

ANROWS

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL RESEARCH
ORGANISATION FOR WOMEN'S SAFETY

to Reduce Violence against Women & their Children

MEDIA RELEASE

FRIDAY 10 JUNE 2022

EMBARGOED UNTIL MONDAY 20 JUNE 2022

Young women unfairly burdened with the responsibility of being wary of domestic violence and abuse

A new report has found that young women feel they are being conditioned to keep themselves safe and, as a result, they are by necessity more aware of domestic violence and abuse than young men.

This ANROWS research explores how young people define and make sense of domestic violence. In particular, the study examines how young people distinguish domestic violence from other unhealthy relationship behaviours, how common they perceive domestic violence to be, and their understanding of the gendered nature of domestic violence.

Following the results of the 2017 *National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey* (NCAS), ANROWS researchers spoke to 80 young people aged 16 to 18 years to unpack how young people define and make sense of domestic violence.

["It depends on what the definition of domestic violence is": How young Australians conceptualise domestic violence and abuse](#) reveals that young women are carrying an unequal share of the burden of learning about and discussing domestic violence, internalising the idea that they must protect themselves from these risks.

Both the young women and young men in the study argued that women are conditioned from a young age by their parents and broader society (including through respectful relationships education) to be constantly vigilant about their own safety.

And I think as a girl we've been a little bit more conditioned to be wary of these red flags and whatnot, because it is so prevalent. Like you've been told from a young age "Watch out for this and this and this", and I don't know if guys get the same thing ... And I don't think guys can always understand how scary it is for us ... (Lena, study participant)*

The young men were more likely to say that there could be explanations for controlling, non-physical behaviours, while the young women were more likely to see these behaviours as innately abusive.

The report recommends that justifications for non-physical violence be challenged by upskilling young people in what healthy relationship behaviours look like.

Despite reflecting on gendered conditioning, both the young men and young women resisted the idea that gender was a driver of domestic violence. This was primarily based on notions of “fairness” and a desire to treat all individuals the same. The young people also questioned the representation of men as the main perpetrators of domestic violence in the media, arguing that this unfairly stereotyped men when they can also be victims. This perception stands in stark contrast to evidence from the Australian Bureau of Statistics which shows that Australian women are nearly three times more likely than men to experience violence from an intimate partner,¹ and more than twice as likely to experience fear and psychological distress because of intimate partner violence.

This report recommends that the young people’s rejection of the gendered nature of domestic violence and the unequal burden of awareness placed on women are addressed through education for young people that challenges gender norms and highlights gendered, structural and intersecting inequalities. The report also emphasises the importance of encouraging conversations that reinforce everyone’s stake in preventing violence against women.

ANROWS CEO Padma Raman PSM emphasised the importance of centring young people’s voices in efforts to end violence against women and children.

"Although there has been extensive research into young people’s experiences and attitudes about domestic violence, this study is unique in the attention it pays to young people’s understanding of domestic violence, in their own terms."

"It confirms what many of us already know, anecdotally – that young women receive messages from an early age that incline them to believe they are responsible for, and must adopt strategies to maintain, their own safety from violence."

"It is critically important that the unequal burden of awareness be addressed through education for young people that challenges gender norms and inequalities."

Young people have been identified as a particular focus in the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022*, and there has been increased government effort to establish respectful relationships curricula in schools across the country. Education, policy and primary prevention initiatives must address the structural inequalities that drive violence against women. Conveying the realities of the gendered uses and experiences of violence to young people will be essential in this process.

OTHER KEY FINDINGS

The study also provides a glimpse into young people’s nuanced and complex understandings of the phenomenon of domestic violence.

- While media representations formed a key reference point for young people’s understandings of domestic violence, they knew there was more to the story than these extreme and sensationalised representations of physical violence.
- The young people conceptualised domestic violence as having “explicit” forms of violence, such as physical violence, and also “subtle” forms, such as emotional abuse. They reflected

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). *Personal safety, Australia: Statistics for family, domestic, sexual violence, physical assault, partner emotional abuse, child abuse, sexual harassment, stalking and safety*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release>

that the subtle forms of abuse are less talked about in the media and less recognised by the public and victims and survivors.

- The young people understood that domestic violence is a pattern of behaviour that can begin with toxic and unhealthy relationship behaviours that are controlling or manipulative, non-consensual and cause harm to the other person's self-worth and mental health.
- Young people felt that the term "domestic violence and abuse" more accurately reflects the multiple and distinct forms of violence and abuse that can co-occur as a snowballing pattern of behaviour within intimate relationships.
- The young people's idea of consent went beyond sexual consent. Having independence, autonomy and the capacity to make one's own decisions was seen as integral to a healthy relationship and most behaviours that encroach on a person's freedom were seen as abusive and wrong.

The young people's sophisticated understanding of domestic violence should be built upon to inform relevant, consistent and effective initiatives aimed at preventing and reducing violence against women.

It is only through centring young people's voices that we can better understand how they conceptualise domestic violence in order to inform effective strategies for domestic violence education and primary prevention.

***Not the study participants' real names.**