can exert control over the victim.[32]

The Northern Ireland Assembly has passed several pieces of legislation criminalising behaviours related to DVA, such as stalking, non-fatal strangulation, down-blousing, up-skirting, cyber-flashing, threatening or abusive behaviour (TAB), and harassment.[33] New sexual offence legislation also prevents offenders from using the 'rough sex' defence during the legal prosecution of domestic and sexual violence cases.[34] Individuals accused of DVA or sexual assault use this defence to claim that their intimate partner consented to the activities as part of rough sexual activity or consentual bondage.

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[31] Langenderfer-Magruder, L., et al. (2016)

[32] 'Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031' (2024)

[33] 'Legal Remedies at a Glance: Steps to take if you are experiencing domestic abuse in Northern Ireland' (2024). *Belfast Area Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse Partnership.*

[34] Kula, A. (2023). 'Consent to rough sex is no longer a defence': New law enters force in Northern Ireland to crack down on sexual strangulation. 26 June. *Belfast News Letter.*

DVA in the Context of Northern Ireland

INDIVIDUALS AFFECTED BY DVA IN Northern Ireland can face a number of obstacles, including victim blaming, self-censorship, physical isolation from support organisations, and systemic criminal justice inequities. However, these difficulties are further compounded for marginalised individuals, including LGBTQIA+ community.

First of all, there is a lack of LGBTQIA+ oriented relationship and sex education (RSE) offered in Northern Irish schools. When students are taught about healthy relationships, LGBTQIA+ perspectives are rarely, if ever, included.[35] This can promote skewed perceptions of what a healthy relationship is, especially for LGBTQIA+ youth. Additionally, religion holds considerable influence over educational policy and curriculum development, as over 90% of Northern Irish schools are segregated based on religious affiliation.[36] Consequently, many discussions about the LGBTQIA+ community in these settings turn into debates about whether being gay was 'right' or 'wrong', rather than educating students about LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships.[37]

A recent study also shows that 78% of primary school pupils and 80% of secondary school pupils in the UK have heard homophobic language in school.[38] While there are not any updated statistics regarding homophobic/transphobic language in schools in NI, it is likely that children and young people here are experiencing this type of verbal abuse. In fact, studies have shown that 82% of LGBTQIA+ youth in Northern Ireland have experienced suicidal thoughts and feelings, as compared to 23% of their heterosexual and cisgender peers.[39] Therefore, young students are further deterred from asking about LGBTQIA+ identities and relationships in educational settings, lest they be targeted by homophobic language or insults from their peers. Furthermore, young LGBTQIA+ people in these educational settings may feel invalidated in their sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQIA+ students experiencing DVA from intimate partners or family members could also be further deterred from disclosing or reporting the abuse.

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35 Meredith, R. (2024). 'Education has failed LGBT pupils, politicians told'. 17 October. *BBC*.

36 Wallace, A. (2024). 'Integrated education in Northern Ireland is urgent – why can't our leaders see that?'. 2 December. *The Guardian*.

37 'Tackling femicide "epidemic" needs to begin with education, MLAs told' (2024). *Derry Now*.

38 'Homophobic language heard by 78% of primary school pupils, new research finds' (2024). *Just Like Us*.

39 'Northern Ireland's LGBT+ young people most likely to contemplate suicide, research finds'. (2021). *Just Like Us*.

Although LGBTQIA+ media representation and awareness has increased greatly in the past 20 years, an overwhelming majority of couples in media and popular culture are depicted as heterosexual. Furthermore, media depictions of DVA – and particularly intimate partner violence – rely on the trope of a stronger/bigger male partner controlling a smaller/weaker female partner.[40] This depiction ignores aspects of DVA that are not physical – such as coercive control, online abuse, financial abuse, and stalking, to name a few. Consequently, individuals may not even be aware that DVA can and does occur within LGBTQIA+ relationships.[41] This is a massive issue around understanding and invisibility, as LGBTQIA+ people are not reflected in advertisements, billboards, and other public campaigns regarding DVA awareness.

LGBTQIA+ people in Northern Ireland face additional barriers to reporting and addressing DVA. For example, abusers may threaten to disclose the victim's sexual orientation or gender identity to their friends, families, or colleagues. Northern Ireland remains more socially conservative than other parts of the United Kingdom; therefore, being 'outed' could be detrimental to the personal and social lives of LGBTQIA+ people in Northern Ireland who have not disclosed their gender identity or sexual orientation to friends, family, or colleagues.[42] Individuals living in rural areas are also often physically isolated from both LGBTQIA+ support organisations and domestic abuse support services.[43] These rural districts of NI are also more socially conservative than the larger cities and urban areas, which can further complicate the process of reporting DVA as an LGBTQIA+ individual.

Most domestic abuse centres and services across the globe, including in Northern Ireland, are specifically catered towards the needs of cisgender women, as they are often the largest group in need of DVA support.[44] However, these organisations may not have adequate resources or capacity to support the unique needs of lesbian/bisexual women, gay/bisexual men, nonbinary individuals, and transgender individuals.[45] This lack of LGBTQIA+ oriented resources may prevent LGBTQIA+ victims of DVA from reporting and seeking support from organisations and institutions.

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[40] Rollè, L. et al. (2020). News media representation of domestic violence victims and perpetrators: Focus on gender and sexual orientation in international literature. *Gendered Domestic Violence and Abuse in Popular Culture*, 149-169

[41] McMahon, L. (2022). *'It's a people problem': the invisibility of male same-sex domestic violence and abuse in the UK* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Sheffield).

[42] Matthews, N. (2019). Party Politics and Religion in Northern Ireland. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*.

[43] Harvey, S., et al. (2014)

[44] 'Domestic abuse, the facts' (N.D.) Women's Aid Federation of England

[45] Walker, T., et al. (2020)

According to the Department of Health and Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, 1 out of 4 lesbian/bisexual women and 4 out of 10 gay/bisexual men have experienced domestic abuse, but the real number is likely much higher due to the long history of underreporting of hate crimes and violence against the LGBTQIA+ community.[46] According to official statistics from the UK Government Equalities Office (2018), 91% of hate crimes against LGBTQIA+ individuals go unreported.[47] Local research from The Rainbow Project also indicated that over two-thirds (64%) of homophobic hate crimes in Northern Ireland were not reported to the police.[48] Therefore, it is currently extremely difficult to know the actual rates and prevalence of DVA against the LGBTQIA+ population.

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[46] 'Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031' (2024)

[47] 'National LGBT Survey – Research Report' (2018). Government Equalities Office.

[48] O'Doherty, J. (2009). Through Our Eyes: Perceptions and Experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People towards Homophobic Hate Crime and Policing in Northern Ireland. *The Rainbow Project – Northern Ireland.*

Methodology

THIS RESEARCH USED BOTH QUALITATIVE and quantitative research methods – specifically, interviews and surveys (n=87) were used to collect the data. First, the research team at HEReNI developed a survey and circulated the survey to organisations that may serve or support LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing DVA.

When developing the interview and survey questions, the research team acknowledged that using terms such as 'domestic abuse' or 'domestic violence' can inadvertently prevent LGBTQIA+ individuals from participating, as they may not see themselves as victims of DVA for various reasons. For example, participants may be unaware that DVA can occur in LGBTQIA+ relationships or that DVA includes more than physical abuse.

Research conducted in other countries assessing the prevalence of DVA among the LGBTQIA+ community often used less direct or polarising language. For example, some of these studies asked participants about their experiences by referring to DVA as 'relationship violence'[49], 'family of origin violence', 'abusive behaviour'[50], or 'coercive control'. To dissuade the fears and anxieties of the participants, especially when discussing traumatic and personal events, the research questions refer to DVA as 'abusive or coercive behaviour'. This phrase encompasses aspects of Northern Ireland's legal definition of DVA and also holds less polarising connotations compared to the phrase 'domestic violence and abuse'.

First, the survey was developed to anonymously collect large amounts of quantitative data from participants all across Northern Ireland, and it remained open for a 10-week-period from November 2024 to February 2025. Most responses from the survey were collected through an infographic shared across social media, which featured both a QR code and a website address leading to the survey. The quantitative data from the survey assess the prevalence and rates of DVA among LGBTQIA+ individuals, as well as overall satisfaction rates within the community of the current legal, policy, and practice initiatives designed to address DVA. At the end of the survey, there was a question asking if individuals were interested in participating in the interview process, and if so, to leave their contact information.

The infographic and the survey were distributed to organisations in the LGBTQIA+ sector – Cara-Friend, HEReNI, the Rainbow Project, and Rainbow Refugees. Through social

[49] Ristock, J., & Timbang, N. (2005). Relationship violence in lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer [LGBTQ] communities. *Violence Against Women Online Resources.*

[50] Bourne, A., et al. (2023).

media, the research team also shared the survey with other LGBTQIA+ organisations in Northern Ireland, including Belfast Pride, Omagh Pride, Mid-Ulster Pride, LGBTQ+ Women's Group Newry, Queer Belfast, QUB Trans Student Association, and Queerde Palestine Belfast.

The survey was also distributed to other organisations and stakeholders specifically addressing DVA. These include the Department of Justice, the Department for Communities, the MARAC Advisory Group, Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), Victim Support NI, Men's Advisory Project, Men's Alliance NI, Hourglass NI, Nexus NI, Women's Aid Federation (and all regional offices), Assist NI, and Belfast Area Domestic Violence Partnership. Other organisations and initiatives that circulated the survey include Relate NI, Derry Well Women, Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), the Commission for Victims of Crime (CVOCNI), and Progressive Politics NI.

Interviews were used to collect qualitative data on the stories and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA. Recruitment began in November 2024 and encompassed a variety of methods. Most participants were recruited through the aforementioned survey, as the final question allowed participants interested in interviewing to leave their preferred contact information for the research team. The survey infographic also included contact information for the research team, so individuals who did not wish to participate in the survey still had the option to interview through contacting the domestic abuse researcher. Other individuals were referred to the research team from LGBTQIA+ sector workers.

Recruitment was difficult for a number of reasons. All DVA survivors – regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity – grapple with difficulties in reporting and receiving support.[51] For example, survivors often choose not to report or discuss their experiences with DVA due to long-lasting trauma, internalised guilt, or fears of exacerbating the abuse.[52] As previously mentioned, some individuals may be unaware that they are experiencing DVA, especially if the abuse is not physical, because the public image of DVA is typically a man beating a woman. In other cases, the individuals may still be in the abusive relationship, and therefore do not feel safe completing the survey or participating in the interview process. Finally, individuals who do not have

[51] Harvey, S., et al. (2014)

[52] Fugate, M., et al. (2005). Barriers to domestic violence help seeking: Implications for intervention. *Violence Against Women*, 11(3), 290-310.

social media or even internet access might not have been able to access the survey, as recruitment was largely through social media, email, and other online forums.

Although these difficulties also affect the LGBTQIA+ community, there are additional barriers that are LGBTQIA+ specific. These reasons range from discrimination within the criminal justice system; to assumed heterosexuality in domestic abuse support organisations; to the lack of LGBTQIA+ support services in rural areas of Northern Ireland. Additionally, some LGBTQIA+ individuals have not disclosed their gender identity or sexual orientation to their partners, friends, family, and/or colleagues. Therefore, participating in the survey and interview process, or even interacting with the circulated social media infographics, could potentially place these individuals at further risk for abuse and discrimination by inadvertently revealing their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Survey Questions and Responses

THE RESEARCH TEAM DEVELOPED A survey which was then circulated to a number of support organisations, services, and stakeholders. A total of 87 survey responses were recorded, although the responses had varying levels of completeness. The survey questioned are listed below, and the responses are listed in the appendix at the end of this paper.

Demographic questions

1. What best describes your sexual orientation?
2. What best describes your gender identity?
3. What is your current age?
4. What council area do you currently live in?

Patterns of abusive behaviour from intimate partners

5. Have you experienced harmful and/or abusive behaviour from a current or former intimate partner(s)?
6. Is this abusive behaviour currently ongoing?
7. How did you meet the former/current partner(s)?
8. How long had you been with the partner(s) when the abusive behaviour started?
9. How long has/did the abusive behaviour last with the intimate partner(s)?
10. What were the patterns of the abusive behaviour from the intimate partner(s)?
11. Where did the abusive behaviour occur with the intimate partner(s)?
12. How often did abusive behaviour occur with the intimate partner(s)?

Patterns of abusive behaviour from family members

13. Have you experienced harmful and/or abusive behaviour from a relative or family member(s)?
14. Is this abusive behaviour currently ongoing?
15. What was the relation of the person(s) to you?

16. What were the patterns of the abusive behaviour with the family member(s)?
17. Where did the abusive behaviour with the family member(s) occur?
18. How often did abusive behaviour with the family member(s) occur?
19. How long has/did the abusive behaviour with the family member(s) last?

Support and reporting services

20. Did you report the abusive behaviour?
21. If yes, who did you report to?
22. If not, what were your reasons for not reporting?
23. What was the most significant barrier that you faced while reporting, or attempting to report, the abusive behaviour?
24. From the first instance of reporting, how long did it take for the relevant legal, policy, or practical initiatives to begin supporting and helping you through the abusive behaviour? (n=31)
25. In your opinion, how fit for purpose are the relevant legal, policy, or practical initiatives that support LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing abusive behaviour from intimate partners or family members?

Follow up

26. HEReNI will be conducting further interviews to gain further insight into the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals who have faced domestic abuse, and support they received. Would you be willing to take part in a one-to-one interview that explores some of these issues in more detail? All interviews will be in the strictest of confidence. If yes, please provide your email, phone number, or any alternative method of contact you feel comfortable with. (n=59)

Survey Findings

Through the survey, the research team gathered a total of 87 responses (n=87). Nearly all of respondents– 94.37% – reported violence from an intimate partner, with 21% of these respondents indicating that the abuse was ongoing with the intimate partner. On the other hand, only 45.59% of respondents reported experiencing familial abuse, with 26% of respondents indicating that the abuse was ongoing with the family member. The most frequently reported perpetrators of familial violence were parents/step-parents and siblings/step-siblings.

The patterns of abusive behaviour varied on a case-by-case basis, but the most common patterns were emotional abuse (reported by 85% of respondents abused by an intimate partner and 77.42% of respondents abused by a family member) and psychological abuse (reported by 58.21% of respondents abused by an intimate partner and 51.61% of respondents abused by a family member). Sexual abuse was also much more frequently reported in cases of intimate partner abuse (58.21%) than familial abuse (32.26%); while physical abuse was slightly more frequent in cases of familial abuse (54.84%) than intimate partner abuse (48.28%). Additionally, abusive behaviour from intimate partners ranged greatly in duration – some relationships lasted for a few months while others lasted for several years – while familial abuse lasted, on average, for several years. Approximately 80.6% of respondents who experienced familial abuse reported that it lasted for over 2 years.

Only 35.48% of survey respondents disclosed or reported the abusive behaviour. A majority of these individuals (75%) reported it to the police, although other avenues of support and reporting included domestic abuse support organisations (45.93%), GPs/social workers (33.33%), LGBTQ+ support organisations (25%), and crisis/helplines (16.67%). For the 64.52% of respondents who did not report, the key reasons for not disclosing the abuse were: not recognising the situation as abusive (71.15%), self-blame for the abuse (55.77%), and concerns of worsening the abuse (44.23%).

There were mixed experiences among the individuals that chose to report the abuse. In a question regarding reporting experiences, participants were asked how long it took for the relevant legal, policy, and practice initiatives to help them through the abuse from the first instance of reporting. The top response for this question was 'no follow up', experienced by over over one-third (39.29%) of survey respondents who reported the abuse. Over half of the survey respondents (60.41%) classified the current legal, policy, and practice initiatives in NI for LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA as 'not so effective' or 'not at all effective'.

Study Sample

PARTICIPANTS FOR THE INTERVIEW PROCESS were recruited through the survey, by contacting the research team, and by direct referral to the research team. Two people initially interested in participating withdrew from the project before interviewing. An additional seven individuals expressed interest in interviewing, but did not respond to the research team when contacted.

The research team interviewed a total of 16 participants – four cisgender lesbians, three bisexual cisgender women, two transgender lesbians, two cisgender gay men, two bisexual nonbinary/genderfluid individuals, one nonbinary lesbian, one asexual nonbinary individual, and one queer transgender man. Therefore, the interviews provide a range of perspectives of DVA experiences within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Participant	Gender Identity / Sexual Orientation	Partner Abuse	Family Abuse	Age Range
Participant 1	Transgender lesbian	No	Yes	45–54
Participant 2	Bisexual nonbinary	Yes	Yes	35–44
Participant 3	Bisexual cisgender woman	Yes	Yes	25–34
Participant 4	Nonbinary lesbian	Yes	Yes	35–44
Participant 5	Bisexual cisgender woman	Yes	Yes	25–34
Participant 6	Transgender lesbian	Yes	Yes	25–34
Participant 7	Asexual/queer nonbinary	Yes	No	18–24
Participant 8	Cisgender lesbian	Yes	Yes	45–54
Participant 9	Bisexual cisgender woman	Yes	Yes	25–34
Participant 10	Cisgender lesbian	Yes	Yes	25–34
Participant 11	Gay cisgender man	Yes	No	25–34
Participant 12	Cisgender lesbian	Yes	Yes	45–54
Participant 13	Cisgender lesbian	Yes	No	35–44
Participant 14	Gay cisgender man	Yes	No	25–34
Participant 15	Bisexual genderfluid	Yes	Yes	25–34
Participant 16	Queer transgender man	Yes	Yes	25–34

Interview Questions

THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE INCLUDED QUESTIONS that were similar to the survey, but were open-ended to allow for participants to elaborate on their own lived experiences and include as much detail as they felt comfortable.

Background questions

- If you are comfortable sharing, could you tell me who you experienced the abusive behaviour from?
  - How did you meet the former/current partner in question?
  - How long had you known this partner when the abusive behaviour started?
  - For relatives: What was the relation of this person to you?
- How long has/did the abusive behaviour last?

Patterns of abusive behaviour

- If you feel comfortable doing so, could you describe to me the patterns of the abusive behaviour?
- How often did the abusive behaviour occur? (daily, weekly, monthly, etc.)
- Can you tell me what settings/locations the abusive behaviour occurred in?
- How did the partner/family member respond if you tried to communicate with them regarding their abusive behaviour?

Support and reporting

- Did you report the abusive behaviour to anyone?
  - What type of organisation or individual did you report it to?
  - How many times did you report the abusive behaviour?
  - What was your experience with the support organisation(s)?
  - What action points or outcomes did they promise and what services did they offer you?
- What were the barriers (if any) that you faced (either mental or physical) while reporting or attempting to report the abusive behaviour?
- If applicable, what were your primary reasons for not reporting the behaviour?

Effects and outcomes

- If you feel comfortable doing so, could you describe the impacts of the abusive behaviour on your mental and/or physical health and wellbeing?
- Can you describe the impacts of the abuse behaviour on your day-to-day life and activities (both short-term and long term)?
- In your opinion and your experience, how fit for purpose are the legal, policy, and practice initiatives for supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals?
- Having experienced abusive behaviour, what advice would you give to other LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing domestic violence and/or abuse from intimate partners or family members?

Research Findings

Background

Intimate partner violence was the most frequently discussed and reported type of DVA, and was experienced by nearly 94% of interviewees. Some participants also experienced family abuse, often in their formative and teenage years, although this was less frequently reported and discussed than intimate partner violence. The duration of the abusive behaviour varied greatly from person to person; the shortest period of abuse among the interviewees was about six months, while the longest period of abuse lasted over two decades.

Participant 1, a transgender lesbian, experienced ongoing abuse from her foster mother for 24 years through her childhood and young adulthood:

> When she found out about me cross-dressing, she put me through to a psychiatrist, who then told her that it would pass, that things would go back to normal. She took what this guy said for the truth, she didn't really consider how I was feeling... The abuse with my foster mother was ongoing from the day that she fostered me.

Participant 2, a bisexual nonbinary individual, faced abuse from their partner, who they had met through an online forum:

> I had a really hard time recognising that it was abuse to begin with. But I would say, looking back, I guess we would have known each other about four years, but part of that was online. So I guess it would have been about a little over a year into the relationship proper... We platonically knew each other to begin with.

Participant 3, a bisexual cisgender woman, was abused by her husband. She met him through a friend, and they got married after 8 months of dating. When the abuse started, they had been together for a year. The abuse "lasted for about six months" before she left him and reported the abuse.

Participant 4, a nonbinary lesbian, was abused by their former partner, who they met on a dating app, for about four years:

> [The abuse] started at the seven month mark, and it probably wasn't as bad then, and it just seemed to get worse and worse as it went on. And that lasted for about three years.

Participant 5, a bisexual cisgender woman, met her ex-boyfriend through a dating app and had been with him for about a year when the abusive behaviour began. The physical and emotional abuse lasted for eight months.

Participant 6, a transgender lesbian, was abused by a partner after they met through an online dating service. The relationship lasted for just over a year:

> There was abusive behavior from the very beginning. If we're talking more emotional manipulation, like, literally from the first date, there was love bombing and gas lighting and other things going on... We had been going out for almost a year at that point when it became like, going from mental abuse, gaslighting, all that to actual physical violence.

Participant 7, an asexual nonbinary individual, experienced abuse from their former partner while in secondary school. The abusive behaviour lasted for nearly four years and was difficult to escape due to them being in classes together:

> A lot of it [the abuse] occurred in the home. A lot of it was over text and phone call, and then it escalated into being at school. We were in the same year it started, we then moved into being the same class, we had a lot of the same classes during this time.

Participant 8, a cisgender lesbian, was abused and blackmailed by her older brother after she came out to him when she was a teenager. She also experienced abuse from a former partner who she met through volunteering at a Pride event. They started dating about five years after their initial meeting, but the abusive behaviour began almost immediately after the relationship began, as she said that "things were off within two weeks".

Participant 9, a bisexual cisgender woman, faced abusive behaviour from her ex-husband. They had been married for about seven years before the abuse began:

> I met him online around 2013 or so, and then we got married in late 2014, and in 2015 I moved over to Northern Ireland to be with him. At the start, he wasn't abusive, but he went on weed and some drugs, and his addiction just made him become an abusive person.

Participant 10, a cisgender lesbian, was abused by her ex-wife, who she met on a dating app. She experienced abusive behaviour and coercive control for the entire duration of the nine-year marriage:

> There were technically little bread crumbs and red flags the whole way along... I actually don't know, because there were little things she used to do, like drive away on me halfway through our arguments, and shouting at me for things, and gaslighting me. So there was abuse, the whole nine years, pretty

> much... At first it was once every few months, and then it would have been the week before her period. She would have blamed her period for it, and then that entire week she would have abused me, basically. Then it was every two weeks, and then it was just randomly every other day or twice in a day.

Participant 11, a cisgender gay man, experienced abusive behaviour from a former partner, whom he had met through mutual friends and dated for two years. He said that the abuse started after they had been dating for six months and it continued for "the rest of the duration of that relationship, probably 18 months".

Participant 12, a cisgender lesbian, faced abuse from her former partner of seven years, who she met through an LGBTQIA+ chat room. Participant 12 also works for a domestic abuse support organisation, but even she acknowledged the difficulties in recognising, reporting, and leaving abusive relationships:

> From the very beginning, the controlling behaviors were very subtle. She had sort of moved in, she wanted somewhere to stay, and I'd said she could stay for a while, and then all of a sudden she moved in. Then it was the subtlety of "Do you not want me here?" when I suggested leaving. So, I would say, within about a year... It was on and off, I would say for the next six years. I work with domestic abuse, so I know how subtle it was. It was the subtle drip feed of negativity for about six years... So it was underlying the whole time, but if she didn't get her own way, it ramped up.

Participant 13, a cisgender lesbian, was abused by her former partner during their three-year-long relationship. Although she did not initially recognise some of the behaviour as abusive, she has realised in hindsight that the abusive behaviour began very early on in the relationship:

> [The abuse] wasn't physical, particularly, more like coercive control and stuff actually probably from the second or third date. But it just took a while, it took the relationship being over for the red flags to register... It was on and off, but it was nearly three years.

Participant 14, a cisgender gay man, initially met his ex-partner through his brother; they knew each other for four years before they began dating after connecting on a dating app. They dated for about six months, and the abusive behaviour lasted "throughout the whole relationship". This ex-partner still abuses Participant 14 through stalking.

Participant 15, a nonbinary genderfluid individual, was abused by their step-mother growing up and by a former partner who they met at university. They had known their partner for about 2 years before they started dating, but said that "the first signs that something was off happened about two months into the relationship". The abuse lasted

for the entirety of their relationship, about 2.5 years, and escalated from occurring every few weeks to being constant.

Participant 16, a queer transgender man, experienced abuse from an ex-partner and from several family members throughout his childhood – including his mother, father, and older brother. The abuse from his family members is still ongoing, as they continue to misgender and deadname him, while the abuse from his ex-partner lasted for about 3 years while he was in school:

> To be honest, pretty immediately it became quite controlling... I would say I noticed something was awry maybe 4-5 months in. I don't remember exactly... This happened from when I was about 17-20 years old, so almost 10 years ago, I know we were established as a couple.

Although some participants were open about their experiences with abusive behaviour from family members in the survey, several individuals did not initially list the family abuse in the survey responses and only mentioned it during the interview, often very briefly and casually.

> There has been abuse with family as well, but mostly that's resolved, so most of it was from an intimate partner. (Participant 4)

> Back when I was tiny, that was just my dad. [The abuse] led to me suppressing a lot of feelings about gender for a couple of years, but that was a very long time ago. (Participant 6)

> I met him online and like that was how we decided to get married. My parents were against it, I think they probably are still against it, to be honest. I guess our parents were kind of emotionally abusive as well. And like it just felt like a vicious cycle, it just came back again and again. (Participant 9)

> I had worse physical abuse when I was a child from a partner of my mother's than I did in that [intimate partner] relationship. (Participant 12)

The negative effects of familial abuse were actively acknowledged by a few of the participants. For these individuals, they grew up either being abused or witnessing domestic abuse without receiving support from family. This inaction from the family affected these participants' perceptions of family and healthy relationships at a very young age:

> There had been a long history of emotional abuse there [in the family], which I think softened me up, if you will, for experiencing abuse in my relationship. Because I was watching my family pretend to be a normal family for my entire life, I was watching really significant abuse happen to someone very close to me, which then trickled down to me. (Participant 2)

> I feel like I ended up in that position because of shit that I went through in my childhood. My mum remains in and has been in an abusive relationship for years, and I think shit like that leaves you more open to this kind of thing happening to you later. (Participant 13)

> I had no sense of what was normal because of the way my family was, so I didn't notice the abuse [from the ex-partner]. (Participant 16)

It appears from these research findings that abuse from family members towards LGBTQIA+ individuals may be normalised and ignored in NI society, which is likely a repercussion of trauma exposure from violence during the Troubles. Indeed, studies have shown that NI citizens who witnessed violence or lived through The Troubles are more likely to be psychologically desensitised to extreme violence.[53] Furthermore, existing education initiatives almost exclusively depict domestic abuse as between intimate partners. Therefore, most of the general public may not even be aware that abuse from family members constitutes domestic abuse.

Patterns of abusive behaviour

Emotional and psychological abuse

Nearly all interview and survey participants described patterns of emotional abuse and psychological abuse. Emotional abuse was reported by 85% of respondents who were abused by an intimate partner and 71% of respondents who were abused by family members, making it the most frequent abusive pattern in both familial and intimate partner abuse, according to the survey. Psychological abuse was also frequent, as it was present in approximately 58% of respondents abused by an intimate partner and 51% of respondents abused by family members.

In the interviews, participants described patterns of coercive control and gaslighting – defined as "a form of psychological abuse where a person causes someone to question their sanity, memories, or perception of reality."[54] This often manifested in some type of verbal manipulation.

One of the most common tactics of emotional and psychological abuse was isolation from friends, family, community, or other support systems. The abusers' constant

[53] Fitzgerald E., et al., (2017). *The Transgenerational Impact of 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland.* School Of Psychology, Queen's University Belfast.

[54] Huizen, J., & Boland, M. (2024). 'What is gaslighting?: Examples and signs of gaslighting and how to respond'. *Medical News Today.*

supervision and separation made it difficult for individuals to report the behaviour to relevant support organisations or open up to friends or family about the abuse.

> I couldn't go to anybody at the time to report what was going on because they watched every move that I was making: they wouldn't allow me to go out to see friends, they wouldn't allow me to walk the dog to get out of the house. They would only allow me to go out of the house if I was doing errands for them. But anything that was related to me, it was a no go... She didn't want me having friends because she was afraid that she would lose me, that friends would suspect what she was doing. By not being allowed to have friends, it meant she was in control of me like a robot. (Participant 1)

> I couldn't see family, I only really talked to my mum family-wise, but I couldn't see family without her having to be there. No exceptions. If I had friends and we were doing something, she either had to come along or I just wouldn't be allowed to do it. She would basically throw fits over it. (Participant 6)

> I wouldn't be allowed to go to gay bars or queer spaces, just because he wasn't comfortable with me being there; manipulating how much time I would spend with people; talking down to me about what he thought of me, what he thought about my family, what he thought about my friends. He said he was only the only real one there to protect me... And there was an element of jealousy. He did come from more of a difficult family, whereas my family are all quite close knit and very social... he said to me he couldn't understand why we're so close, and he probably felt like that was a sort of barrier. (Participant 11)

> She was very jealous of my relationship with my children, and she would have tried to isolate me... There's a lot of jealousy around my familial relationships and my friendships. It made my home, where we lived together, quite uncomfortable, so people didn't come to visit, and then would have used that against me, saying "Nobody ever comes to see you". (Participant 12)

> My step-mum was very abusive. I wouldn't get fed if they didn't feel like feeding me, I wasn't allowed to go into large portions of the house regularly. I was told by her, "You are suffering now because you haven't embraced Jesus Christ, and you will continue to suffer your entire life until you accept Jesus Christ and atone for not being Christian previously." (Participant 15)

In several instances, the perpetrators emotionally and psychologically abused through excessive criticism of the victim. The criticism can target any aspect of the victim, including (but not limited to) their behaviour, physical appearance, their friends/family, or their career.

> A lot of her put downs and would almost be – it sounds weird – like, nurturing almost. It was like, "Oh, you can't do that. I'll do it for you." Or like, "You're really stupid, I'll do it right." So at first, it didn't even seem like it was anything bad. And I was like "Alright, okay, well, she maybe does know better, and she maybe can do this better than I can". But because it was every day, I started to feel like I couldn't do anything right at all. (Participant 4)

> I wasn't allowed new tattoos, wasn't allowed to cut my hair short, wasn't allowed to wear low cut tops or low cut clothes, she cut me off from my friends and family. It would have been "You can go out", but whenever I did go out, I came back and she would have been really upset with me about it, and it almost made it not worth going out then. She just forced me into the cooking, cleaning, homemaker role. (Participant 10)

> It started with snide comments about interests, things that I liked, hobbies, and then being really disparaging against people that I knew, basically saying that I shouldn't hang out with them because there was something wrong with them. (Participant 15)

> They went on to do English literature at [university], so they were very good with their words. It was verbal manipulative abuse, like twisting stuff I said so it made me look worse, and twisting what they would say so it made them look better... A lot of controlling how I acted and even spoke. If I didn't speak in the right tone of voice, they would take almost a hissy fit with me... That happened every single day, some form of verbal control. (Participant 16)

Another method of psychological and emotional abuse was threatening self harm or suicide. In these instances, the victims are pressured to change their behaviour or stay in the abusive situation, or they risk the abuser potentially hurting themselves.[55] Oftentimes, the abuser does not intend to hurt themselves, instead using this tactic to maintain control over the victim:

> Whenever she wasn't getting her way with things, she would threaten suicide. That was very common, especially towards the end... Everything was always about her. If, say, a friend would want to go out after work, or there was a little social event to go to, she would again throw a fit. She would be like, "I'm here on my own... I'm going to hurt myself, unless you come home." (Participant 6)

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[55] Mandel, D. (2024). "Beyond Co-Occurrence: The Interplay of Coercive Control, Suicide, and Homicide". 4 November. Safe & Together Institute

> She was very controlling, very emotionally manipulative, trying to stop me talking to my friends, it was very isolating. We both had mental health problems, very much trying to use that to make us only depend on each other... I tried a lot of times [to confront her], mostly about emotional stuff, and she would just kind of break down. A lot of them escalated into threats of committing suicide... She would turn to her classmates and just brag about what she was doing to me so I didn't have anyone in my corner. (**Participant 7**)

> There was a few times where they were like, "I'm going to kill myself if you don't message me back immediately", so a lot of death threats upon themselves. (**Participant 16**)

Several participants also experienced psychological and emotional abuse through extreme mood swings which created cycles of abusive behaviour. In these cases, the situation could be described as 'emotional whiplash'. Essentially, the relationship would cycle through periods of calm, followed by intense abuse, followed by apologies and promises to be better, circling back to the abuse.[56]

> She'd be nice in the messages, but then when she saw me, she'd treat me like she hated me. It was so confusing, because then you're always trying to get back to that early stage when everything was so good. It was almost like a switch flipped, and I kept thinking, "Well, this isn't the real her". (**Participant 4**)

> He abused me, both emotionally and physically... it occurred frequently, when he was annoyed or he was disappointed about something. I always confronted my partner about it, but he was always telling me he's going to change, he's going to change, but nothing ever changed. (**Participant 5**)

> I suppose it was a bit of a cycle of addictive abusive behavior. There's the apologies, the 'I'm a terrible person', the begging for forgiveness. And then there's a period of relative calm, and then it sort of builds up again. We were just in that cycle. She was very aware of what was going on, and from what she had told me, this was a pattern that she had repeated. So she knew her behaviour was completely out of line. (**Participant 8**)

> It would go through ebbs and flows, periods of time where things were all right, and then things would blow up, with increasing frequency towards the end of the relationship. I tried to end the relationship when we were maybe 11 months in and from there on in, it went through increasing levels of drama and dysregulation in increasingly small cycles. (**Participant 13**)

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56 Craig, H., & Kippert, A. (2022). 'What is the Cycle of Abuse?'. 21 September. *DomesticShelters.org*.

Physical abuse

Several participants also experienced different patterns of physical abuse, including hitting, choking, punching, and throwing items. Physical abuse was one of the more common forms of abusive behaviour in the survey, as it was reported by 43% of respondents who were abused by an intimate partner and nearly 55% of respondents who were abused by family members.

Interview participants also discussed their experiences being physically abused by intimate partners and family members. Participant 1 experienced physical abuse from her foster parents until she was 14; they slapped and hit her if she did something wrong or if she attempted to express herself in a more feminine way, as this was before she came out as transgender. In another case, Participant 16 was physically abused by his father; his seven siblings and mother also experienced physical abuse from the father:

> My dad is like a very imposing figure. He has hit us before. He has broken my little sister's arm. He has choked out my older sister, he has thrown her out. He hasn't physically thrown me out, but he has been like, "You're not welcome". He's a very aggressive man. (Participant 16)

Participant 3 said that the physical abuse she experienced from her ex-husband "was really hard" and she "just couldn't bear it anymore". Participant 4 also mentioned being in a physically abusive relationship before they were in a longer, emotionally abusive one. They said the physical abuse was "very quickly ended thanks to family". Participants 5, 8, and 15 also briefly indicated that they had experienced physical abuse through their interviews and survey responses.

In some cases, the physical abuse was targeted towards others in the household, such as children or pets. For example, Participant 10 was physically abused by her ex-wife, but her daughter was also targeted by the physical abuse:

> She choked my daughter and threw her toys and broke them. She also pushed me against the fireplace in an argument. And she had hit me when she was pregnant because she knew that I wouldn't hit her back. (Participant 10)

Several participants also experienced threats/attempts of physical violence or secondary physical violence, such as by destroying possessions or throwing items. Although these cases never escalated to physical attacks, the threats of potential violence was enough to cause significant distress to the survivors.

> She did try to attack me in the flat... It's only because of how my bathroom door works that I'm still alive because she was very imposing, so if she wanted to, she could knock me out with one punch. I was able to hold it

> while I was on the phone with the police. Then she left the apartment, she was worried about the police... But the police said no crime was committed because she didn't lay a hand on me and she left the apartment willingly, they said nothing happened. So getting something like a restraining order cannot be done. (**Participant 6**)

> One time, probably the most scared I've been, was when I was kind of pinned up against the wall and thought there was going to be a physical attack. There wasn't, but it was that fear, since they're a bit bigger than me, he could sort of corner me like that. (**Participant 11**)

> There were certain behaviors that were messages to say, "I might not hurt you, but look what it can do". She's thrown things at times, on odd occasions, she would be slamming a door or flinging a cup or breaking something... It was never physical against me, but it was nearly like, "If she's able to do that, what else could she do?"... Near the end, I nearly had wished for something big to happen, for her to either strike me or throw something at me, so that it could have actually gone to the police. (**Participant 12**)

> There was physical intimidation. A lot of punching beside my head but not me, a lot of scratching themselves, or breaking objects. Physical intimidation that was supposed to intimidate me, but wasn't actually punching and hitting and kicking me. The threat that it could be you. (**Participant 16**)

Another form of this indirect physical abuse is stalking, which can occur during and after the abusive situation.[57] Participants 9 and 14 both experienced instances of stalking after leaving their abusers.

> He pressured me to go back to his place... I had to call the police, and when they couldn't get in contact with him – he refused to pick up the phone, answer the door, go to the police station – they basically just sent a strongly worded letter to tell him to stop coming to the property here... I think a restraining order needs to be two instances. He would come by multiple times but I didn't answer the door, so that was considered just one instance. (**Participant 9**)

> He just appears out of nowhere, like I can't leave the house... and if I leave I have to go out a different door where he can't see me. (**Participant 14**)

This type of indirect abuse – like stalking and threats of violence – can complicate the reporting process for victims, because some services require concrete evidence, like

[57] Baldry, A.C. (2002). "From Domestic Violence to Stalking: The Infinite Cycle of Violence". In *Stalking and Psychosexual Obsession* (eds J. Boon and L. Sheridan).

scars, marks, or bruises. Since this type of abuse did not cause direct physical violence, the victims experienced immense trauma, fear, and anxiety but could not receive legal redress without tangible evidence.[58]

Sexual abuse

Many participants also experienced sexual abuse from the perpetrators. During the interviews, Participants 2, 3, 7, 10, 15, and 16 mentioned specific instances of non-consensual touching/penetration – from both family members and intimate partners. For all of these cases, the sexual abuse occurred towards the end of the abusive situation. Many other participants also indicated in the survey that they experienced sexual abuse. Sexual abuse was reported by 53% of respondents who were abused by an intimate partner, and 32% of respondents who were abused by family members.

A common form of sexual abuse is coerced sexual activity. Participant 6 and Participant 16 both reported instances of being pressured into sexual activities by their partners:

> There was a lot of pressuring me into doing sex stuff, even if I wasn't in the mood for it. I would basically pleasure her just to get her to kind of stop pestering me and her being like 'Oh, you think I'm fat. You don't like my body'. I was basically doing sexual favors. (Participant 6)

> There were a lot of actual sexual physical interactions with them. On the 'lower' end was manipulation to do sexual acts I didn't want to do... and if I don't help them with that, I've ruined their whole day. On the 'higher' end, there was one time that I would actually deem as rape more stereotypically. I was really not in the place to be having sex... I was threatened, and then I just sort of let it happen, and I was crying the whole time. (Participant 16)

Reproductive control, such as forced pregnancy and forced abortion, was another form of sexual abuse mentioned in the interviews. In the case of Participant 10, her ex-wife was adamant about having no more than two children. After carrying the first child, the ex-wife placed immense pressure on Participant 10 to get pregnant within a certain time frame, or else she would carry the second child as well:

> The deal was that she carried the first one and I carried the second one. Once she had the first one, I then had 20 attempts at fertility treatment and 7 miscarriages. And she started saying that her biological clock was running out, and that if I didn't get pregnant by the end of the year, she would have

[58] Fugate, M., et al. (2005). Barriers to domestic violence help seeking: Implications for intervention. *Violence Against Women,* 11(3), 290-310.

> the second child. But she didn't want more than two children, so I would then never be allowed to be pregnant. (Participant 10)

Threats of sexual assault was another tactic of sexual abuse. For example, Participant 16 received threatening texts from his ex-partner whenever he was out with friends:

> If I was out with mates, they would message me saying stuff like, "I'm going to rape you in front of them to show that you belong to me, that you're mine". (Participant 16)

Economic / financial abuse

Economic/financial abuse was also a recurring pattern with the interviewees and survey respondents. The Northern Ireland Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy (2024-2031) defines financial abuse as "where one person deprives their partner or family member of financial resources or ability to make money…creat[ing] financial dependency and control."[59] The rising cost of living in Northern Ireland also may be exacerbating the prevalence of financial abuse, as individuals are facing increasing economic difficulties. Studies also indicate that LGBTQ+ individuals in the UK are more likely to face poverty than their cisgender and heterosexual peers.[60] Consequently, the LGBTQ+ community in the UK and Northern Ireland is further vulnerable to experiencing this type of abuse. Financial and economic abuse was reported by 31% of respondents who experienced intimate partner abuse and 32% of respondents who experienced familial abuse.

In one instance of financial abuse, Participant 1's foster mother maintained control over her bank account after she came out as transgender. She stated that this economic control prevented her from freely expressing herself as a transgender woman:

> [My foster parents] had persuaded me to have a joint bank account with them, which meant that they had another hold on me… Two years after I disowned them, [the foster mother] put her name under my address and vice versa under her address. It meant that unknown to me, she was getting details about my accounts without my knowledge… The only thing that was holding me back for all those years was her having access to my bank account. If I was able to break free from her, from my bank account, having access to my bank account, I would have left her sooner. (Participant 1)

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59 'Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031' (2024)

60 Uhrig, S. N. (2015). Sexual orientation and poverty in the UK: A review and top-line findings from the UK household longitudinal study. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 5(1), 23-72.

For other participants, the financial abuse came from intimate partner relationships. In these cases, the abusers would force their partners to cover expenses but did not reimburse them. This limited their personal finances and left them financially dependent on the abuser, which further complicated the process of leaving the relationship.

> We, for a time, worked on the same job where she would claim to have no money, and would beg for money for certain things. Or because we were living together, there was an agreement where we would split the cost 50/50, but we never did that. It was a lot of times, her claiming 'Oh, I have no money'. But we work the same job, we have the same wage. How is that possible? It was all lies, the financial abuse. (Participant 6)

> he earned twice what I earned, and yet, because my youngest teenage daughter lived with us, she made it seem sensible that I paid two thirds into the house because I had a teenage daughter. At the time, I was going, "Oh, I wouldn't want anyone to pay for my child"... She bought things, but then can only go half on it after she bought it, even surprises: "Oh I got us this, but we'll both have to pay for it". If I paid for something, and she never carried money, it was like, "I'll give you it back later". And then when I asked for it back, it was, "Oh, my God, you're going to be piddly, over 30 quid"... Later on, I was only staying because she limited me so financially, I was never able to have savings or a way out to get somewhere, you know. (Participant 12)

Substance abuse alongside abusive behaviour

Substance abuse was not listed as a survey response as it often occurs in conjunction with other types of abuse, such as physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.[61] However, it was a consistently mentioned pattern during the interview responses. In a few of these incidents, the abusive behaviour was triggered or heightened through substance abuse. Several participants noticed that the abusive behaviour was exacerbated by excessive alcohol consumption:

> I noticed he was being too much of a drinker and I think that's what triggered it [the abuse]... initially he was remorseful, whenever it happened. I kept having positive thoughts that it would change, but it got worse and worse. He had no remorse. You know, it got really bad. (Participant 3)

> There was a lot of alcohol, I'm pretty sure she was an alcoholic, so that was a source of trouble... If I were drawing the night to an end, if I was saying

[61] Bhatt, R.V. (1998). Domestic violence and substance abuse. *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics*, 63, pp.25-31.

> I wanted to go home that would be a trigger. If I were leaving the house or prioritizing anything over her, that would also be a trigger. Sometimes she was just so unbelievably hungover that she was just insane, she was just gone. It was just really just pure anger, damage and aggression coming out of her... At one point she did stop drinking for about 10 weeks before we went on a trip... it did improve things, there was certainly a lot less of the physical abuse, but it was almost like the emotional abuse took over. (**Participant 8**)

> He had quite a bad drinking problem as well, and would have got very verbal, and it would have been screaming and shouting as well. (**Participant 11**)

In another case, the abuse was triggered through drug use. Participant 9's ex-husband became addicted to recreational drugs and she recalls that he was abusive whenever he took these drugs or experienced withdrawal.

> He bought this drug from, like, probably the dark web and he just blacked out, started trashing the place when he was high... Mostly it was emotional and verbal [abuse]. When he has a withdrawal, all he cares about is the next hit, and he gets annoyed when I get in the way, or when I start telling him, "Maybe you should quit", or something. He just gets really defensive as well.

The existing literature indicates that the misuse of alcohol or drugs is positively correlated with instances of physical and/or verbal abuse.[62] Furthermore, the risk of abuse is further exacerbated if the person abusing substances also displays symptoms of depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions. The LGBTQIA+ community is more likely to display symptoms of these mental health conditions and more likely to use substances such as alcohol or drugs compared to the general population, often due to discrimination, trauma, and societal pressures.[63] Due to these concurring risks, LGBTQIA+ individuals are more likely than the general population to experience substance abuse alongside domestic abuse.

Abuse targeting sexual orientation and/or gender identity

Many interview participants also recalled LGBTQIA+ specific abuse, including intentionally using incorrect pronouns or birth names that they no longer use,

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[62] Humphreys, C., et al. (2022). Beyond co-occurrence: addressing the intersections of domestic violence, mental health and substance misuse. *Child & Family Social Work*, 27(2), pp.299-310.

[63] Brown, M. J., Serovich, J. M., & Kimberly, J. A. (2016). Depressive symptoms, substance use and partner violence victimization associated with HIV disclosure among men who have sex with men. *AIDS and Behavior*, 20, 184-192.

preventing the victim from accessing gender affirming care or clothing, or forcing someone to disclose or hide their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. This type of abuse was commonly perpetrated by family members. For example, Participant 1's foster mother repeatedly and publicly referred to her by her deadname, even years after she came out as transgender:

> I went into a shop where she was working, and she shouted my male name, my old male name, publicly in the shop... and that was the last time that she and I spoke verbally. (Participant 1)

In another example, Participant 8 came out to her brother when she was 12 or 13 years old, but he used this information to blackmail and coercively control her. Specifically, he would threaten to out her to her parents if she did not listen to him:

> I spoke to my brother, who I wasn't particularly close to, but I just thought, "Well I can trust him, he's in this family bubble". So I said to him, "I think I might be bisexual", and he basically used it to blackmail me for the rest of my childhood, threatening to out me if I stood up to him at all, if I wasn't cooperative... I felt really disempowered by him having that information. Like if I was having friends coming to stay, he would say things like, "Have you told them what a pervert you are?", because we would be sharing a bed. He was just always holding it over me and describing me as a pervert, he was a bully. If he was beating up our younger brother, and if I would try and intervene, he would say, "Well, do you want me to go and tell Mummy what a pervert you are now? Do you want me to do that now?" He never did, because obviously he was enjoying having that hanging over me. (Participant 8)

Several participants were also physically abused by family members at a young age in an attempt to 'beat out' the LGBTQIA+ identity.

> When I was 12 years old, I stole female jewellery from my foster sister, and I got found out. I was severely punished, I was stripped bare and strapped across the backside with a gold sandal. So that sort of opened up my eyes that I was being abused. (Participant 1)

> He [her dad] thought that my stereotypically feminine personality traits that I was going to turn out gay... And he tried to beat that out of me. (Participant 6)

When Participant 16 came out to his parents as queer and transgender as a teenager, his parents were not supportive and put him through several different types of therapy, including conversion therapy:

> Me and my mum were quite close... I thought if I came out, even though they were staunchly against gay people, I thought my mum would love me more than she would hate gay people, but she didn't... I went to conversion therapy when I came out as a trans man at 15. I went to seven or eight different therapists because they kept disagreeing with my mother... So she took me to conversion therapy. (**Participant 16**)

Although these LGBTQIA+ specific patterns of abuse were largely perpetrated by family members, there are some instances where this abuse was perpetrated by intimate partners. For example, Participant 4 said that their ex-partner was initially very supportive of them being nonbinary, but her support later turned into emotional abuse:

> It was like, this switch flipped for her, she was like "You need to decide [your gender], because it's really hard for me. It's really uncomfortable for me, I feel like you're leading a double life". Like, if I wore makeup for work and she saw a picture of me, she would be like, "Why are you wearing makeup? That looks stupid. You can't do your hair"... it was everything. My hair wasn't right, my clothes weren't right, and that anything to do with my gender was just really such a weight on her. (**Participant 4**)

In another example, Participant 7 shared that their ex-partner intentionally outed them to their classmates on multiple occasions:

> When I first came out as nonbinary, she used that as an opportunity to isolate me and ruin my reputation in front of my classmates by shouting my preferred pronouns at them when they unknowingly misgendered me, outing me and leading me to being bullied in person and through an anonymous online forum. She manipulated me into thinking this behaviour was done out of love and respect for my identity but it was an act of control. I had come out as nonbinary to another queer friend first and when she found out she verbally attacked me and used it as an opportunity to manipulate and blackmail me into doing things. (**Participant 7**)

Participant 10 also experienced LGBTQIA+ specific abuse from her ex-wife, who was bisexual and had only dated men until she met Participant 10. Her ex-wife's parents were very conservative and did not support their marriage. As a result, the ex-wife blamed Participant 10 for the rocky relationship with her parents:

> My ex was with men right up until she met me and then came out to her mum. That was a whole other side to it, it was almost like she was blaming me for that, as if I forced her to come out to her mum because of it.

Participant 15 was forced to hide aspects of their nonbinary identity around their ex-partner, because the partner wanted to have a 'girlfriend'. They said that they "[weren't] really allowed to talk about gender stuff or queerness, because she wanted to be known as someone with a girlfriend, so being forced to be more closeted about that was definitely part of it".

Confronting perpetrators about the abuse

Nearly all of the participants reported patterns of emotional and psychological abuse whenever they tried to confront the perpetrators about the abusive behaviour. The perpetrators often accused the victim of being abusive in turn, or manipulated the victim into apologising and staying in the abusive situation.

> If I confronted them about them treating me in the way that they did, they would then turn on me: "How dare you confront us? We have done nothing wrong!". They would get aggressive towards me and interrogate me on what I was accusing them of. They were very good at thrusting it back to me. (Participant 1)

> Whenever I tried to bring up a problem I had with the behavior without labeling it as abuse, I used to find that sometimes I would get justifications, sometimes I would get denial, or just kind of explaining a way of things... He just explained away why he had reasons for things, or he didn't see it like that. (Participant 2)

> Any time that I confronted her about it, she would say that I was being really dramatic, and that because of my autism, I wasn't getting the joke, that I was wrong... Also, I'm in recovery, but I've never drank when I've been with her... So, any little thing that she could pick about me – if it was gender or AA or recovery. She'd be like, "Look what I have to put up with, you can't do this, you can't do that, and I have so much that I have to put up with, with you". The way she would do it would be so convincing that I would walk away apologising, feeling like I'm the one that's wrong all the time. (Participant 4)

> Whenever I confronted her at the end of it or was trying to leave, again it was just a whole gaslighting thing that I said that I was coerced into a lot of it, and then she just blamed me, a lot of victim blaming. (Participant 7)

> If I ever did call it out, I suppose it would have been: pack up his bags and leave and pin it back on me, that I'm the one that has a real issue. He would have pinned it back on me, that I don't know what I'm talking about, and how dare I bring something like that up to him. (Participant 11)

> Whenever I tried to end it, she was like, "Nobody else gets me but you, I can't believe you're not gonna be there for me when I need you"... She would have used my work against me and said things like, "That's all I'm hearing is [domestic abuse support organisation]. You're twisting things. You make out like I'm pushing you over and trying to get you to do my things my way." And that all shut me up, because I then went off and thought about it. "Am I oversensitive? Am I overthinking this? Am I being dramatic?", she would use that very quickly to try and shut me up, trying to get me to be quiet. (Participant 12)

> I did try to talk to her about the fact that I felt like some of her behaviors were difficult. But the counter would always be "well, I spoke to my therapist about your behaviors, and she says that you're abusive". So I spent quite a lot of time trying to work out if I was a narcissist and if I was gaslighting and if I was a horrible person and what I had done. Then I would go through cycles of trying to fix my behavior so that I wasn't doing those things... It was really confusing. (Participant 13)

In several of the above-instances, the perpetrators tried to shift the blame to an aspect of the victim's identity.[64] For Participant 4, the abuser blamed their autism and their AA recovery for making the relationship difficult. For Participant 12, the abuser claimed that her career at a domestic abuse support organisation warped her perception of the relationship. For Participant 13, the abuser attempted to swap roles by claiming that Participant 13 was actually the abusive person in the relationship after talking to a therapist. When the perpetrator blames an aspect of the victim's identity, the victim usually attempts to fix, analyse, or decentralise that aspect of their identity. This distracts the victim from the ongoing abusive behaviour and traps them in the abusive situation.[65]

In other situations, such as with Participant 15, participants noted that confronting abusers about their behaviour made the abuse worse. For Participant 15, these instances of confrontation worsened both emotional/psychological abuse and physical abuse:

> Anytime I said that I wasn't happy about something or didn't feel listened to, she'd basically blame it on me being crazy, and then yell at me about basically being ableist to people who did take antidepressants, and that it was just

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64 Harsey, S.J., Zurbriggen, E.L. and Freyd, J.J. (2017). Perpetrator responses to victim confrontation: DARVO and victim self-blame. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 26(6), 644-663.

65 Daw, J., et al. (2023). "You don't notice it, it's like boiling water": Identifying psychological abuse within intimate partner relationships and how it develops across a domestic homicide timeline. *Current Psychology*, 42(23), 2000-2014.

> like some big conspiracy I had to make fun of her and other people who took medication, and that I never put in effort into mental health. Of course, the crying would start and all that, and then the abuse would be worse for the next day or two. Usually the next morning I'd be woken up by being shoved out of the bed, that type of thing. (Participant 15)

Experience with reporting and support organisations

Only about 35% of survey participants reported the abusive behaviour, and the overall experiences of reporting incidents of domestic abuse and engaging with relevant support organisations were mixed.

Some of the participants had quite positive experiences and a great deal of support when they disclosed the abusive behaviour. For example, Participant 3 had initially disclosed the abusive behaviour to her family, who then advised her to report it to the police. When asked about her experience with reporting to PSNI, she said that "it was quite fast – the response. They acted real quick about it". Participant 5 also had a very positive experience working with the PSNI. After reporting the abuse to the police, they very quickly placed a restraining order on her ex-boyfriend. She stated that "it was quite a fast service".

In another case, Participant 16 had a positive experience reporting the abuse from his family to the police. Participant 16 and his siblings were sexually abused by their older brother and he went to a sexual abuse support organisation to report this ongoing abuse. Because his siblings were under 18 years of age, the police were called and sent to the house to interview the children. While the police was there, he was able to indicate to the police that he was also being abused by his parents:

> When it came to my interview, my mum refused to leave the room and kept staring at me with this very intense, angry expression. Whenever I asked if she would leave, she was like, "Why do you want me to leave? You're going to say something bad"... I tried to say everything with my body, and they [the police] actually did pick it up. They gave me a number and a card, and then they wrote up in a police report about it. I don't know what the actual police report says, but it's something that's quite scathing and not good. I know this because I'm in a council house now, because of everything. I was being threatened for being queer, I'd been molested, so it wasn't safe for me to live in that house.

In some cases, the reporting experience was rather neutral. Years after leaving the abuse, Participant 1 saw a social media post asking to hear stories from individuals abused by

workers from a specific children's wellbeing organisation. Her abusive foster mother worked there when the abuse was happening, so she reported it to this organisation. Participant 1 also appealed to the PSNI to report the abusive behaviour when they were retroactively investigating instances of abuse in residential homes. However, Participant 1 noted that this reporting was mostly for their history and records, rather than for justice.

Although there were some positive or neutral experiences when reporting and receiving support, most participants had negative experiences with reporting and receiving support. Some of these reasons were external; for example, Participant 9 struggled to report and find support because public services were still partially shut down due to COVID-19 at the time:

> They [domestic abuse support organisations] couldn't do that much because they, no longer had funding for counselling services... because of COVID. They said a lot of services would be cancelled like counselling. They didn't have a counselling partner anymore, so I had to get my own... But they did refer me to a solicitor, and my employer did counselling for like three or six counselling sessions, just through a charity or civil servants. (**Participant 9**)

Most of the negative experiences came from LGBTQIA+ specific issues that arose while the participants reported and contacted support organisations. The most recurring issues mentioned in the interviews for LGBTQIA+ individuals were: a lack of LGBTQIA+ support services and support workers properly trained in LGBTQIA+ issues and identities; assumptions from support staff that victims are cisgender or heterosexual upon reporting; and exclusion of transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals from specific spaces.

Lack of LGBTQIA+ oriented support and resources

Some participants have successfully reported the abuse and contacted domestic abuse sector organisations to cope with the physical and emotional impacts of the abuse. Although these first steps were helpful, the participants have indicated that these organisations and sector workers are not always properly equipped to handle LGBTQIA+ specific issues. This suggests a lack of LGBTQIA+ training in DVA support spaces.

Participant 7 reported the abuse to PSNI through their secondary school because they were underage at the time. Initially they were going to give a statement to the police, but ultimately decided against it because it was too emotionally draining. Although the PSNI officers were supportive while reporting, Participant 7 said that the police did not know how to follow up in their case, particularly because they were queer/nonbinary

and underage at the time. They also experienced discrimination from support workers because they were asexual. They noted that several counsellors who did not understand asexuality or know how to support asexual survivors of sexual abuse:

> They were very supportive during it, but I didn't feel there was a lot of actual logistics there for me, like further support or stuff for me. I went to give my statement, and then I couldn't go through with it, they were like "Okay, you can try again later"... I don't think they really knew how to deal with it, especially me, being so young and it [the abuse] being queer, they didn't have a lot of expertise in that... I also identify as asexual, and I experienced a lot of aphobia [discrimination based on asexual identity] when I did go to different counsellors. Because of the sexual abuse I experienced, they said "Oh, did that make you asexual?" "Are you sure you don't just have a fear of intimacy?". They really were not equipped to deal with asexuality.

Participant 10 did not report to an organisation but has gone to counselling to help with the emotional toll of the abuse. Although it has helped her, she found that the support workers and counsellors are not very knowledgeable or properly-trained on LGBTQIA+ issues.

> I had a different counsellor at the start of the year, and she was awful. She started asking me if all my friends were gay and what their sexual orientation was, as if that mattered to the story that I was telling her... But then my friend recommended another counsellor, and she's much more down to earth and understanding. I have noticed a few little things... She [the new counsellor] asked me if I moved on [romantically or sexually] and had a one night stand, what are the risks of catching an STD, which was a really weird question... Sometimes she just says little things that kind of make me feel like she either doesn't take me seriously or she's under-educated in it.

Participant 14 also reported the abusive behaviour to the police, but he found them dismissive and ill-equipped to work with LGBTQIA+ victims of domestic abuse:

> They just really didn't seem to care... they didn't really tell me that much. I just kept getting pushed from post to pillar, different officers, different police stations... it was just their body language. You could tell they didn't want to be in that room, didn't want to be on the phone call... yeah, I found that they're not trained properly [in LGBTQIA+ issues].

Participant 15 attempted to report the abuse from their ex-partner to the police, but the officers would not take a statement from them when they found out that the abuser was a woman:

> When I talked to support organisations, the first cops that came through were totally supportive on the phone. They sent two female officers in, and I mentioned 'she' and 'her' [as pronouns] while talking about my ex. They turned on a dime, and they literally said "Well women are like that. They're dramatic and bitchy." They refused to take a statement there.

Participant 16 did not want to go to queer support organisations, as his ex-partner was well-known in the queer community, and did not want to go to women's support organisations because he didn't feel that they would be able to support his needs as a queer transgender man. As a result, he didn't know where to go to receive support:

> They [ex-partner] were well known within the queer circles. I felt like I couldn't go to the Rainbow Project, because it was like telling our mutual mates. It would have felt uncomfortable and difficult... At the time when I was looking for support, I couldn't really seem to find abuse centers that weren't just for women hurt by men. I didn't want to go there, because they're not going to give me the kind of support that I'll need. And I didn't want to go do the queer ones, because of how small the queer community was.

Assumed cis-heterosexuality upon reporting

Participant 4 attempted to disclose the abuse to both their GP and a helpline, but had negative experiences from these resources because they assumed that Participant 4 was a heterosexual woman. Due to these initial experiences of assumed heterosexuality, they have chosen not to report the abuse to other organisations.

> When I phoned the GP, that was hard because he assumed that it was a man, and I didn't even correct him... he was really nice, but he just went on this whole spiel, as if it was a straight relationship... I also phoned a helpline, and when I was speaking to the person there, as soon as I said that it was a woman, it was almost like they lost interest. It just felt so invalidating and really hard to then continue a conversation with them. It's like, unless it's a man hitting a woman and being physical with a woman, they don't have anything to tell you... if I was a straight cis woman phoning up because I was being beaten at home by a man, she would have taken everything way more seriously and probably gotten different services involved. That basic assumption stopped me seeking more help, it even stopped me speaking to friends about it.

In another example, Participant 10 experienced additional difficulties during the divorce process. Although her own solicitor was queer-friendly, the ex-wife's solicitor failed to acknowledge that the case was between two women and was difficult to work with:

> I was recommended to my solicitor because she had done pure queer cases, quite a few cases. My ex's solicitor, on the other hand, was an absolute pig. He initially tried to claim 100% custody without her consent, so if I hadn't been on speaking terms with my ex, I would have ended up going to court and paying £25,000 to try and get my child back... He kept saying "the father" whenever it came to me and getting the details wrong constantly.

Exclusion of transgender/nonbinary individuals

Transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming survivors face additional struggles when seeking support or attempting to report cases of domestic abuse. Participants 1 and 6 have both experienced transphobia and exclusion from various support services, including LGBTQIA+ organisations and women's support organisations.

> I found when I've gone for support from LGBTQ[IA+], queer spaces, I found that when I've gone into groups that they've totally and utterly ignored me. It hasn't done any good for my mental health, where I then leave their space because it's not doing my mental health any good. (Participant 1)

> First, I talked to my local Women's Aid – they said I had to go to Men's Aid. I tried explaining that I'm not a guy. The receptionist still insisted that I go to Men's Aid. I tried speaking to an organisation that's based on the mainland [UK] called Galop, but they only really have mainland resources, so they couldn't do anything... I tried the local DSA [domestic and sexual abuse helpline] they right up told me there's nowhere to go... In the end, Women's Aid said they would support me, but that I would not be allowed to come to the center, attend any group, stuff, anything else. (Participant 6)

Additionally, Participants 2, 7, and 15 noted that the available support services in Northern Ireland rarely include nonbinary perspectives and approaches, which has led to them feeling underrepresented and misunderstood.

> I feel as if the non binary piece just gets missed, people don't know what it is. People see it as 'Male Lite', and therefore, in sectors that are very dominated at responding to women, I get a bunch of prejudices aimed at gender nonconforming men AND gender nonconforming women, AND then the non binary specific stuff... I feel like I have to lie and call myself a woman. I'm in this situation of being Schrödinger's nonbinary person, where apparently I'm enough of a woman to get misogyny, but I'm not enough of a woman to get into the support services... Do I have to chip away at my own identity? Do I have to undermine myself by saying "I'm a woman" to get help? (Participant 2)

It's hard to find ones [organisations] that I feel safe in as a nonbinary person, a lot of them are women's support groups. It's hard to find ones for trans or nonbinary people. It's hard to find ones that will accept that... I haven't gone to them just because of that fear. (Participant 7)

There were about five or six shelters that we called, all of them had reservations about me being nonbinary and queer. Most of them – four out of five – rejected me because they were like "No, we only house women... There are people here who were abused by non-women or by men, and your presence would be too disturbing to the other women there."... They put me in the room next to the bathroom because they thought it would be disturbing to folks if they knew that I was queer and attracted to women. I was supposed to be there for about three nights minimum. They kicked me out a night early before my family arrived, because another woman needed the space, and they didn't want me even in the building with a straight, cis woman. (Participant 15)

Reasons for not reporting

Nearly two-thirds (64.5%) of survey respondents did not report the abusive behaviour to the police, courts, or other support organisations. For some individuals, these reasons were external, such as missing the window for reporting or the fact that certain forms of abuse were not included in NI's legal definition of domestic abuse until recently. However, there were a myriad of other reasons for not reporting or seeking support, which will be elaborated upon below.

Did not recognise situation as abusive

For most participants, they did not consider what they were experiencing to be DVA, whether between intimate partners or family members. According to the survey, 71% of respondents did not realise that they had experienced abuse. Sometimes, they did not realise until years after leaving the situation, and therefore could not report the abuse even if they wanted to, as they missed the window for reporting.

I don't know that I considered it [as abuse]. I had broken teeth, I had bruises, I had very clear side effects of it, but there was a denial piece there where it wasn't the classic 'battered wife' scenario. I think I was more just focused on wanting it to stop, and trying to get to a better place in the relationship. (Participant 8)

I've actually been to a couple of Pride panels around domestic abuse... I've always found it really insightful and it's made me think "God, I was in quite a bad situation", and at the time I didn't recognise it as abuse. (Participant 11)

These participants often did not realise that they were experiencing abuse because their situations did not fit the 'stereotypical' image of domestic abuse – namely, a male partner physically abusing a female partner. They were unaware that abusive situations can and do look different from this stereotype – including abuse from family members, abuse between two women/individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB), or abuse between two men/individuals assigned male at birth (AMAB).

Uncertainty of what would come from reporting

For a number of participants, they chose not to report the abuse because they did not know what they would achieve or what good would come from reporting. Essentially, they felt that they had more to lose by reporting.

> I didn't really know where it would go. It's awful, but I feel like if I had to report it to people, to an organisation, then I wasn't clear what avenue that would go down. Would I have to disclose it to friends, family, the extent of it? I didn't really want to have to be a victim... I didn't actually think it would lead anywhere, it was sort of his word against my word. What would I be getting out of it, other than having been traumatised by going over it again? (Participant 11)

> It's the fact that I wouldn't know who to talk to or why, I wouldn't know what I was trying to achieve in doing that. Realistically, I don't think it was bad enough to warrant any kind of police reporting... I think it would have been helpful if I could have understood why it might be helpful to come forward and talk about this with people that weren't just my therapist and just my friends... I think it would have been helpful for me if I had better been able to understand what I might gain from coming to talk to other people. (Participant 13)

For Participant 10, there were a number of reasons why she chose not to report. However, her primary reason was because she believed she had more to lose by reporting the abuse. Specifically about having her non-biological daughter taken away from her if she called the police:

> At first I thought I could fix it. She was very hot and cold, so I thought, "Oh, we're getting better and it was just a blip". And I might have rationalised it because it was the week before her period, or because her mum was giving her a hard time for being gay. So that's why I didn't really go to anyone... Even when she was choking my daughter, it was on Christmas Day, but I didn't want to call the police on Christmas Day to the house. I was scared of losing my daughter, because she's my non-biological daughter. I thought if I phoned the police, they would take her off the both of us. I felt like I had more to lose

> by reporting it... For me, that's what held me there for quite a long time... I knew I needed to leave for maybe the last three years, but in my head I was losing my daughter, my family, my house, my dog, basically everything I knew. (Participant 10)

Lack of evidence of the abuse

As previously mentioned, cases of non-physical abuse – including psychological, emotional, financial, online, and indirect physical abuse (stalking/throwing things, abusing other people) – are difficult to report and prosecute if there is a lack of evidence. This is especially true for criminal justice organisations, such as the Northern Ireland Courts or the PSNI. Additionally, emotional and psychological abuse only became a criminal offense in 2021 with the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act.[66] Instances of non-physical abuse that occurred before this legislation was enacted could not be brought to the court system as cases of domestic abuse. As a result, many participants chose not to report because they knew that an investigation would be futile without tangible proof of the abuse.

> I never needed to report to the police, there was never any evidential stuff that would have been enough to report to police... Also back then, coercive control wasn't a crime. Domestic abuse was always seen as physical. It was, "How do you prove it?". People always knew emotional [abuse] was there, but it was never designated as a crime until the last two years. So you couldn't go with a text message and say, "Look at this ream of texts I'm getting", police would have been like, "Oh it's just texts, nothing nasty in that". (Participant 12)

> I think it's really clear if someone has beaten the ever loving fuck out of you and you lived with them and needed to leave, then Women's Aid would be a great place to go to. But when it's something like coercive control, I felt stupid... I hated everything: I hated the relationship, I ended up hating her, I hated myself. I was like "I don't want any of this", but I couldn't leave. It was horrific, and I didn't know where to go for that. (Participant 13)

Even in cases of physical abuse, some participants did not feel there was enough evidence to report the abusive behaviour. For example, Participant 16 couldn't report any of the abuse from his ex-partner – emotional, psychological, or sexual. He specifically mentioned that he couldn't report the sexual abuse because it was too late to use a rape kit and his ex-partner made him delete the abusive text messages from his phone:

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66 'Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland)' (2021)

> I didn't report that I've been raped, I didn't report that I'd been abused or anything like this. When we broke up, they made me delete all of our messages, so I didn't have any proof that I'd been abused. I didn't have any physical things on my body, I didn't have any messages from my phone. And when you have cases that are like, my word against someone else's word, at that point, it's just down to who can afford the most expensive lawyer, because there's no proof. So I never bothered reporting it, because there was nothing that could be done. And the rape happened a long time ago, and I did not get a rape kit because I didn't even really register what was happening until later on. (Participant 16)

Effects and outcomes

Mental health impacts

Virtually all of the participants have indicated that the abuse they experienced continues to negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing. Several participants have gone to therapy or counselling to assist with the emotional recovery from the abuse, but still experience a number of struggles. For example, Participant 2 still experiences a great deal of anxiety regarding their ex-partner because they are still in the closet. They are terrified of their ex-partner finding out about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and using it to blackmail them or out them to other friends or family:

> I'm still so afraid of being outed. I knew, for instance, that if he were to find out about me, he would have the power then to out me, to my family, to out me in other circumstances, to out me online, And until I come out myself, that will always be a danger for me. Because of other circumstances, largely related to the difficulties I've had since leaving the abuse, I have never reached a point where it's felt safe for me to come out. And until I do, that will be a real point of vulnerability, where I'll always have to think "What if he finds out? What if he knows? What if he says something?". (Participant 2)

Many participants have struggled with their self-esteem and confidence after leaving the abusive relationships, particularly if the relationships featured a lot of gaslighting, coercive control, and emotional/psychological abuse.

> I feel like her voice is always in my head and that's really hard, it just springs up out of nowhere... like her voice in my head being like "You look stupid. Why are you wearing that? Look at the state of you." and laughing at me... it's affected my whole self confidence and self esteem. (Participant 4)

> I was really horrifically bullied in school, and I was getting to a good stage of independence and basically finding myself. Over the last 10 years, it's almost like I've kind of gone back to that school girl where I have no confidence in myself whatsoever. I very much have an anxious attachment style with people now, I've noticed... I just feel like I've lost all independence. (Participant 10)

> The relationship was the hardest to recover from, it left me so emotionally devoid. I struggled to sleep, I struggled to look at myself and not blame myself, I felt parental guilt for my children. My older two moved out quite young... looking back on it, they probably didn't want to be in the same house as her. The emotional impact of that left me so devoid of any self esteem and self worth that I kind of felt like... she left me feeling like "Who else would want me?" (Participant 12)

Furthermore, several participants indicated that the abuse deeply affected their ability to trust people. In the cases of intimate partner violence, the abuse prevented them from seeking out or being open to the idea of new romantic relationships:

> I'm so afraid of that ever happening again. Like, I feel like I cannot have a relationship, because who'd want me, and also I can't have a relationship, because what if it happens again? I couldn't go through it again. (Participant 4)

> I've struggled a lot with my relationships because I find it hard to trust people and get close to people. (Participant 7)

> The abuse from my brother has been very formative for me around trust. One good thing that I suppose came from it was that I knew that I couldn't live in the closet. I had to come out. I couldn't have anybody have that over me. So I sort of made the best of that element of it. But it was a real insight into how people can abuse information about you... as far as the relationship goes. It really put me off any sort of romantic entanglements for a long time, for about 10 years. (Participant 8)

> Even when I was meeting good people, I just didn't want to get into a relationship in general, because I was fearful that might be the outcome again. Thankfully, after a lot of patience from my [current] partner, we're in a really happy relationship, but I know that would have put a lot of people off, because I was so resistant to get into another relationship again. (Participant 11)

> When she and I ended, I just went, "I can't be in relationships anymore. I need to breathe. I need to be on my own". I would say it took me two years to recover from that, two years to learn about myself and care about myself and realise that I had value and self esteem and worth... I needed to learn to

want myself and care about myself and take time for myself – all the things that I've been encouraging women to do for years... But the impact of it left me really struggling to trust anyone again. Even though I've had four quite long term relationships in my life, the one where the abuse happened was the only one that's left me angry, that still sits with me. (Participant 12)

I do have a new partner who is lovely and really consistent and is the literal opposite. There are still times where she will do things for me. Or I will take an issue to her because I need to talk about something, and she'll just sit and listen and be like, "That's okay. I still love you". We can talk about this and nothing is the end of the world, nothing is catastrophic. Everything, every single issue in that relationship was like the end of the relationship... I'm still shocked sometimes that things are so different and that things can be so different. It was only an under-three-year relationship, but it absolutely fucking floored me, it was horrific. (Participant 13)

Many participants have lost their friends through the abuse as well – either from the abuser isolating the victim from their friend groups or from the abuser harassing peers to drive them away from the victim and further isolate them. Friend groups can be a support system in their own right, so this loss of support left many participants feeling vulnerable and alone in the abusive situation:

It was literally unsafe to be my friend. That's kind of what happened. That's why I lost my circle... Because when we ended, the threats of violence didn't stop, and it ended up with me losing my entire support system. So that was by her design, you know: 'if I can't have you, no one can'... One of my friends took her in as a roommate, and my ex's behaviour led to her eventually leaving the country. I lost another friend because my ex kept stalking and harassing her, and wouldn't leave her alone... So literally losing all your friends, literally having to leave a job, and literally now there's nowhere you can go that is safe, it is just, it sucks. I've kind of given up on ever healing. (Participant 6)

I lost two of my best friends for about a year because I couldn't leave that relationship, they were just like "We can't watch you kill yourself anymore". They used to be like, "We're really worried we're gonna get a phone call one day and you'll be dead"... Honestly, my biggest message would be to friends of people in abusive relationships: it is really hard to watch a friend go through that, but if you leave them, you will leave them alone with the abuser. It can be so hard to watch someone do that to themselves, but I would not make the choice that my friends made, because absolutely it left me even more isolated. (Participant 13)

> The whole friend group, unfortunately, took her side and I was getting stalked by friends like I had to switch medical providers and therapists because they were being harassed… Like, I have to have them blocked on LinkedIn, and I have their spouses blocked on LinkedIn. That's how thorough you have to be. (Participant 15)

Other individuals shared that the abuse exacerbated existing mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – a mental health condition that develops after witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event and includes flashbacks, negative thoughts, insomnia, and hypervigilance. Several participants mentioned symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression, even after leaving the abusive situations. They have also experienced increased rates of panic attacks and hallucinations as a result of the abuse they experienced:

> My mental health sort of affected me where I was hallucinating… When I was in the hospital, I was sexually assaulted and also tortured for four weeks, all because of me being transgender, so I have made an effort not to end up there again. So I then healed myself through holistic therapy and counselling.. Meditation and relaxing… Stuff like that to help me to be stable. (Participant 1)

> I believe I have PTSD from it. I haven't been diagnosed, but I experience a lot of flashbacks and intrusive memories. I don't experience it as much now. I did a lot in the first few years. I'd have really bad panic attacks. I would see her everywhere, even after she left school. If I saw someone with the same hair as her, I would immediately be hyperventilating and panicking. I really struggled during my studies, especially because I felt very let down by the school through it, I couldn't really concentrate through that. I had depression before, and it [the abuse] really exacerbated it. (Participant 7)

> I've been struggling with depression for my whole life, but it got really bad during 2023 and the start of 2024. It's getting better now, but I've pretty much been on medication for my whole life, because every time I try to reduce it, I just relapse… I guess it's more emotional, it's not so much flashbacks about physical abuse, aside from the time he was trashing a place because it blacked out. It's more thinking back about what he was saying and then kept putting myself down. (Participant 9)

> I'm in therapy because I was suicidal, I tried to kill myself. Now that I've gone to therapy and I've processed a lot of it, I'm not in situations that are dangerous so I'm in a much healthier place. But it's manifested in something called contamination anxiety, where I always think I'm going to be drugged, and I have general anxiety. (Participant 16)

Physical health impacts

For several participants, the stress and anxiety of the abusive relationship has affected their physical health. For example, Participant 4 shared that they still go to therapy because of the ongoing mental and physical impacts: "Even this week, I was really feeling poor and I've just been really exhausted. Like, it affects my sleep, it affects how I think" (Participant 4). Similarly, Participant 10 also indicated that the emotional stress of the abuse has taken a physical toll on her: "I've noticed the stress. I've started getting psoriasis patches, losing hair, I'm not sleeping" (Participant 10).

For Participant 13, the physical health impacts were particularly evident during the relationship, especially the lack of sleep. She said it took her several months to recover from the physiological impacts of the abuse, as she was constantly anxious and in 'fight or flight mode' during the relationship:

> While I was in the relationship, I didn't sleep. I'm really into the gym and my lifting really suffered, my recovery really suffered, it didn't really matter how much sleep I got or didn't get. There was a lot of sleep deprivation... this is probably another part of the pattern. We would go to bed together and I would just be falling asleep, and then they would start a fight the second I was falling asleep. And then we would be up until 4am fighting and I would be too wrecked to do anything the next day. So my resting heart rate and stuff like that was through the fucking roof. (Participant 13)

However, the physical impacts of DVA can be even more intense. For Participant 3, her ex-husband's abuse caused her to have a miscarriage. It was at this point that she realised she needed to leave the relationship:

> It was quite difficult for me to cope with the situation... I can remember I had a miscarriage as a result of it, so I just couldn't keep up with it anymore. I needed to be over. (Participant 3)

Participant 15 also experienced ongoing PTSD since leaving the relationship, but the physical impacts have been complex as well. They have experienced issues with blood-clotting after being severely physically abused by their ex-partner:

> There were physical bruises. I'd been referred three times to a haematologist to check for a clotting disorder, that's how bad the bruising was continuously. (Participant 15)

Finally, Participant 16 reported ongoing sexual dysfunction that was "directly because of the sexual abuse", as he did not have it when he first was dating his ex-partner (Participant 16). Therefore, the physical health impacts have not left these individuals and still affects their day-to-day life, even if the bruises or marks have faded.

Effectiveness of legal, policy, and practice initiatives

When asked about their opinions on the current legal, policy, and practice initiatives in Northern Ireland to support LGBTQ+ survivors of DVA, approximately 60% of survey respondents categorised the services as 'not so effective' or 'not at all effective'. Only 14.5% of survey responses agreed that services were 'extremely effective' or 'very effective', indicating that changes need to be made to ensure that these services are accessible and supportive for LGBTQIA+ survivors of DVA in Northern ireland.

Survey respondents also raised several significant issues with these services while reporting, or attempting to report, the abuse. Nearly 27% of respondents felt that their experiences were not believed or taken seriously by support services, especially in intimate partner relationships that were between two AFAB people or two AMAB people. Approximately 22% of respondents experienced victim-blaming or denial from their communities, and an additional 22% felt that the lack of legal restitution significantly limited their reporting process. Although these were the most common responses, there were a myriad of other barriers and suggestions brought up by the survey participants and interviewees alike. These reasons included a lack of awareness of LGBTQIA+ friendly support services, perceptions of DVA among the LGBTQIA+ not being taken as seriously as heterosexual DVA.

Increased signposting and availability of LGBTQIA+ inclusive services

Participants 4, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, and 16 were unaware of what domestic abuse support services existed after they left the abuse, and importantly, if these services were LGBTQIA+ inclusive. They said that increased advertising, signposting, and promotion of LGBTQIA+ inclusive domestic abuse services would be helpful.

> I 100% think they need to be restructured, just the assumption that you're met with when you do report it or make things known... LGBTQ+ people are so isolated when this happens, we can't speak to our doctors and we can't speak to help lines because we feel othered, and it just feels like the loneliest place on Earth. (Participant 4)

> I don't think there was a lot of awareness of them. I wasn't really signposted to anything, I wasn't really aware of anywhere I could go for it. (Participant 7)

> I wouldn't have known of any [support organisations] at the time. I was a bit involved in the gay scene, so if I really needed something, I would have known of Cara-Friend. (Participant 8)

> [I have] limited knowledge of what is out there by engaging with organisations like HEReNI, Cara-Friend, and Rainbow Project. (Participant 13)

> A lot of support services aren't advertised in a way that's accessible to people who might need them. I don't know necessarily if we need more or if they just need more funding, but they definitely need better outreach. I don't know if there was another sexual abuse place or hotline I could have gone to, because I didn't see any so I'm going under the assumption that there wasn't. (Participant 16)

On this topic, Participant 11 also said that having 'a one-stop shop' for domestic abuse support could be helpful for marginalised individuals experiencing or recovering from DVA, as this might lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation. He also noted that having comprehensive relationship education that included LGBTQIA+ perspectives would be instrumental in preventing LGBTQIA+ individuals from getting into abusive or unhealthy relationships:

> There needs to be more signposting to what domestic abuse is so people can be aware of the signs of unhealthy relationships to stop them from continuing, and to identify unhealthy patterns of behavior. (Participant 11)

However, other DVA survivors, such as Participants 6 and 15, exhausted all available services to them and still have not found adequate support. This indicates that accessible and adequate support spaces for marginalised LGBTQIA+ individuals are missing from the available services:

> I've reached out everywhere I can. I've reached out to mainland charities. I've reached out to charities here. I'm simply told there's nowhere I can go, over and over again....So at this point, I've kind of just given up on ever being able to talk to anyone. (Participant 6)

> It would be one thing if societally there was support... It would be like, "Okay, we just need to pour money on this, and we'll get something good out of it". It's that there is stuff that exists, and the stuff that exists is actively harmful. (Participant 15)

Tackling heteronormative stereotypes of domestic abuse

Many participants noted a lack of public awareness of domestic abuse happening in LGBTQIA+ relationships. Patriarchal societies, including Northern Ireland, promote the traditional gender roles, where femininity is nonviolent, passive, and obedient, and masculinity is assertive, dominant, and aggressive.[67] Therefore, the stereotypical image of domestic abuse has largely been, and continues to be, a man physically abusing a woman.[68] As a result, LGBTQIA+ cases of DVA are invisible in public campaigns. In particular, abuse between women or AFAB individuals tends to be dismissed or minimised.

> We're still such a parochial community, it's even taboo for me to be gay where I live... In gay relationships and queer relationships, I just feel like it's almost like our abuse and our relationships and dating aren't taken as seriously here. (Participant 4)

> The first time I came across research into domestic abuse in the LGBT community, I remember seeing a little flyer for it and going, "What?! What do you mean?"... It didn't even occur to me that it could be a thing. Why would a woman hit another woman? The concept was just alien to me. There's maybe some sort of awareness piece that could be done to validate that experience for people, so they know it's a thing. (Participant 8)

> I think that, especially for females, it just feels like they don't take you seriously. If it's a female abusing a female, someone's like "Oh, you can't physically abuse each other"... Just because they're not physically hitting you and there's no bruises, it doesn't mean that the abuse isn't happening. (Participant 10)

> Reporting is difficult for women in general, but when it's within the same sex relationship, I don't believe our places are as informed or as supportive as they could be... There's still societal judgment that it doesn't happen between women... I have at times heard women within the group work setting talking about "Jesus, I'd be better off with the woman. Men are all bastards". And then I'm going "It's not always the same. I've supported women who are in same-sex relationships, and abuse is abuse regardless of gender". Yes, the majority of domestic abuse that happens is male-perpetrated towards women. However, abuse happens in all relationships. (Participant 12)

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[67] Tracy, S.R. (2007) Patriarchy and domestic violence: Challenging common misconceptions. *Journal-Evangelical Theological Society*, 50(3), p.573.

[68] Seelau, S. M., & Seelau, E. P. (2005)

> I feel like, particularly for women or people who identify as women, there's this assumption that domestic violence or like abuse doesn't happen within girl-and-girl relationships. The idea that women are softer, they're more emotional, they're not beating the fuck out of each other. But I actually know lots of women who've been in physically abusive relationships [with other women]. (Participant 13)

> I wear lots of black, but she was a more hyper feminine person. So even if we changed or left out pronouns, she's also much more likely to be believed and supported and directed places than I would be. (Participant 15)

This unawareness of LGBTQIA+ domestic abuse even existed in the personal relationships of some participants, including friends, family, and colleagues. For example, Participant 4 disclosed the abusive behaviour to their boss, but he was skeptical because the ex-partner was the more feminine-presenting one in the relationship:

> When I went to him, it was almost like, "How could someone like that abuse you?" because she was so feminine and so girly and colourful. It almost felt like, because I'm the more masculine presenting one, that it should have been me. (Participant 4)

Participant 7 shared a similar experience with their parents, who refused to acknowledge the abuse because it was between two AFAB individuals and the ex-partner was also younger than them. Participant 7 said that "they didn't actually see it as abuse, because it was two girls. If she had been a boy, it would be straight away to the police, but because it was a girl they had no idea what to do with it" (Participant 7). In all of these scenarios, patriarchal gender roles influence the ways that family members, peers, and support organisations respond to instances of domestic abuse, especially between women and AFAB individuals. Gendered stereotypes can thus negatively affect all types of domestic abuse victims – of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

Other mentioned institutional barriers

Aside from these common issues that participants listed above, there were several other areas in need of reform that participants brought up. For example, Participant 2 said that support organisations should expand their focus to include longer-term assistance. Even after leaving the abusive relationship, they have felt more vulnerable than before due to a lack of available support systems, unsafe housing, and still being in the closet. They even explicitly stated that they sometimes regret leaving the abuse, because of how unsafe they currently feel:

> I do still feel in many ways that it was a mistake to leave, simply because I have put myself in so much riskier circumstances than I would ever have been in if I had just been able to tough it out and stay...
>
> Everything is so much built on the idea of getting the person to leave, and there's very little recognition of the need for long term support... In my experience, I've ended up in extremely unsafe housing; we are all experiencing abuse and gaslighting from our social housing association that has felt like an echo of the original abuse and has massively re-traumatized me... Even if I were to apply for a managed transfer, which I would by no means be eligible for, that essentially would be me parachuting myself into the unknown. Whatever estate I moved into could be great, or it could be homophobic and transphobic as hell, and I could be in physical danger, I could be in mortal danger. There's no way to know until you live in a place... From the beginning of the process, you're very conscious that you have to stack up your marginalizations for people to see in order for them to recognize you as vulnerable. But every time you do that, you are telling people stuff that can be used against you. (Participant 2)

Because of Participant 9's difficult experience with finding services in the wake of COVID-19, she also said that domestic abuse services need more financial support because many resources she knew of "were cancelled because there was no funding" (Participant 9). Therefore, she indicated that increased funding of domestic abuse services is absolutely necessary, especially to help victims who were left stranded during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant 9 and Participant 15 – who both immigrated to Northern Ireland – also highlighted the additional barriers that may affect LGBTQIA+ immigrants experiencing domestic abuse, including language barriers, racism, and increased likelihood of isolation in a new country:

> Other women who don't speak English as a first language, or they just move to Northern Ireland and they don't know anybody else, I imagine it would be quite a lot tougher for them. (Participant 9)
>
> My ex is a white woman with settled status, more permanent status here... Can you imagine if I – a non-European immigrant of colour – was even broadly accused of doing half the stuff that I did experience, how that would have turned out versus the other way around? (Participant 15)

Although psychological and emotional abuse are now legally considered to be domestic abuse under Northern Ireland's domestic abuse laws, Participant 10 said that

the nuances of this abuse have yet to translate into legal and support services. She was emotionally and physically abused, but the lack of tangible evidence has made it difficult for her ex-wife to be held accountable:

> I think it needs to be looked at, to understand the nuances of different forms of abuse, especially verbal and coercive use... When I told my solicitor everything that happened to myself and my daughter, she basically said it was my word against hers and I didn't have enough video evidence to prove that that was happening. The best I could do was just 'split on amicable terms', so abuse isn't even put down as a reason for the divorce right now. They don't do that unless the other party starts arguing it or you need an immediate annulment. So on paper, it looks like we split... as if nothing was wrong and we just decided to part ways. (**Participant 10**)

Therefore, institutions must ensure that all victims of domestic abuse – especially those who have encountered psychological and emotional abuse – can receive justice and support from the existing legal, policy, and practice initiatives. Although non-physical abuse is included in the current domestic abuse laws in NI, this legal inclusion means nothing if victims cannot receive adequate support from the government or public sector organisations.[69]

[69] 'Over 2,300 convictions Northern Ireland domestic abuse law' (2025). 7 January. *Irish Legal News*.

Report Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings and lived experiences shared above indicate that the current support services for LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing DVA in NI are not adequate. Therefore, the conclusion of this report lays out a number of policy recommendations for the NI government, DVA support organisations, LGBTQIA+ support organisations, and other stakeholders that support DVA survivors.

LGBTQIA+ organisations to recruit domestic abuse case-workers

Both the survey responses and participant testimonies indicate that there are not enough avenues of support for LGBTQIA+ people in Northern Ireland experiencing domestic abuse. LGBTQIA+ support organisations should be supported to recruit domestic abuse case workers within the LGBTQIA+ sector. Most LGBTQIA+ individuals would feel more comfortable and understood in an LGBTQIA+ oriented support space, so it is essential that these spaces have LGBTQIA+ trained caseworkers that can help LGBTQIA+ clients that frequent these spaces. The LGBTQIA+ sector organisations are already underfunded and understaffed, so there should at least be adequate resources to carry out this life-saving work in the area of DVA.

LGBTQIA+ inclusive training in domestic abuse support spaces

Existing domestic abuse support services should also receive funding to buy in expert training so their staff are knowledgeable in the issues surrounding LGBTQIA+ domestic abuse from both families and intimate

partners. Many LGBTQIA+ individuals were assumed to be cisgender and/or heterosexual when they reported the abuse; in other cases, support workers were not properly trained in LGBTQIA+ domestic abuse issues, and could not provide the survivors with adequate support and advice. LGBTQIA+ training in domestic abuse support organisations would help expand the skill set of support workers and ensure that LGBTQIA+ survivors receive proper assistance. LGBTQIA+ training in domestic abuse services in NI could also benefit LGBTQIA+ individuals living in rural areas. There are several domestic abuse support organisations dispersed throughout Northern Ireland, including in rural areas. Therefore, these services may be currently more accessible to LGBTQIA+ individuals living in rural areas that might otherwise be isolated from receiving LGBTQIA+ oriented support.

Increased outreach from LGBTQIA+ friendly services

There should be increased signposting of LGBTQIA+ inclusive services among domestic abuse support organisations, women's support spaces, and similar stakeholders that support LGBTQIA+ domestic abuse victims. Several interviewees and survey participants mentioned that they were completely unaware of the existing domestic abuse support services that were inclusive towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. As a result, many of these individuals did not receive help due to the lack of awareness and advertising of the existing legal, policy, and practice initiatives. Therefore, increased outreach from LGBTQIA+ friendly services to the community would help raise awareness and encourage LGBTQIA+ individuals to seek help if they are in abusive situations.

LGBTQIA+ inclusion in public awareness campaigns

The lack of awareness among survey respondents and interviewees alike suggests the need for greater visibility of LGBTQIA+ individuals in public awareness campaigns about DVA. The existing promotional materials for DVA support services often rely on the stereotypical image of a male physically abusing a female partner, excluding LGBTQIA+ perspectives from these campaigns. By including LGBTQIA+ perspectives in the existing public awareness campaigns, LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing DVA from family members and intimate partners will have an easier time identifying their situations as abusive and subsequently seeking support. Representation at advisory groups – such as the MARAC advisory group – will also encourage other DVA support services to include LGBTQIA+ perspectives in their work as well.

LGBTQIA+ inclusive RSE in schools

Several interviewees and survey respondents experienced abuse from both family members and intimate partners. Some of these individuals even noted that the abusive behaviour from family members at a young age desensitised them and increased their likelihood of experiencing intimate partner abuse later on. To combat this, RSE curriculums in primary and secondary schools must teach children and young people about healthy relationships and the signs of unhealthy relationships. Furthermore, the RSE curriculum must include LGBTQIA+ perspectives, so that young LGBTQIA+ people can learn about signs of unhealthy relationships within an LGBTQIA+ context. This will also help to tackle the stereotypical image of domestic abuse – a woman being physically beaten by a male partner. Abuse can happen to anyone, by anyone – including family members – this is why it's important that the current RSE curricula in Northern Irish schools reflects this. Education from an early age about healthy relationships – inclusive of all sexual orientations and gender identities – could help young LGBTQIA+ individuals more easily recognise patterns of abusive relationships.

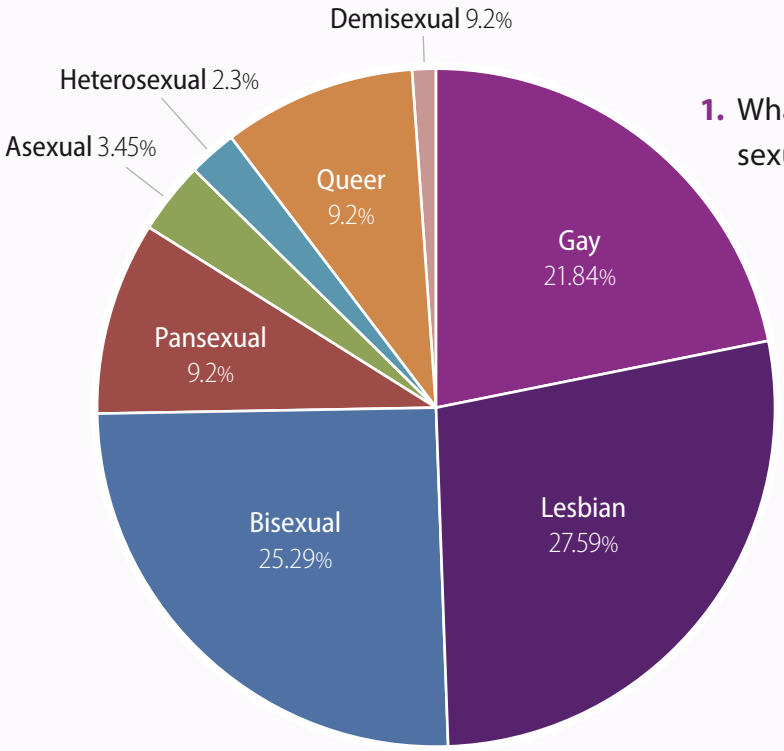
Intersectional approaches to policy change and development

The above-mentioned suggestions for the current legal, policy, and practice initiatives must be implemented with consideration to multiply-marginalised individuals in the LGBTQIA+ community. Some LGBTQIA+ people can access the available support services with relative ease – especially if they present as cisgender and heterosexual – but the same cannot be said for the most marginalised members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Transgender, nonbinary, genderfluid, or gender-nonconforming survivors of DVA particularly struggle to find safe and supportive spaces. However, it is important to note that other aspects of identity – such as socioeconomic status, race, nationality, immigration status, religious affiliation, and physical/mental disability – can increase barriers to accessing support. Therefore, intersectional approaches must be considered when improving and developing these policy changes.

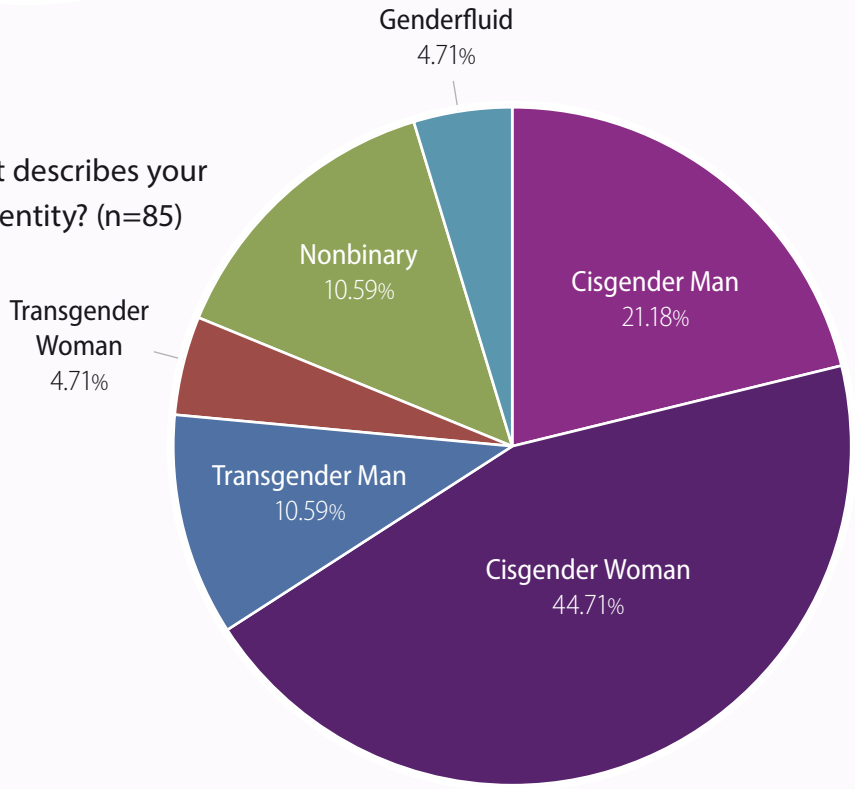
Appendix

Survey Questions and Responses

Demographic questions

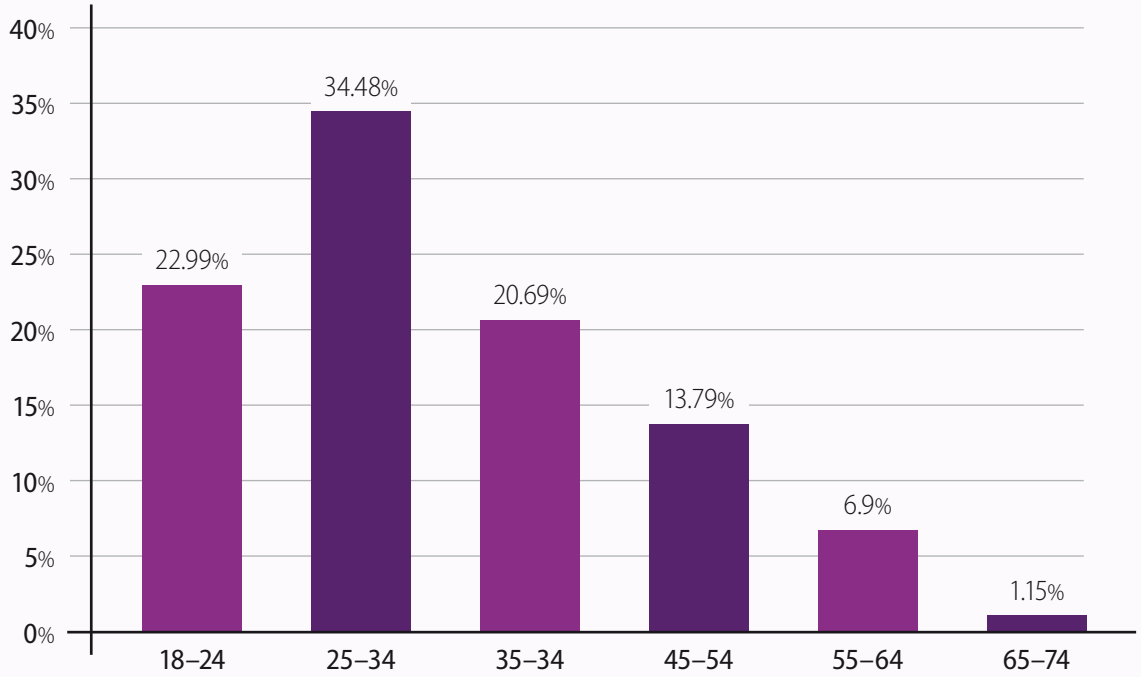


1. What best describes your sexual orientation? (n=87)

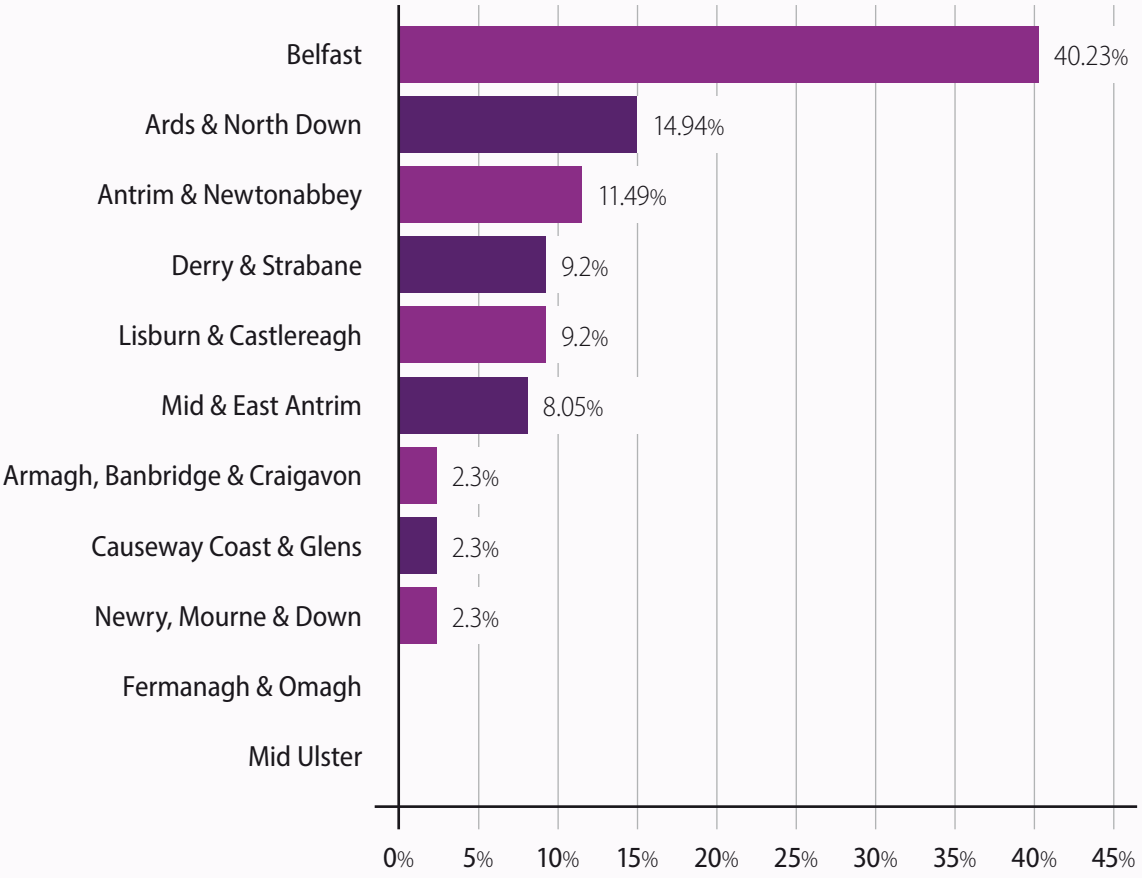


2. What best describes your gender identity? (n=85)

3. What is your current age? (n=87)



4. What council area do you currently live in? (n=87)

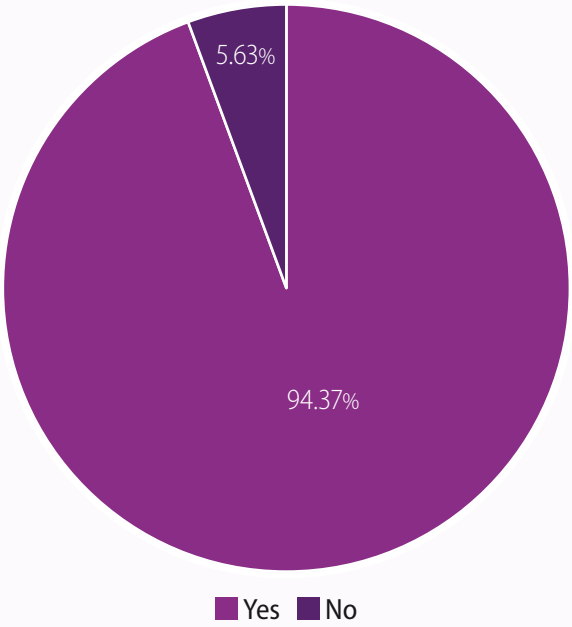


Patterns of abusive behaviour from intimate partners

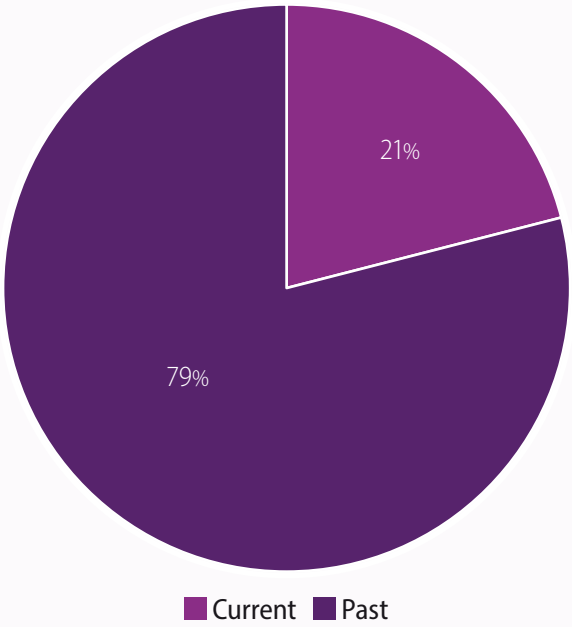
5. Have you experienced harmful and/or abusive behaviour from a current or former intimate partner(s)? (n=71)

6. Is this abusive behaviour currently ongoing? (n=67)

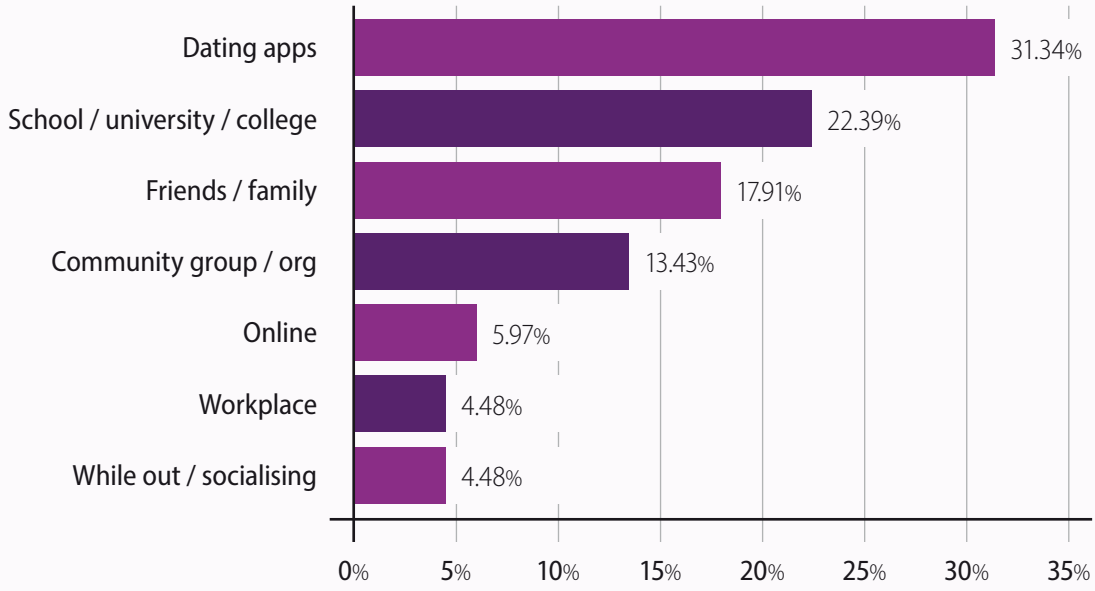
Experienced abuse from intimate partner



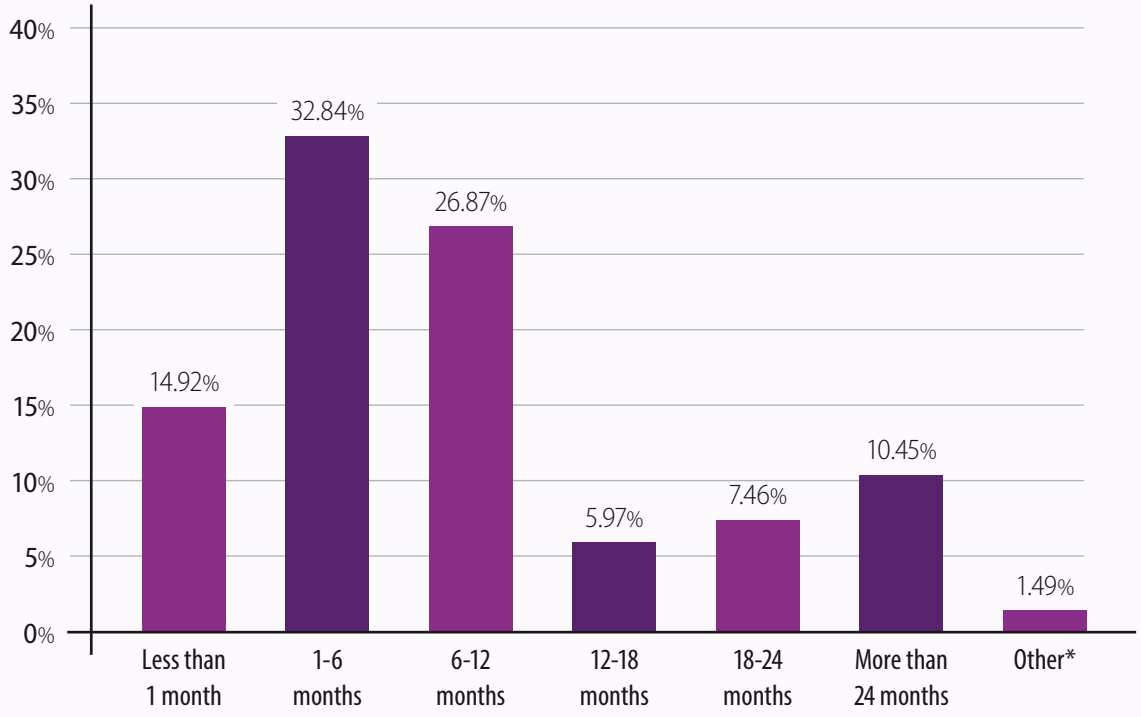
Ongoing abuse from partner(s)



7. How did you meet the former/current partner(s)? (n=67)

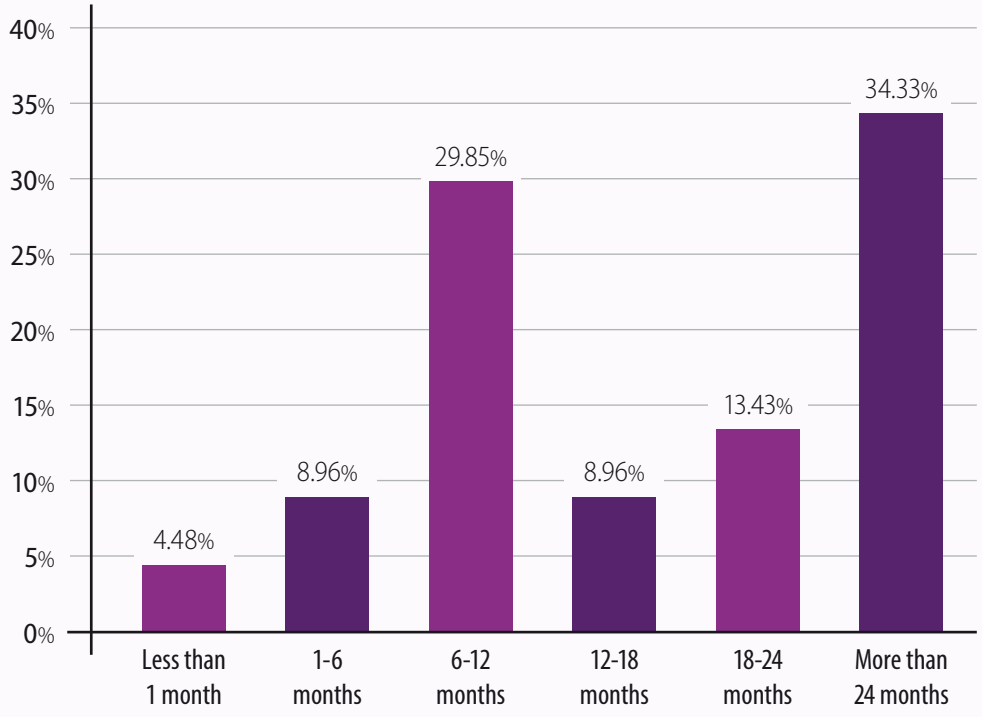


8. How long had you been with the partner(s) when the abusive behaviour started? (n=67)

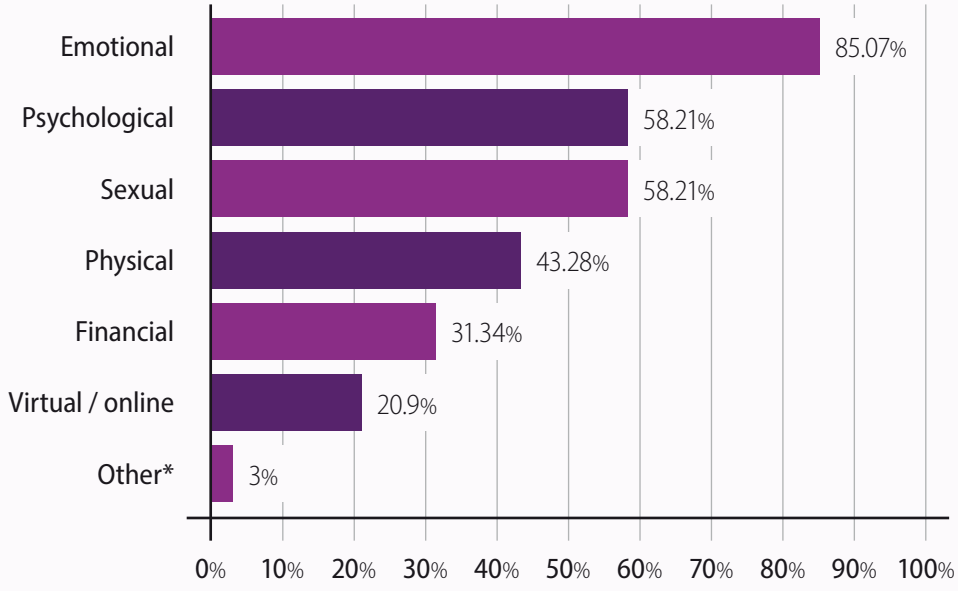


*Response: There were two separate partners who were abusive.

9. How long has/did the abusive behaviour last with the intimate partner(s)? (n=67)

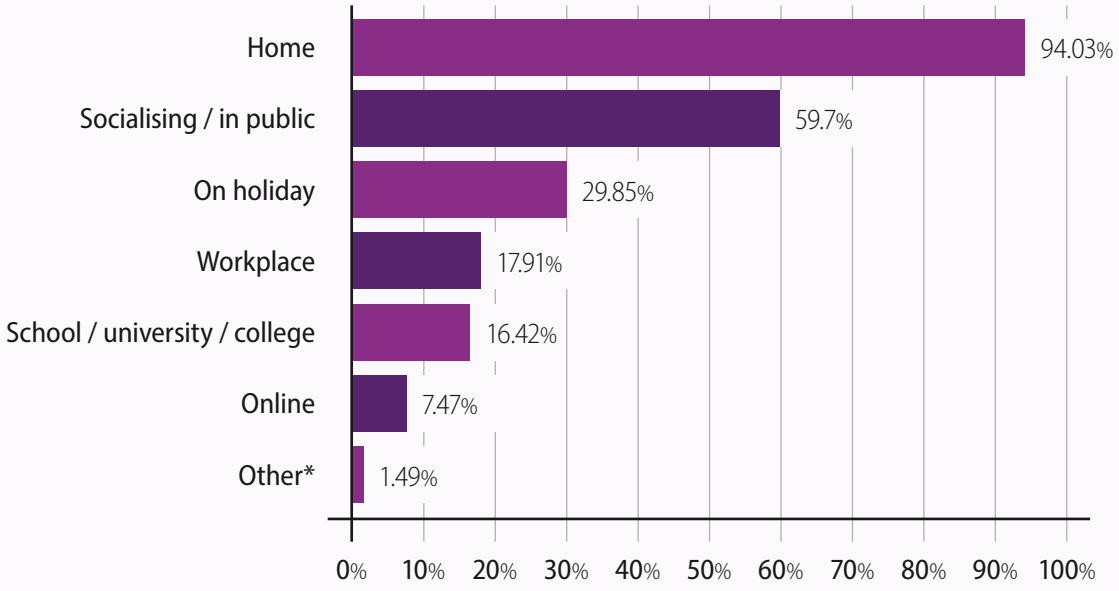


10. What were the patterns of the abusive behaviour from the intimate partner(s)? Select all that apply. (n=67)



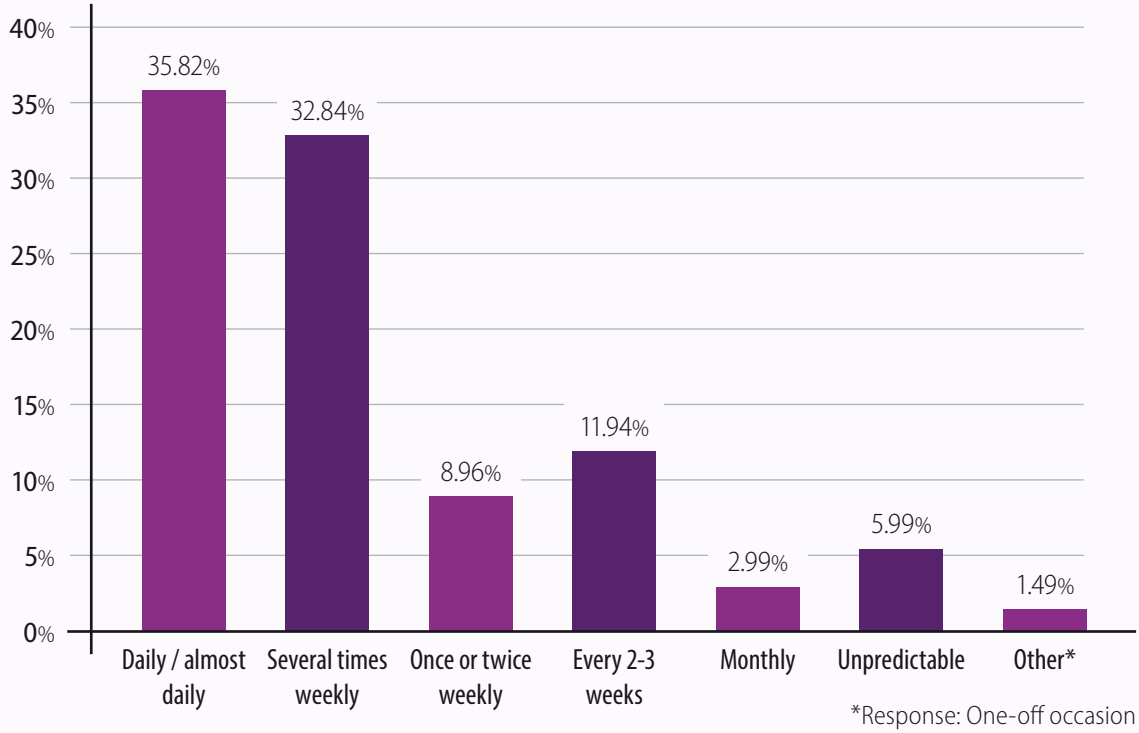
*Responses: Stalking

11. Where did the abusive behaviour occur with the intimate partner(s)? Select all that apply. (n=67)



*Response: A friend's house

12. How often did abusive behaviour occur with the intimate partner(s)? (n=67)

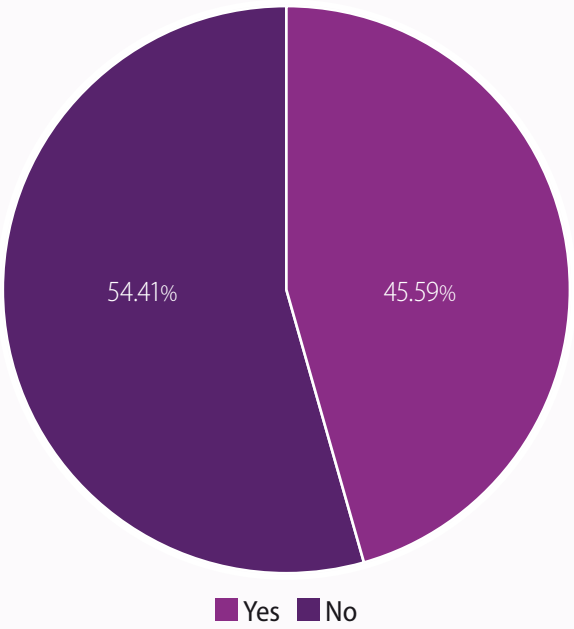


Patterns of abusive behaviour from family members

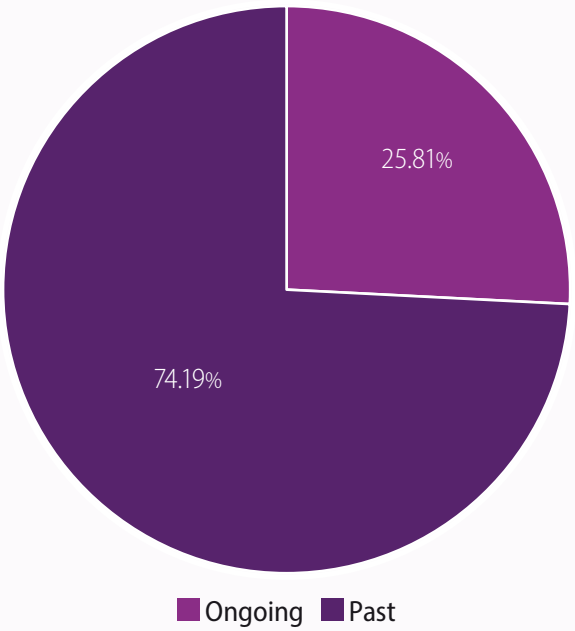
13. Have you experienced harmful and/or abusive behaviour from a relative or family member(s)? (n=67)

14. Is this abusive behaviour currently ongoing? (n=31)

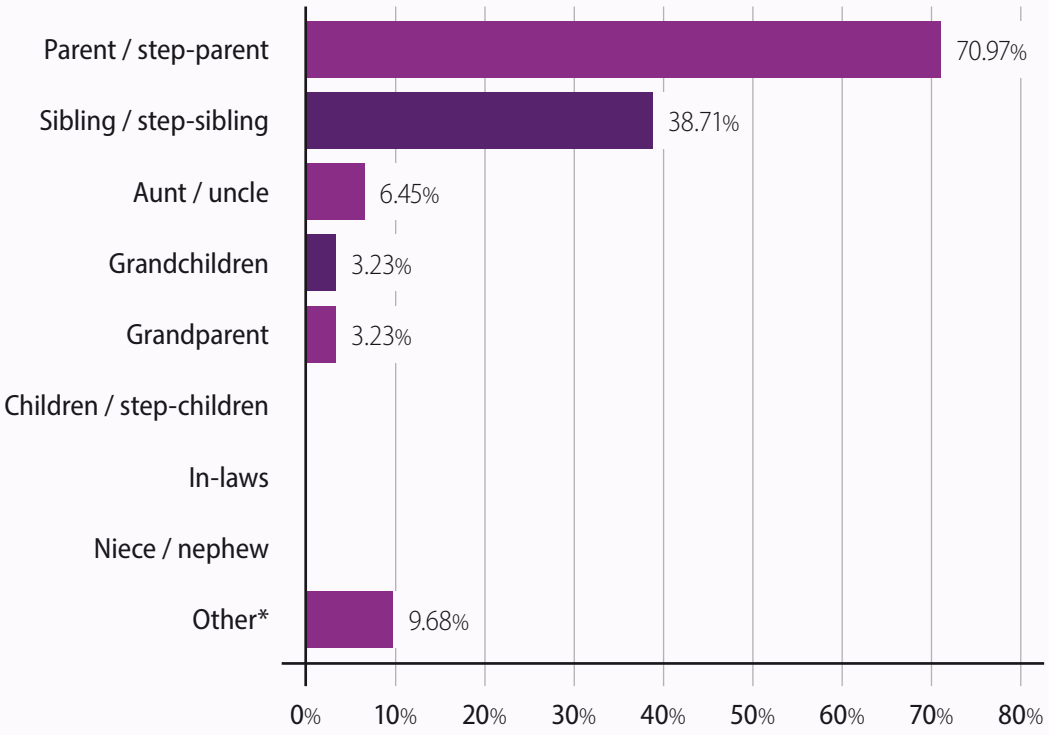
Experienced abuse from family/relatives



Ongoing abuse from family

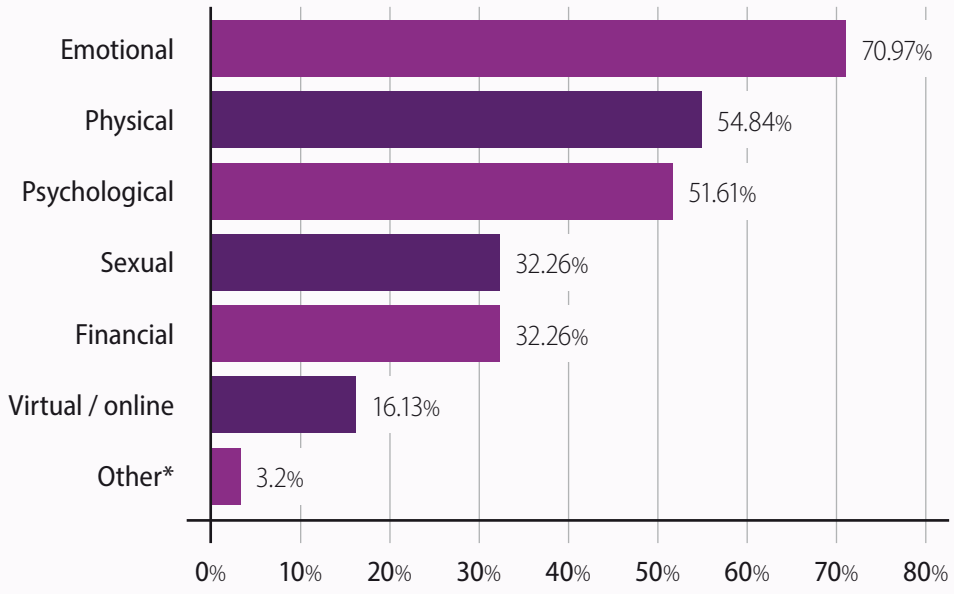


15. What was the relation of the person(s) to you? Select all that apply if multiple family members were involved. (n=31)



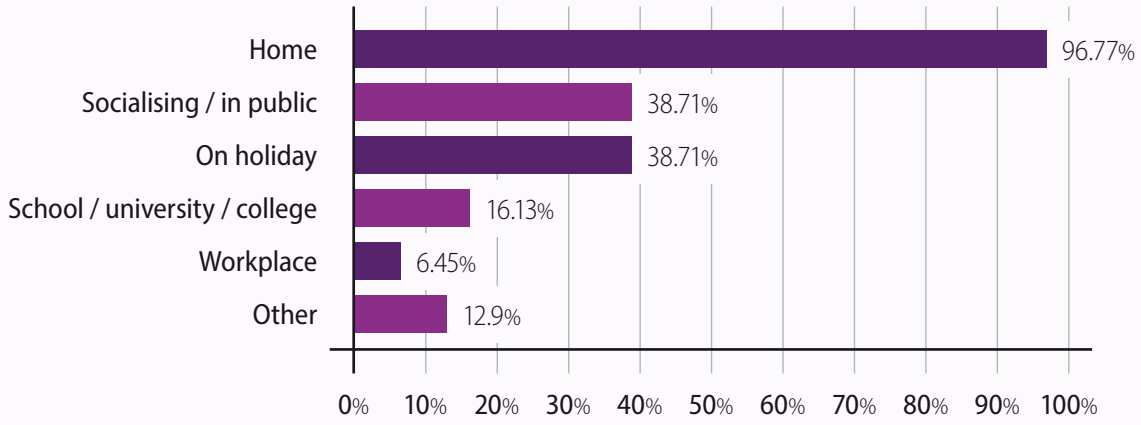
*Responses: Cousins; family friends living at home

16. What were the patterns of the abusive behaviour with the family member(s)? Select all that apply. (n=31)



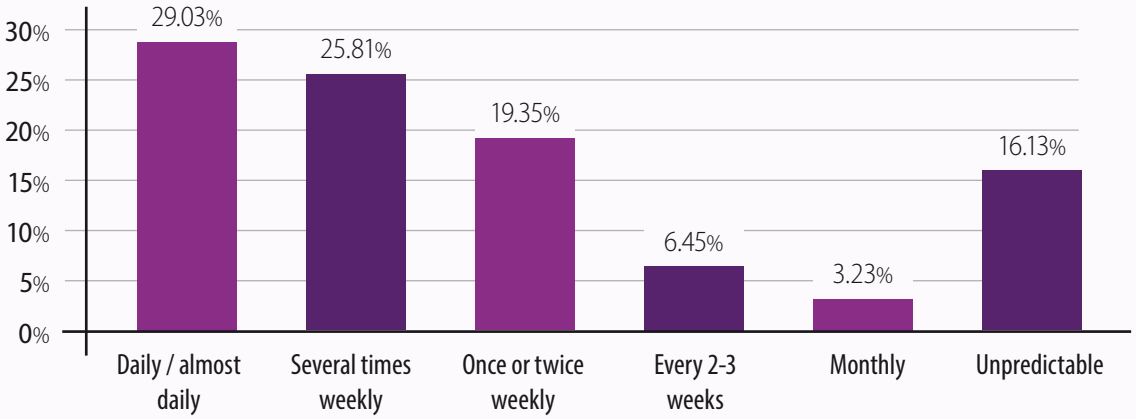
*Responses: Isolation; withholding food, bathing, and time outside

17. Where did the abusive behaviour with the family member(s) occur? Select all that apply. (n=31)

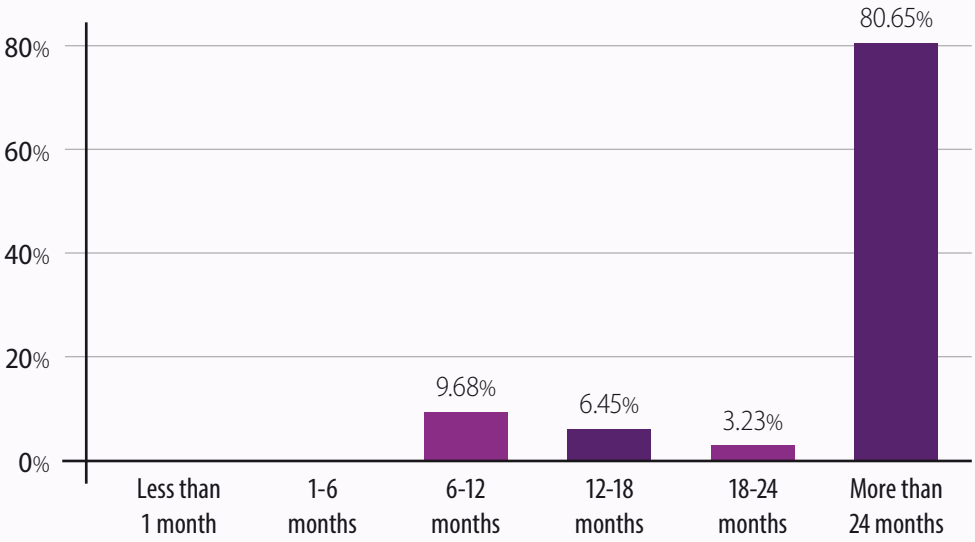


*Responses: Everywhere; in hospital; at a family business; online

18. How often did abusive behaviour with the family member(s) occur? (n=31)

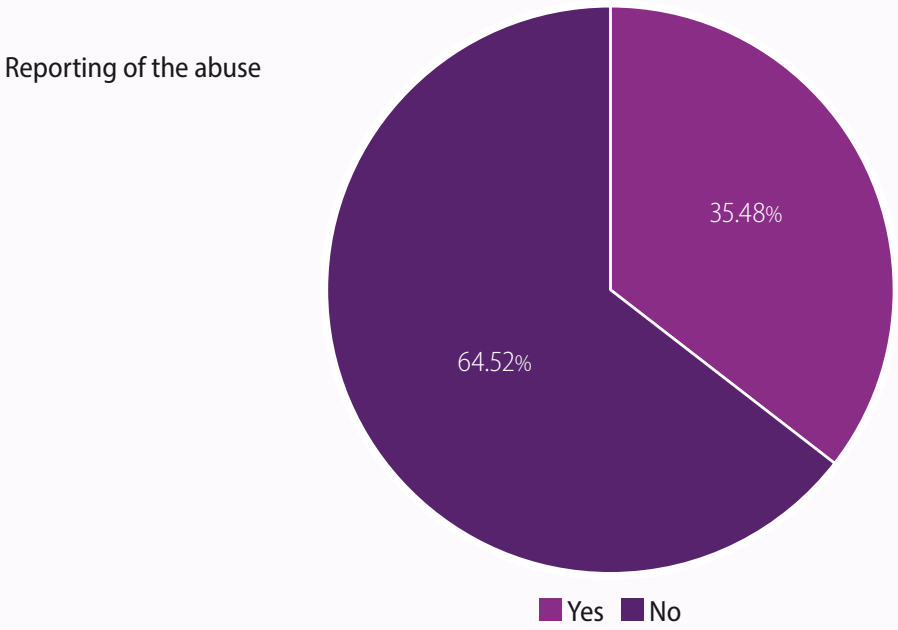


19. How long has/did the abusive behaviour with the family member(s) last? (n=31)

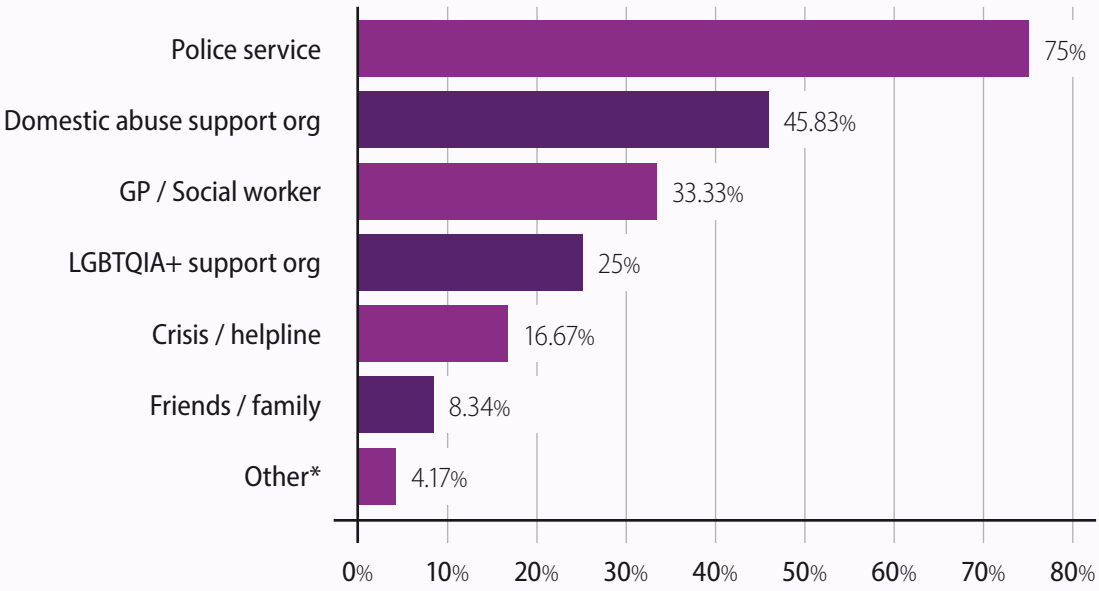


Support and reporting services

20. Did you report the abusive behaviour? (n=62)

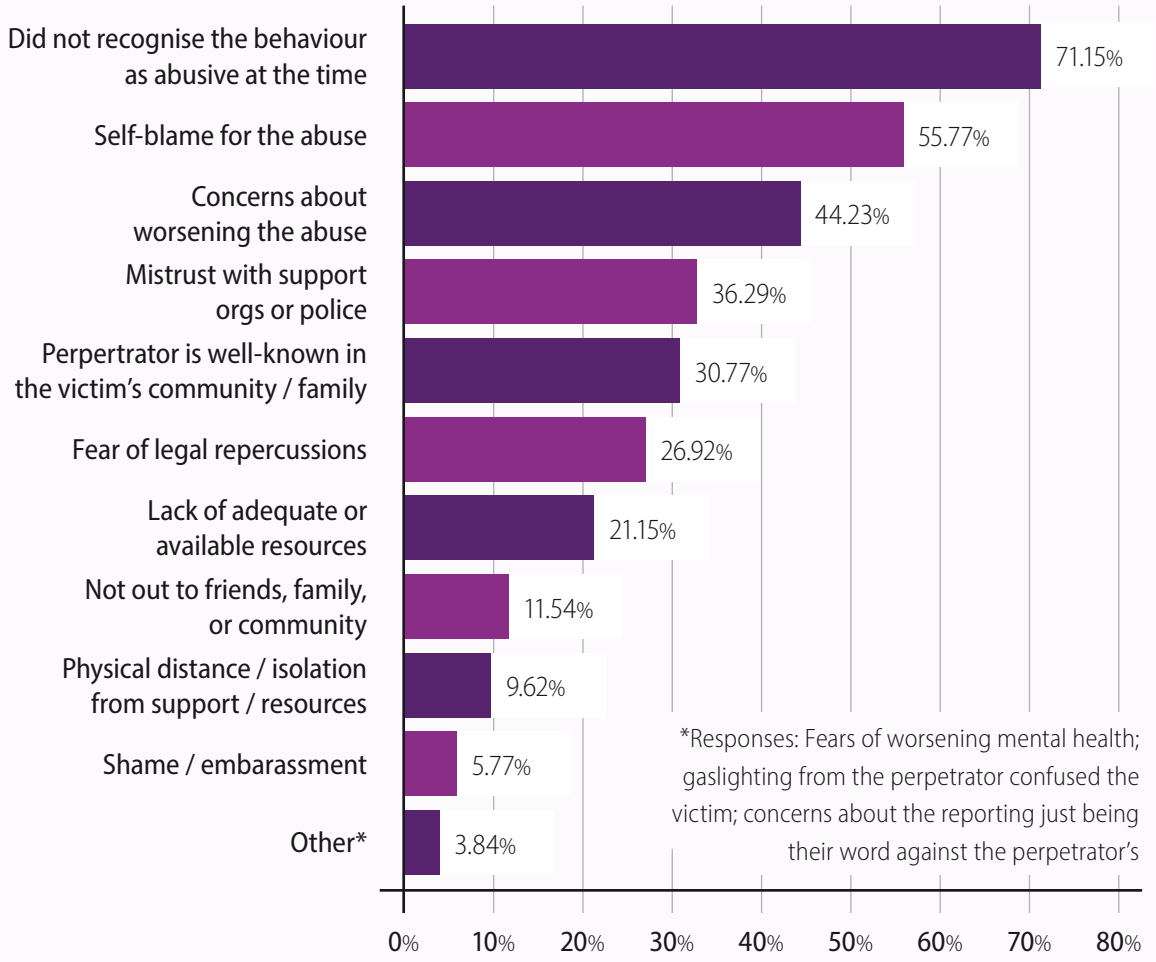


21. If yes, who did you report to? (n=25)

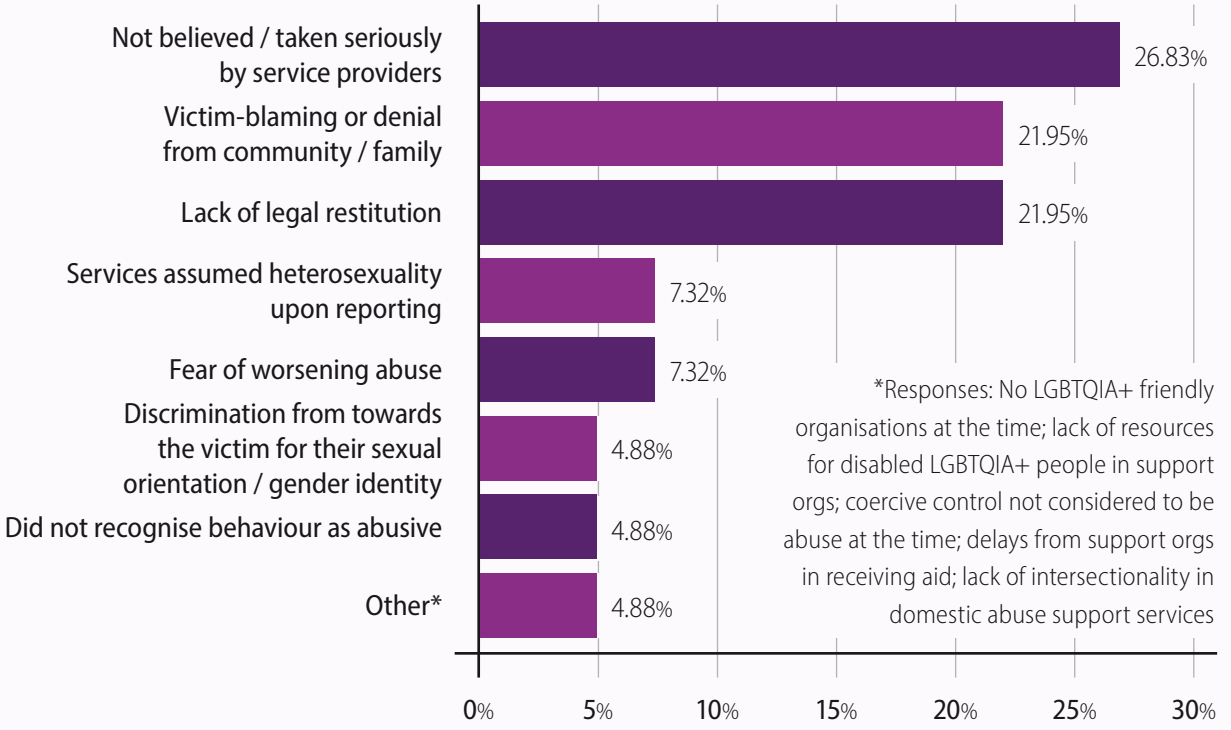


*Response: Employer

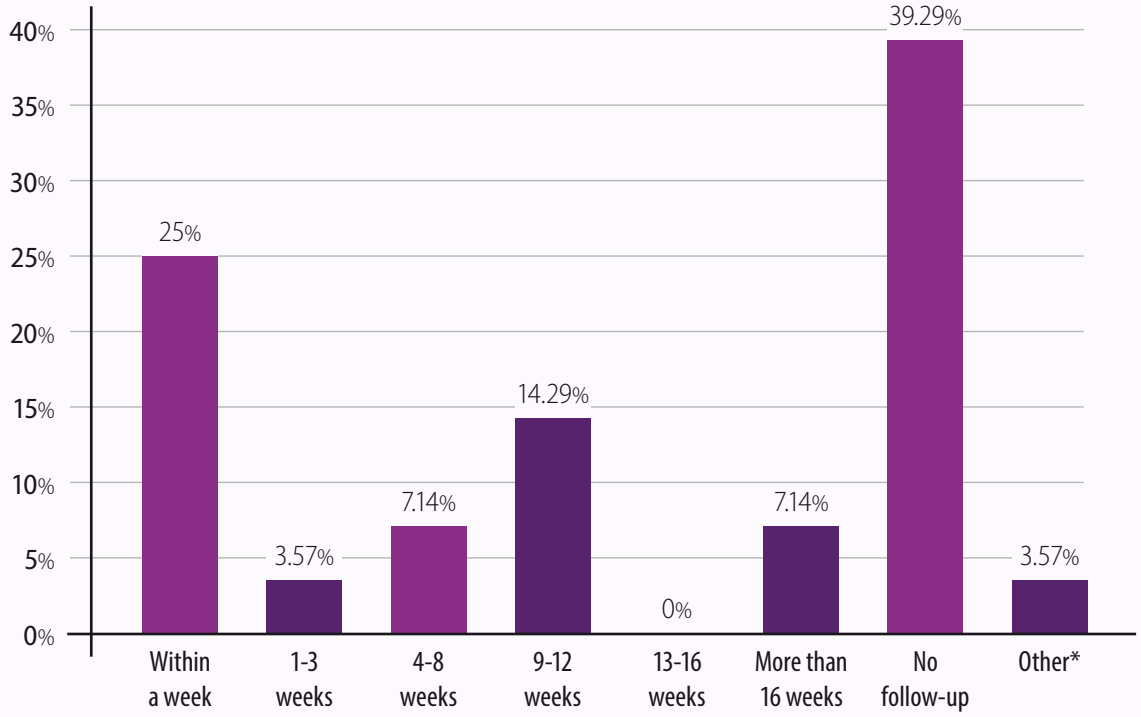
22. If not, what were your reasons for not reporting? (n=53)



23. What was the most significant barrier that you faced while reporting, or attempting to report, the abusive behaviour? (n=42)

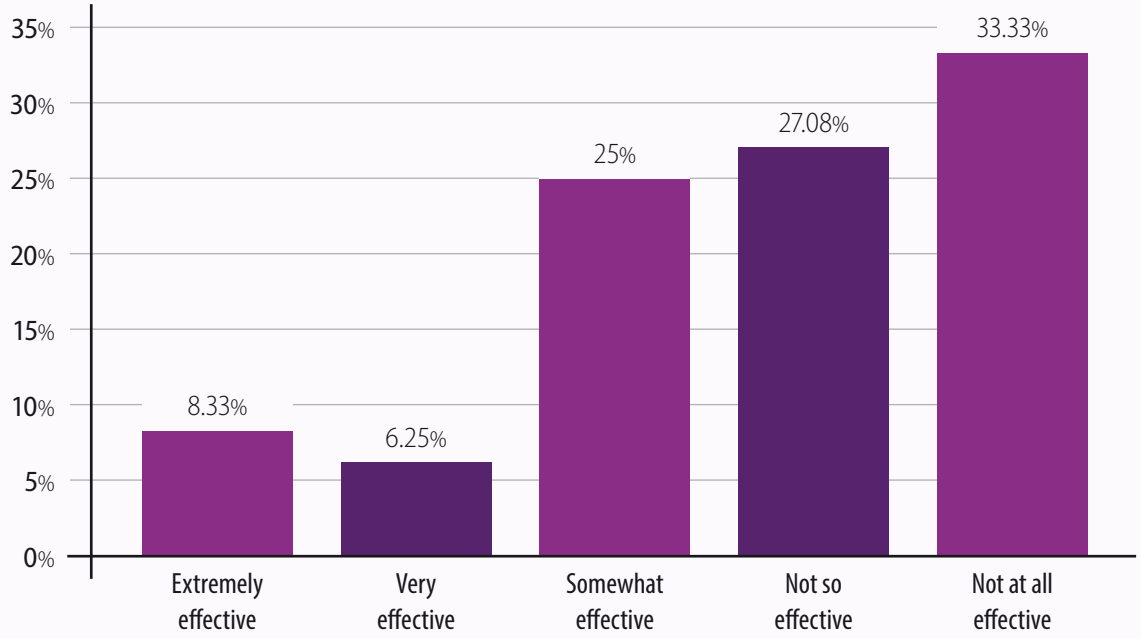


24. From the first instance of reporting, how long did it take for the relevant legal, policy, or practical initiatives to begin supporting and helping you through the abusive behaviour? (n=31)



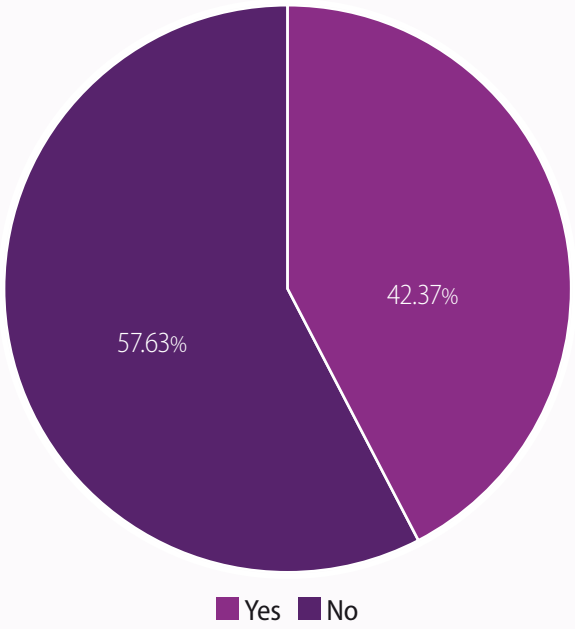
*Response: multiple instances with reporting

25. In your opinion, how fit for purpose are the relevant legal, policy, or practical initiatives that support LGBTQIA+ individuals experiencing abusive behaviour from intimate partners or family members? (n=48)



Follow up

26. HEReNI will be conducting further interviews to gain further insight into the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals who have faced domestic abuse, and support they received. Would you be willing to take part in a one-to-one interview that explores some of these issues in more detail? All interviews will be in the strictest of confidence. If yes, please provide your email, phone number, or any alternative method of contact you eel comfortable with. (n=59)



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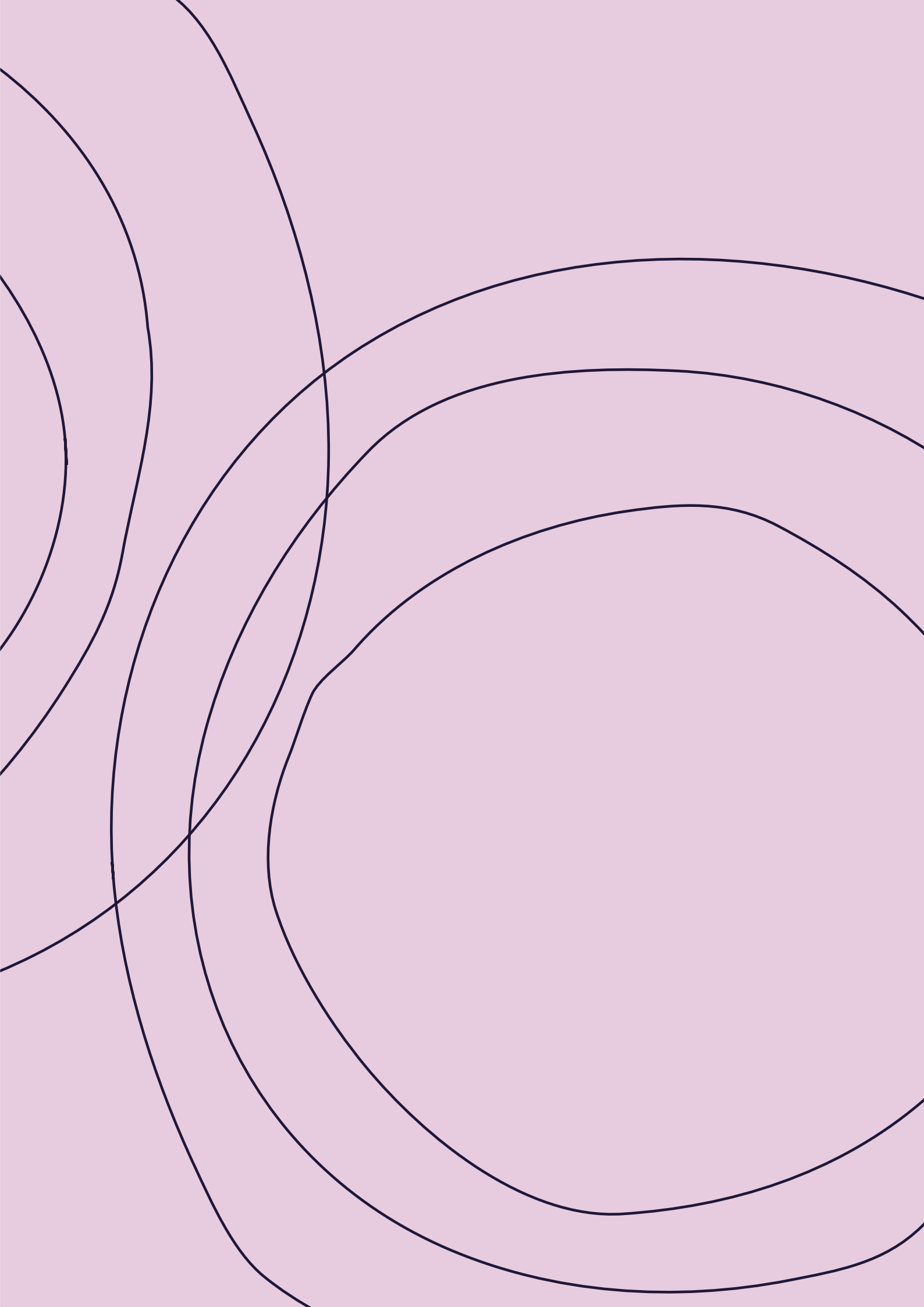

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