

# Come Together to End Domestic Abuse: a survey of UK attitudes to domestic abuse 2022

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women's aid  
until women & children are safe

## Report author

### Sarah Davidge

Research and Evaluation  
Women's Aid Federation of England

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Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. Over the past 47 years, Women's Aid has been at the forefront of shaping and coordinating responses to domestic abuse through practice, research and policy. We empower survivors by keeping their voices at the heart of our work, working with and for women and children by listening to them and responding to their needs.

We are a federation of just under 170 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country. We provide expert training, qualifications and consultancy to a range of agencies and professionals working with survivors or commissioning domestic abuse services, and award a National Quality Mark for services which meet our quality standards. We hold the largest national data set on domestic abuse, and use research and evidence to inform all of our work. Our campaigns achieve change in policy, practice and awareness, encouraging healthy relationships and helping to build a future where domestic abuse is no longer tolerated.

Our support services, which include our Live Chat Helpline, the Survivors' Forum, the No Woman Turned Away Project, the Survivor's Handbook, Love Respect (our dedicated website for young people in their first relationships), the national Domestic Abuse Directory and our advocacy projects, help thousands of women and children every year.

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For help and support, you can access Women's Aid's direct services, including our **Live Chat**, the **Survivors' Forum** and the **Survivor's Handbook**, at [www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support)

# 1. Introduction

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Women's Aid has been working to end domestic abuse for almost 50 years. In July 2022 we launched the Come Together to End Domestic Abuse campaign ahead of Women's Aid's 50th birthday in 2024, because we believe there is something that everyone can do to end abuse and make it intolerable in society. We know that everyone has a role to play. We want to show how we can make a measurable difference, and how we can best evidence this.

The Come Together to End Domestic Abuse campaign, which involves a range of activities including media partnerships, events and public awareness, has research and evaluation at its heart. As part of our Come Together campaign we have worked with M&C Saatchi World Services as their charity partner to develop a unique survey into UK adults' attitudes to domestic abuse. The aim was to design a piece of formative research to gather insight on attitudes towards domestic abuse in order to better understand where and why domestic abuse is 'tolerated' in our society. We set out to discover:

- How well the UK public understand the scope and nature of domestic abuse.
- What factors or attitudes make domestic abuse more or less tolerable.

This report sets out the key findings from the research and will inform our work, and further research, going forward.

## 2. Methodology

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### Research questions

The research sought to answer the following questions:

- **1.** What level of tolerance do UK adults have towards domestic abuse, and what drives tolerance?
- **2.** Are UK adults aware of the various guises that domestic abuse can take?
- **3.** How common do UK adults perceive domestic abuse to be?
- **4.** How important is domestic abuse as a political issue in relation to other priorities?

### Survey design

Women's Aid and M&C Saatchi designed a survey which included questions aimed at understanding why people hold the views that they do towards domestic abuse.

Adopting an approach that has been previously used to explore public attitudes towards violence against women in Scotland (Scottish Attitudes Survey 2019<sup>1</sup>) the survey relied on scenarios that

described particular situations. The questions included an original scenario and an experimental version, the original version depicted a scenario between a perpetrator and victim while the experimental versions described the same or very similar scenario with a change designed to explore how different factors impact attitudes towards abuse. Participants were shown scenarios in a randomised order.

This allowed for behaviours to be explored in context, to provide insight into people's judgements and attitudes without being influenced by terms which may trigger a socially desirable response and ultimately provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive issues.

After seeing the scenarios respondents were asked how wrong they believed the behaviour described was and how harmful they believed that behaviour to be. Respondents were provided with a 5-point Likert scale from extremely wrong to not at all wrong and a great deal of harm to no harm at all. They were then asked to rate how wrong they felt the behaviour in the experimental scenario was.

We used marriage as a proxy for intimate relationships in all but one scenario. Whilst domestic abuse can happen between partners regardless of their marital status this was chosen as it is widely recognised and is well-understood across the population. Asking people to consider one single relationship type across a range of scenarios also ensures that any observed differences in attitudes to domestic abuse are due to views about the differing behaviours, and not attitudes to different types of relationships.

We ended on a series of questions to test awareness of the prevalence and cause of domestic abuse. We avoided using terms likely to cause social desirability bias (the tendency to answer questions in a way that will be seen favourably by others), for example we did not mention domestic abuse explicitly until after the scenario questions.

In addition the survey included five questions aimed at understanding why people hold the views that they do towards domestic abuse (attitudinal drivers):

- One question was aimed at understanding how important people perceive domestic violence to be in relation to other policy priorities.
- Two proxy questions were designed to elicit whether people held stereotypical views of gender roles or underlying misogynistic views.
- A final question was asked to understand whether respondents had experienced gender-based violence.

These questions were then used to analyse responses to the scenario questions to understand how different attitudes and life experiences impact perceptions of domestic abuse.

### Sample

The survey was disseminated through YouGov to their panel, achieving a nationally and politically representative sample of 2,151 UK adults aged 16+. Fieldwork was undertaken between the 6th and 8th of May 2022, and the survey was carried out online.

YouGov provided us with data on the sample to allow us to look at how demographic information and voting behaviour influenced views (demographic drivers).



The percentages cited in this report are based on weighted data which is representative of UK adults (aged 16+) and have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

All described differences in the text (i.e. between different demographic groups) are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or above. This means that the probability of having found a difference of at least this size, if there was no actual difference in the population, is 5% or less. The term 'significant' is used in this report to refer to statistical significance and is not intended to imply substantive importance.

### Statistical significance and p values

All described differences in the text (i.e. between different demographic groups) are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level or above. This means that the probability of having found a difference of at least this size, if there was no actual difference in the population, is 5% or less or  $p < .05$ . The term 'significant' is used in this report to refer to statistical significance and is not intended to imply substantive importance.

Throughout the findings p-values are shown via colour coding in all tables to show the confidence levels on a scale from  $p < 0.001$  (most statistically significant) to  $p < 0.10$  (least statistically significant). The colour coding used in this report reflects whether the difference is positive/higher (blue) or negative/lower (pink) compared to the mean.

## 3. UK perceptions of domestic abuse

### 3.1 Prevalence

Most of the UK public are of the opinion that domestic abuse is common (84%), this opinion is significantly more prevalent amongst women (91% compared to 76% of men). As noted in the previous section there are some significant differences between groups when it comes to how common people perceive domestic abuse to be. Within both the group with stereotypical views of gender roles and those with underlying misogynistic views (see 4.2 and 4.3) being less aware of its prevalence, 20% within each sub-group perceive it to be not common (not very or not at all).

**Table 1: How common is domestic abuse in the UK**

How common is abuse in the UK?	Gender		All
	Female	Male	
Very common	49.0%	24.3%	36.9%
Fairly common	42.1%	51.7%	46.8%
Not very common	4.5%	12.4%	8.4%
Not at all common	0.2%	1.3%	0.8%
Don't know	4.2%	10.2%	7.1%
Weighted N	1103	1048	2151

$p < .001$   $p < .01$   $p < .05$   $p < .10$   $p < .10$   $p < .05$   $p < .01$   $p < .001$

The majority (68%) of UK adults believe that domestic abuse in the UK has increased during the last three years with women significantly more likely to believe this (77% of women and 59% of men).

**Table 2: Has domestic abuse increased or decreased in the UK over the last 3 years?**

Has domestic abuse increased or decreased in the UK?	Female	Male	All
Increased a lot	45.8%	28.3%	37.2%
Increased a little	30.7%	31.4%	31.0%
Stayed the same	6.9%	13.1%	9.9%
Decreased a little	1.2%	3.7%	2.4%
Decreased a lot	0.3%	0.7%	0.5%
Don't know	15.1%	22.8%	18.8%
Weighted N	1103	1048	

$p < .001$   $p < .01$   $p < .05$   $p < .10$   $p < .10$   $p < .05$   $p < .01$   $p < .001$

Interestingly this perception is not accurate. ONS prevalence data<sup>2</sup> shows domestic abuse actually remains at similar levels to previous years, which are of course alarmingly high but have not increased. This probably tells us a lot about the profile domestic abuse has had over the last three years with the Domestic Abuse Act and Covid meaning it has more media presence. This increased exposure to information about domestic abuse could lead to a perception that it is on the rise. The false impression of an increase may distract attention from addressing the root causes of domestic abuse.

### 3.2 Victimization and personal experiences of domestic abuse

The research evidences the extent to which people know domestic abuse to be an issue in the UK, but perceive it as something that happens to 'other people' and not to them.

When asked about victimisation most people do not think domestic abuse will happen to them, only 9% felt they might be a victim in the future (see Table 3). They are more likely to think it will happen to someone they know, but this is still less than half of UK adults (41%, see Table 4).

Again, we saw a difference between the views of men and women in the findings. Women (49%) are more likely to think someone they know might be a victim than men (34%), see Table 4. It is also notable that those women who have previously experienced domestic abuse are significantly more likely (17%) to believe they will be victims in the future than other women (7%).

**Table 3: Likelihood of yourself being a victim of domestic abuse in the future**

Likelihood of victimisation: Yourself	Gender		
	Male	Female	All
Very likely	2.4%	3.3%	2.9%
Somewhat likely	5.7%	7.1%	6.4%
Not very likely	23.1%	25.0%	24.1%
Not at all likely	54.5%	49.8%	52.1%
Don't know	13.2%	12.7%	12.9%
Prefer not to say	1.1%	2.2%	1.7%
Weighted N	1103	1048	2151

p<.001 p<.01 p<.05 p<.10 p<.10 p<.05 p<.01 p<.001

**Table 4: Likelihood of someone you know being a victim of domestic abuse in the future**

Likelihood of victimisation: Someone you know	Gender		
	Male	Female	All
Very likely	10.7%	15.6%	13.2%
Somewhat likely	23.2%	33.4%	28.4%
Not very likely	20.2%	15.3%	17.7%
Not at all likely	13.4%	8.6%	10.9%
Don't know	31.1%	25.6%	28.3%
Prefer not to say	1.4%	1.5%	1.5%
Weighted N	1103	1048	2151

p<.001 p<.01 p<.05 p<.10 p<.10 p<.05 p<.01 p<.001

Although just 10% of women and 8% of men answered that they thought they would be a victim of domestic abuse in the future, a much higher percentage said they had experienced domestic abuse in the past. When asked if they had faced certain experiences, 37% reported experiencing behaviour that is classed as domestic abuse at some point in their lives. There is a significant difference between women (46%) and men (27%) who report having experienced one or more of the behaviours in shown in Table 5 within an intimate relationship.

There is a seeming discrepancy between these two findings which could be explained if the behaviours listed in Table 5 are not widely understood as being part of domestic abuse, of a pattern of controlling behaviour. This would indicate the need for wider understanding of the nature of domestic abuse.

The most common forms of reported abuse are being 'regularly verbally abused, put down or criticised by a partner, husband or wife' (19%) and 'feeling that their partner, husband or wife was regularly trying to stop them doing what they wanted to do' (19%). We know that women are far more likely to experience repeated patterns of abusive behaviour as part of coercive control and gendered differences in experiences are apparent in the findings. Women are twice as likely (15%)

to have experienced more than one type of behaviour than men (7%) and women are much more likely to have felt fear within the context of an intimate relationship (20% compared to 5% of men).

For analysis all abusive behaviours were combined to represent those who have experienced at least one form of domestic abuse and this variable was used to understand whether or not a personal experience of domestic abuse would impact someone's attitudes towards domestic abuse.

**Table 5: personal experiences of domestic abuse**

Personal experiences of domestic abuse	Female	Male	All
Been in a relationship where you felt your partner/husband/wife was regularly trying to stop you doing what you wanted to do	23.8%	14.0%	19.0%
Been regularly verbally abused, put down or criticised by a partner, husband or wife	25.2%	12.8%	19.1%
Been physically attacked or abused by a partner, husband or wife	17.0%	8.8%	13.0%
Had unwanted sexual contact (e.g. sexual assault, rape)	23.5%	7.1%	15.5%
Been a victim of stalking or harassment (either in person or online)	13.3%	5.8%	9.6%
Been afraid of a partner	19.6%	5.1%	12.5%
At least one of the above	46.1%	27.0%	36.8%
No, none of these	47.3%	66.1%	56.5%
Don't know	1.6%	3.5%	2.5%
Prefer not to say	5.0%	3.4%	4.2%
Weighted N	1103	1048	2151

p<.001 p<.01 p<.05 p<.10 p<.10 p<.05 p<.01 p<.001

### 3.3 Private/public matter

*"Domestic abuse should be reported to the police or support services"*

*"Domestic abuse is a private matter that should be dealt with in the family"*

When asked to choose which of the two statements above they most agreed with, 87% of UK adults said domestic abuse should be reported to police or support services, suggesting most people do not think it's a private family matter. There were some significant variances however. Men were more likely to view it as a private matter to be resolved within the relationship or family (7% compared to 2% of women).

**Table 6: Should domestic abuse be reported to police**

Should domestic violence be reported to police?	Gender		All
	Female	Male	
Domestic abuse should be reported to the police and other support services	93.5%	80.4%	87.1%
Domestic abuse is a private matter that should be dealt with in the family	1.8%	6.8%	4.2%
Don't know	4.8%	12.8%	8.7%
Weighted N	1103	1048	2151



There are often good reasons survivors do not report abuse to the police or seek formal support. This may be a previous poor response, uncertainty around what is a crime, fear of not being believed and concerns about the impact on any children. This is particularly true for survivors from marginalised groups who may face additional barriers to reporting such as experiences or fear of racism by the police towards them or the perpetrator and experiences or fear of other forms of discrimination.

The perception held by the majority of the UK public shows an encouraging awareness that domestic abuse is an issue to be concerned about, and one that requires support. However, this may also evidence that there is an expectation for survivors to report to police or seek formal support. This in turn, could mean that survivors can be blamed if they do not feel able to report the abuse. As we see throughout this report (see 6.3 in particular), a tendency to place responsibility on survivors for the abuse they experience, suggests that many people do not accept a collective societal responsibility to end domestic abuse.

### 3.4 Responding to domestic abuse

Most (85%) UK adults say they are likely to help a female friend they believed was experiencing domestic abuse (see Table 7). Half (51%) say they are very likely to in this scenario. Women were much more likely than men to say they would be very likely to help (62% compared to 40%).

**Table 7: Likelihood to help a female friend experiencing domestic abuse**

Likelihood to help a female friend experiencing domestic abuse	Gender		All
	Male	Female	
Very likely	40.3%	61.5%	51.2%
Fairly likely	37.3%	29.7%	33.4%
Not very likely	6.2%	2.1%	4.1%
Not at all likely	1.3%	0.0%	0.6%
Don't know	14.9%	6.7%	10.7%
Weighted N	1048	1103	2151



The majority of UK adults who said they would be likely to help a friend who they believe is experiencing domestic abuse, said they would encourage her to report to the police and other support services (80%), encourage her to contact a helpline (75%) and ask her if she is doing ok (65%). Only 22% would go directly to the police or support services themselves.

Men are significantly more likely to say that they would talk to her abusive partner about the abuse (15% compared to 4% of women). Young men 16-24 are particularly likely to say that they would talk to her partner about the abuse (24%).

*"It made a huge difference. I would not be free and happy now if it was not for the wonderful support I have had from my friends, family and local domestic abuse service" – Survivor talking about the value of effective support*  
*"This provided some validation and allowed me to process my own thoughts and manage my responses more quickly than I would have without that support" – Survivor talking about the value of effective support*

**Table 8: How would you help a female friend experiencing domestic violence?**

How would you help a female friend experiencing domestic violence?	Gender		All
	Male	Female	
Ask friend if she is doing ok	58.0%	71.2%	65.3%
Ask friend directly about abuse	45.1%	51.1%	48.4%
Talk to her partner about the abuse	15.3%	3.6%	8.8%
Talk to friends about what is wrong	20.7%	24.4%	22.7%
Encourage her to contact a help line	70.0%	79.3%	75.1%
Encourage her to report to the police and other support services	74.9%	84.5%	80.2%
Report to the police and other support services	24.3%	19.5%	21.6%
Other	4.0%	4.4%	4.2%
Don't know	1.6%	0.6%	1.1%
Weighted N	813	1006	1819



The most common reason for not helping a female friend who is believed to be experiencing domestic abuse is a perception that participants should not get involved (43%). Suggesting that, whilst most people think domestic abuse should be reported to the police or formal support services (see 3.3), a significant portion of UK adults are still reluctant to talk about domestic abuse or feel that it is a matter for private concern or statutory services only.

This was followed by concerns that intervening would make the situation worse (41%). Almost a fifth (18%) would not help if they were friends with both partners in the relationship. It is interesting to note that people shared fears that the police would not take domestic abuse seriously or that children would be removed, fears which can prevent survivors from reporting themselves. There were no significant differences by gender in responses to this question.



**Table 9: Why would you be unlikely to help a female friend experiencing domestic violence?**

Why would you be unlikely to help a female friend experiencing domestic violence?	All
Feeling that you should not get involved	43.0%
Fear that I might make the situation worse	40.6%
Fear that it would not improve the safety for those involved	24.4%
Friends with both partners in the relationship	16.7%
Feeling that the police would not treat it seriously	13.9%
Fear that children would be removed from family	7.2%
Other	7.8%
Don't know	7.6%
Weighted N	103

p<.001 p<.01 p<.05 p<.10 p<.10 p<.05 p<.01 p<.001

*"I only contacted the police after I left the home, I was fearful of repercussions before. My mother persuaded me and sat with me."*

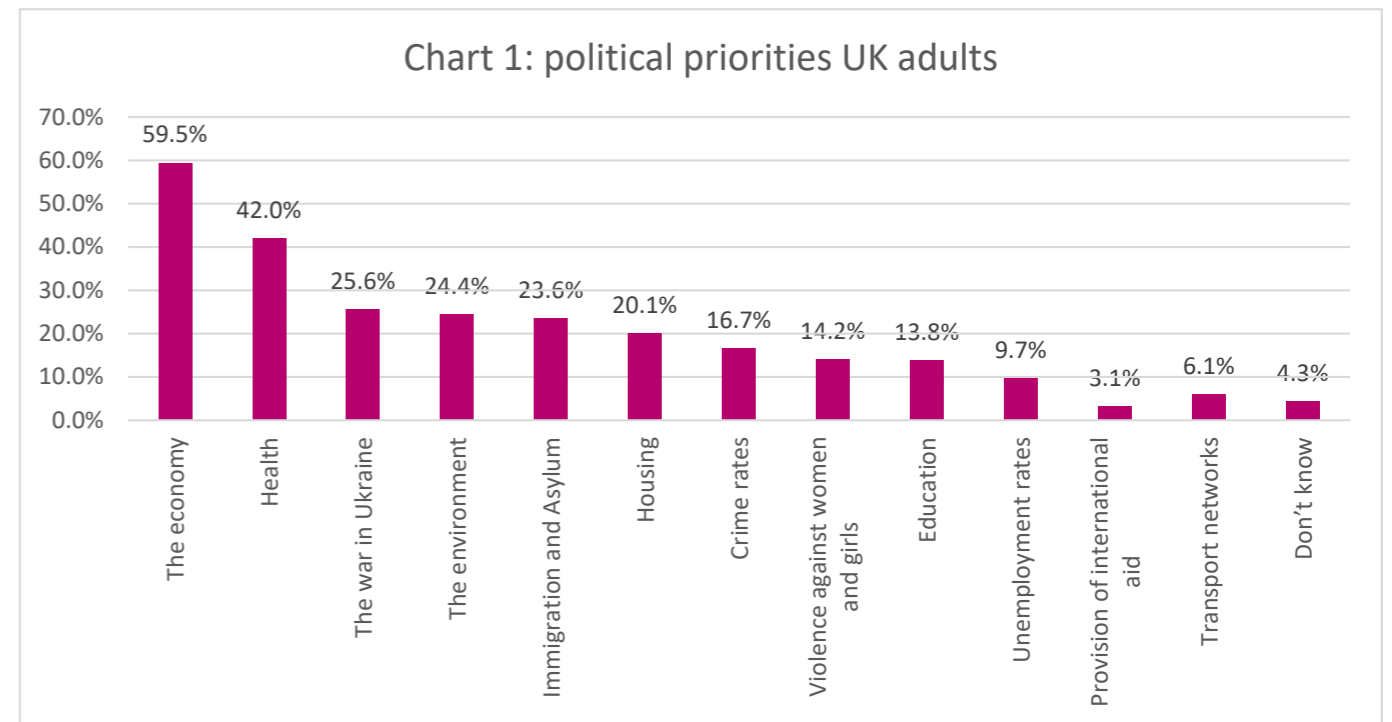
**- Survivor talking about the value of effective support**

**3.5 Importance of violence against women and girls and other policy issues**

Overall, 14% of UK adults selected violence against women and girls as one of the top three issues that should be prioritised by the UK government over the next 12 months (see Chart 1). It is a significantly higher priority amongst women participants, with 18% of women placing VAWG in their top three issues compared to 10% of men. This was notably true of young women in the 16-24 age group (see Table 10), a third (33%) placed VAWG in their top three issues. Only health was ranked in the top three by more members of this cohort making violence against women and girls a key political priority for them.

The economy and health are the most important issues in people's minds and we know that domestic abuse is a key consideration in both policy areas, and vice versa. Survivors of domestic abuse are disproportionately impacted by economic concerns due the unequal starting point they are at as a result of domestic abuse. This makes it harder for survivors to gain the economic independence they seek after a relationship with an abuser, or to leave an abuser in the first place<sup>3</sup>. Health is also a key concern for survivors of domestic abuse as their journey to recovery and independence often requires both physical and mental health support<sup>4</sup>.

**Chart 1: Issues in top three political priorities for the next 12 months**



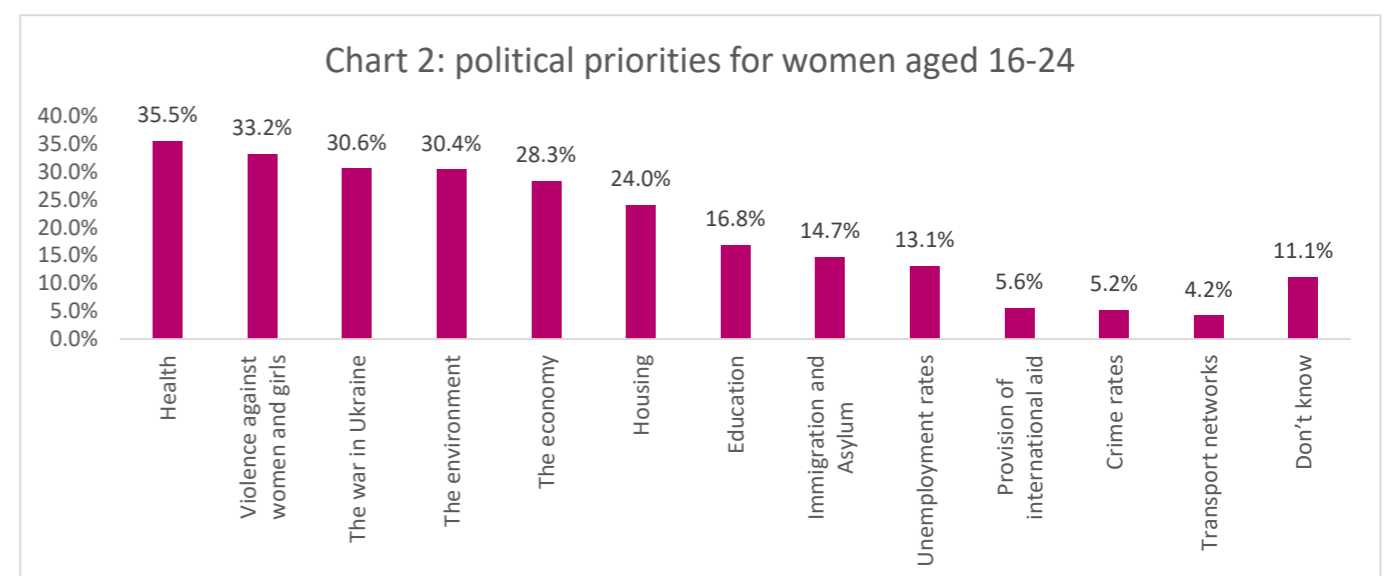
Q. If you had to choose which of the following issues do you think the UK Government should prioritise over the next 12 months? (Please select up to three options) Base: All UK Adults N= 2,151

**Table 10: % who selected VAWG in top three political priorities**

Female 16-24	33%	Male 16-24	9%
Female 25-49	18%	Male 25-49	8%
Female 50-64	16%	Male 50-64	12%
Female 65+	13%	Male 65+	12%
Weighted N	11.03		1048

p<.001 p<.01 p<.05 p<.10 p<.10 p<.05 p<.01 p<.001

**Chart 2: female 16-24 issues in top three political priorities for the next 12 months**



# 4. UK perceptions of gender roles and sexism in society

In this research we make an initial exploration of the role views towards gender roles and sexism or misogyny play in people’s perceptions of domestic abuse. As noted in the methodology, we used proxy questions to indicate where participants held a view which may indicate either underlying misogynistic views or stereotypical ideals of gender roles. The next phase of this research will utilise focus groups and qualitative analysis to explore the interaction of these views and tolerance of domestic abuse more fully.

## 4.1 Underlying misogynistic views

Participants were asked under what conditions they believed it was acceptable for sports crowds to sing rude chants about women (see Table 10). The majority (69%) of UK adults believe that it is never acceptable for sports crowds to sing rude chants about women. However, 24% believe that there are instances where it is acceptable to sing these chants, the most common being when they are sung as a joke (12%).

For analysis and reporting purposes any responses which indicated that it is acceptable to sing rude chants about women at sports games were grouped together to indicate a sub-group who may hold underlying misogynistic<sup>5</sup> views. This variable was then used in analysis to understand whether holding such views had an impact on attitudes towards domestic abuse. See later in this report (5.4) for more detail on the importance of this driver in understanding tolerance of domestic abuse.

Men (30%) are significantly more likely than women (17%) to select a response which indicated that they may have underlying misogynistic views. This was particularly true of younger men, aged 16-24 (46%).

The proxy question used is not exhaustive, for example misogynistic views are more prevalent in younger men than older when considered via the proxy question we used. There could be many explanations for this including changing views of masculinity and acceptable behaviour more broadly so we caution against drawing the conclusion that misogyny is not prevalent in older men (see age as a driver of tolerance).

**Table 11: When is it acceptable for sports crowd to sing rude chants about women?**

When is it acceptable for sports crowd to sing rude chants about women?	Male	Female	All
When they are sung as a joke	17.5%	6.8%	12.0%
When they are not directed at/ about a particular woman	11.6%	7.0%	9.2%
When there are also other chants about other people (i.e. not women) being sung during the match	12.5%	8.6%	10.5%
When they are about the wife/partner of a player	3.6%	0.4%	2.0%
Other	3.0%	0.9%	2.0%
Not applicable – It is never acceptable to sing rude chants about women	59.0%	78.6%	69.1%
Don't know	10.9%	3.9%	7.3%
Weighted N	1048	1103	2151

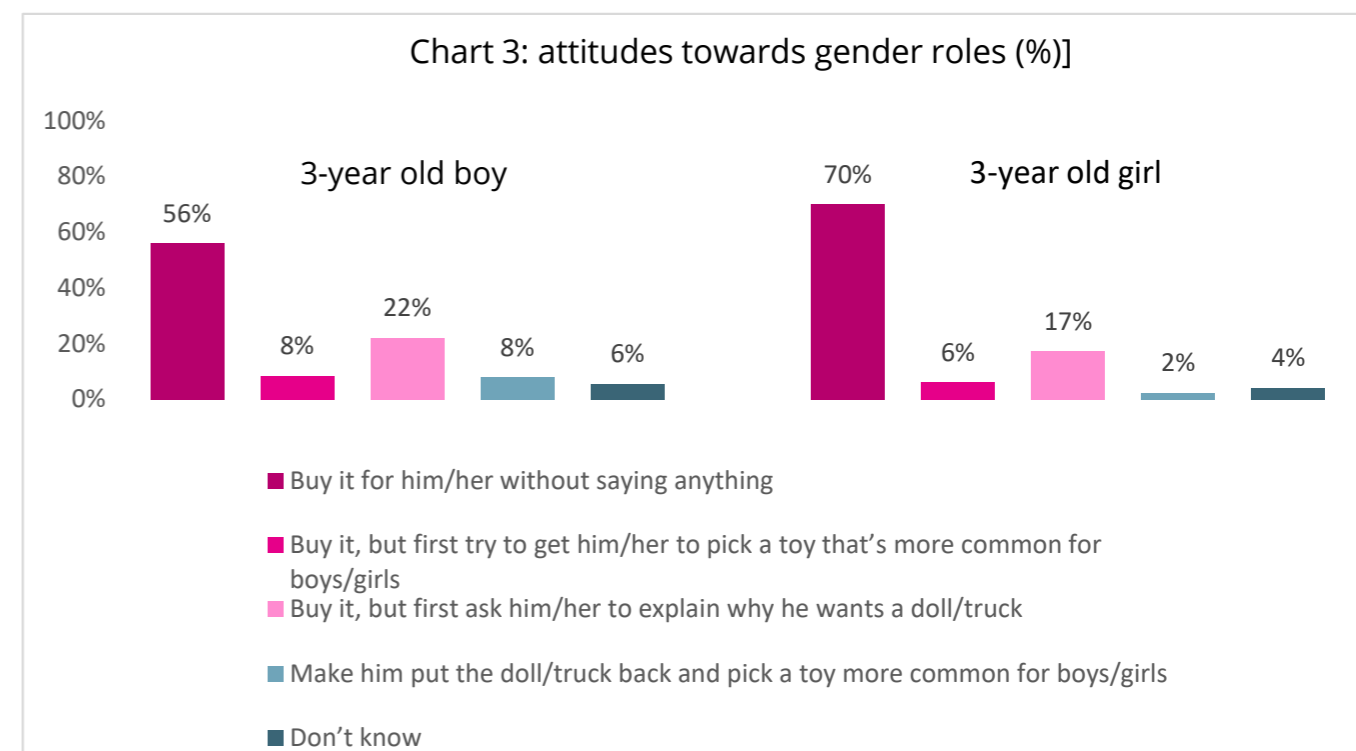


## 4.2 Stereotypical views of gender roles

In order to understand the prevalence of gender stereotypes amongst participants, they were asked what they would say in response to a 3-year old girl choosing a toy truck or 3-year old boy choosing a princess doll (see Chart 3). Response options ranged from make him/her put the toy back and pick a toy more common for their gender to buy it for him/her without saying anything.

**Chart 3: Attitudes towards gender roles (%)**

Q. Please imagine that you have taken a 3-year-old boy/girl to a shop to buy a toy and he/she chose a princess doll/truck. Which of the following would you do? Please select the option that best applies. Base: All UK Adults N= 2,151





Whilst 70% of UK adults said they would buy the girl a truck without saying anything, only 56% said that they would do the same if it was a 3-year-old boy who wanted a princess doll. This difference was significantly more pronounced amongst men compared to women, almost all of whom would buy either child the desired toy. It was particularly prevalent in men over 50. This suggests that stereotypes are not applied equally to boys and girls when it came to toys. Rather, girls are afforded more freedom to explore toys and interests that are stereotypically seen as being for boys.

For analysis, respondents who selected that they would make the boy put the toy doll back and select a toy more appropriate for boys, were categorised as potentially holding stereotypical views of gender roles. This subgroup were compared to other subgroups in order to understand whether such views impacted their attitudes towards the tested scenarios and other questions. See later in this report (5.4) for more detail on the importance of this driver in understanding tolerance of domestic abuse.

### 4.3 Beliefs on the root cause of domestic abuse

*“People who carry out domestic violence against women are enabled and worsened by sexism in wider society”*

Women’s Aid understands domestic abuse experienced by women to be a cause and consequence of women’s inequality in society. The research tested how widely shared this view is by asking people which of the two statements above they most agreed with. We found that 40% of UK adults believe that people who carry out domestic violence against women are enabled and worsened by sexism in wider society, whilst 34% believe that people who carry out domestic violence against women are just ‘bad people’ and it’s not a reflection of wider society. We used this finding to group respondents and look at whether understanding of the root cause of domestic abuse would impact someone’s attitudes towards domestic abuse.

Women (47%), particularly young women (59%), were most likely to believe that domestic abuse is enabled by sexism in wider society.

**Table 12: root causes of domestic abuse**

Age and Gender (Grouped)	People who carry out domestic violence against women are enabled and worsened by sexism in wider society	People who carry out domestic violence against domestic violence against women are just ‘bad people’, it’s not a reflection of wider society	Neither	Don’t know
Male 16-24	32.8%	34.4%	10.7%	22.1%
Male 25-49	31.1%	40.5%	9.0%	19.4%
Male 50-64	32.6%	46.1%	9.2%	12.2%
Male 65+	34.0%	39.5%	11.0%	15.4%
Female 16-24	58.8%	20.5%	3.9%	16.8%
Female 25-49	46.6%	27.0%	5.7%	20.8%
Female 50-64	45.6%	32.7%	7.2%	14.5%
Female 65+	41.1%	28.9%	10.1%	20.0%
All	39.6%	34.2%	8.3%	17.9%

p<.001 p<.01 p<.05 p<.10 p<.10 p<.05 p<.01 p<.001

## 5. Attitudes to abusive behaviours

### 5.1 Scenarios tested

#### a) Physical and sexual abuse

**Scenario 1:** This scenario tests the acceptability of marital rape and the experimental scenario tests the difference where the woman initiates the encounter.

1: *“A married couple have just been at a party. When they go home the man kisses his wife and tries to have sex with her. She pushes him away, but he has sexual intercourse with her anyway.”*

1a: *“A married couple have just been at a party. When they go home the wife kisses her husband and takes him to their bedroom. The husband tries to have sex with her. She pushes him away but he has sexual intercourse with her anyway.”*

**Scenario 2:** This scenario tests the acceptability of physical violence in an intimate relationship and the experimental scenario tests the impact of repentance on opinion.

2: *“A husband is upset with his wife because she forgot to tell him about an upcoming appointment that they have to attend. The conversation gets heated, and the husband ends up slapping his wife across the face.”*

2a: *“A husband is upset with his wife because she forgot to tell him about an upcoming appointment that they have to attend, the conversation gets heated, and the husband ends up slapping his wife across the face. He apologises to his wife afterwards and assures her it will never happen again.”*

#### b) Emotional and psychological abuse

**Scenario 3:** This scenario tests attitudes to sharing intimate photos online and the experimental tests change relating to the woman’s behaviour.

3: *“A woman sent some naked photos of herself to her boyfriend. After they split up, he posts the photo in an online forum, where it is circulated further.”*

3a: *“Now please imagine that the ex-girlfriend had started dating one of the man’s friends after they split up, which is what made him want to circulate the photos.”*

**Scenario 4:** This scenario tests attitudes to emotional manipulation and the experimental tests changes between threatened behaviour and an actual act.

4: *“A woman is at a work event where one of her new colleagues asks her out for a drink. She declines and explains that she is married. Later she tells her husband, he is upset and says he will not speak to her until she apologises”*

4a: *“Now please imagine that the wife does not apologise, so the husband ignores her for several days”*

**Scenario 5:** This scenario tests attitudes to continuous criticism and the experimental tests changes in gender roles.

5: *“Imagine a married couple who both work and contribute to household tasks equally. The husband often tells his wife that her contributions are not good enough and that she is not capable of doing it correctly”*

5a: *“Now please imagine that instead, the wife was criticising the husband...”*

**c) Controlling behaviours**

**Scenario 6:** This scenario tests attitudes to financial control and the experimental tests change relating to the woman’s behaviour.

6: *“A married couple who both work full time and earn similar salaries. The man insists on looking at his wife’s bank statements every month, but he does not let her see his own.”*

6a: *“Now please imagine that when checking the statements one month he notices a purchase he doesn’t recognise, and he asks his wife to explain why she made these purchases.”*

**Scenario 7:** This scenario tests attitudes to control over how the woman dresses and the experimental tests change relating to the woman’s previous infidelity.

7: *“A woman decides to sign up for a gym membership, when she tells her husband he tells her she does not need to go to the gym because he thinks she is already perfect, and he is concerned that she will attract a lot of male attention in the gym. As a compromise he agrees that she can go to the gym if he can check that her gym outfits are not too revealing before each session.”*

7a: *“Please imagine that the wife had previously cheated on the man. Please use the scale to tell us what you think of the man’s behaviour now?”*

**d) Stalking and harassment**

**Scenario 8:** This scenario tests attitudes to the use of tracking software and the experimental tests change relating to the type of software used.

8: *“Imagine a man installs software on his wife’s phone without her knowledge. The software enables him to track his wife’s location on his phone”*

8a: *“Imagine a man installs software on his wife’s phone without her knowledge. The software enables him to track his wife’s location on his phone. He can access all her personal data (like photos, videos, emails and texts) from his phone.”*

**Scenario 9:** This scenario tests attitudes to stalking behaviour and the experimental tests change relating to the man’s mental health.

9: *“Imagine a woman broke up with her boyfriend a few months ago. He wants to get back together, she does not. He has been sending her flowers and gifts to her work even though she has told him she does not want them”*

9a: *“Imagine a woman broke up with her boyfriend a few months ago. He wants to get back together, she does not. He has suffered mental health problems since their break-up and has been sending her flowers and gifts to her work even though she has told him she does not want them.”*

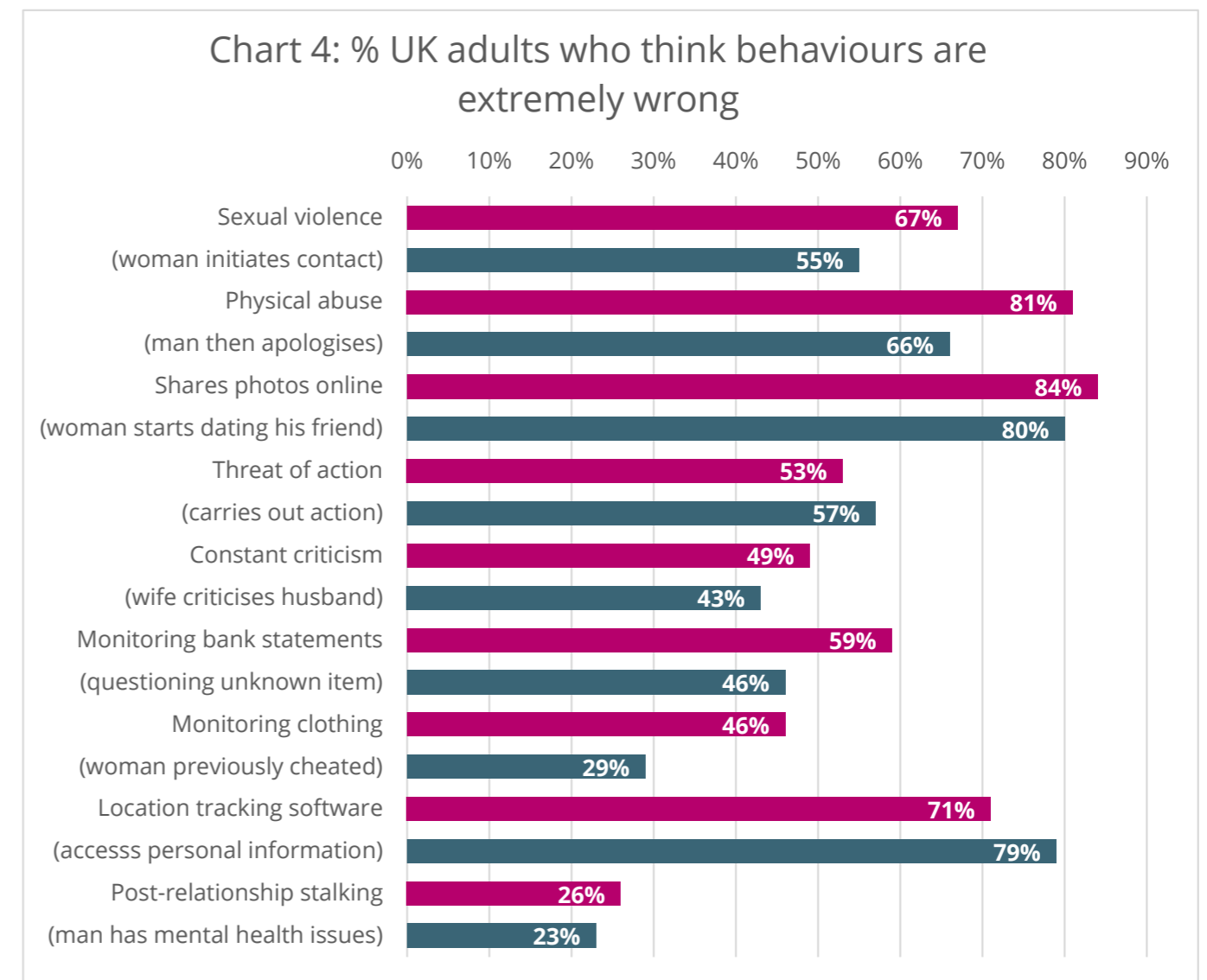
**5.2 Attitudes towards scenarios**

**Perceptions of ‘wrongness’ in behaviours**

Participants were asked to rate how wrong they feel the husband’s behaviour to be using a Likert scale from “not at all wrong” to “extremely wrong”. We looked at the percentage who perceive the behaviour to be extremely wrong to see variation depending on the type of behaviour.

In each of the scenarios we saw a statistically significant difference between the original and the experimental version. This gave us extensive insight into what drives UK adults to feel domestic abuse is more or less tolerable. Chart 4 gives an overview of each scenario for comparison.

**Chart 4: % UK adults who think behaviours are extremely wrong**



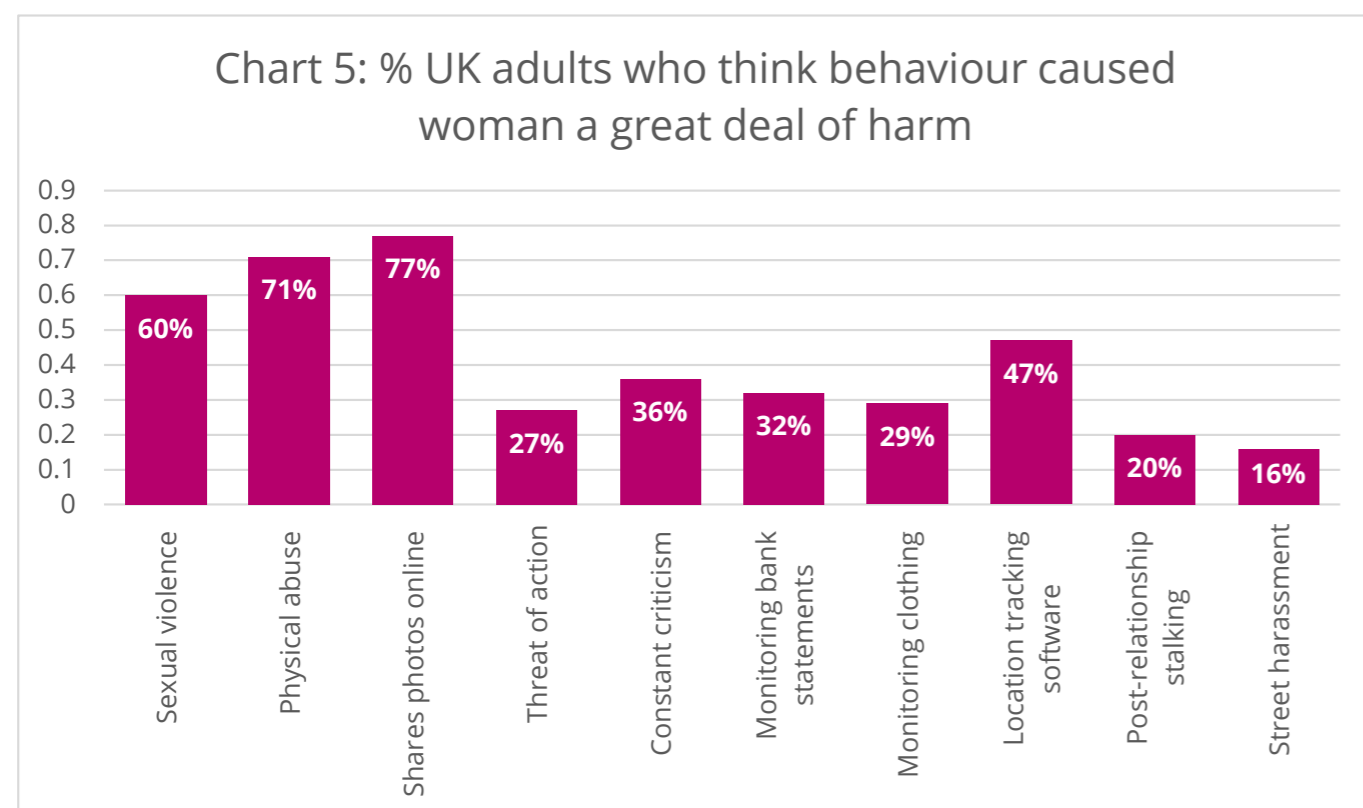
### Perceptions of harm caused by behaviours

Participants were asked to rate the level of harm they perceive being caused to the wife as a result of the husband's behaviour using a Likert scale from "no harm at all" to "a great deal of harm". We looked at the percentage of people who perceive a great deal of harm was caused to see variation depending on the type of behaviour (Chart 5).

In a similar pattern to levels of 'wrongness', those behaviours classed as emotional/psychological abuse, controlling behaviour or stalking are perceived as less harmful than others. Again, sharing photos online is perceived as extremely harmful by the most people, even more so than physical or sexual violence.

This may indicate a need to increase understanding of the escalatory nature of domestic abuse and the harm caused by coercive control. Chart 5 gives an overview of each scenario for comparison.

**Chart 5: UK adults who think behaviour caused woman a great deal of harm**



### 5.3 Impact of demographic drivers on perceptions

There were a number of demographic drivers which consistently influenced attitudes to domestic abuse throughout the questions and tested scenarios.

#### Experiences of domestic abuse

Throughout most of the scenarios tested, those who report saying they have experienced domestic abuse<sup>6</sup> are significantly more likely, compared to those who have not, to believe that the man's behaviour is extremely wrong or that it caused the wife a great deal of harm. It is likely that empathy and experience contribute to this variation.

The notable exception to this is the "infidelity test" in scenarios 7 and 7a (see 6.3). This would indicate that even those who have experienced domestic abuse hold some views which put responsibility for the abuser's actions on the survivor.

#### Gender

Men are consistently less likely to report the husband's behaviour is extremely wrong and does a great deal of harm compared to women.

There were very clear gender differences throughout the research, for example, in scenario 5 which tests perception of continuous criticism. Women are significantly more likely than men to report that the man's behaviour in this scenario is extremely wrong (Female = 58%, Male = 39%) and to report the man's behaviour as causing a great deal of harm to his wife (Female = 44%, Male = 28%).

UK adults are less likely to believe the behaviour is extremely wrong when the scenario describes the wife criticising the husband (49%), compared to when the husband criticises the wife (43%). The gender variation extends to the experimental scenario, 51% of women and 36% of men feel the wife's behaviour is extremely wrong.

This may suggest there are sections of population who believe it is more acceptable for a woman to criticise her husband than it is for a husband to criticise his wife, however it may also reflect that people think a wife criticising her husband will cause him no harm as it will not be taken seriously by the husband as she does not hold the power in the relationship.

Men are also less aware of the facts around domestic abuse and what to do if someone they know experiences it (see 3.4). In the question on how people would support a friend experiencing domestic abuse, young men 16-24 are particularly likely to say that they would talk to her partner about the abuse (24% compared to 15% of all men and 4% of women who would be likely to help a friend).

Men were consistently less aware and more tolerant throughout the questions. This may be in part because they are less likely to experience it, it could also speak to structural inequality experienced by women. It also appears to highlight a gap in education and awareness raising around domestic abuse which men in particular would benefit from.

#### Age

Throughout most of the scenarios, young people (16-24) are more likely to report that they 'don't know' how wrong the man's behaviour was, or how much harm was done to the woman. This indicates a need to further educate young people on these topics, and to ensure this is also available for young men.



Young women held very strong negative attitudes towards the man's behaviour in the marital rape scenarios (1 & 1a) but were also less likely than most other female age groups to believe the man's behaviour is extremely wrong when he slapped his wife (scenario 2/2a).

Young adults (16-24) were consistently the least likely to believe that the described behaviour is extremely wrong and this is particularly apparent across the set of scenarios exploring controlling behaviour. This variation is closely linked to gender and is predominantly driven by young men who consistently show more tolerance and less awareness than women in the same age group. As little as 5% of this group believed the man's behaviour to be extremely wrong in scenario 7a where the husband monitored his wife's clothing choices after she had cheated on him.

Age is a complex demographic when looking to understand attitudes and perceptions. Unlike other demographic drivers, we all pass through each age group during our lives so looking at the findings set out in this report alone does not tell us whether variation is generational or linked to a 'time in our lives'. For example, older men are less likely than the younger age groups to find sexist football chants acceptable, but the research does not tell us what they felt when they were younger.

Age intersects with other factors such as education level and the research also identifies a correlation between education and likelihood to believe that the man or woman's behaviour is extremely wrong.

Adults with a higher level of formal education were most likely to believe that the husband's behaviour is extremely wrong in most scenarios compared to those with a low level of formal education. This could be attributed to a number of factors such as educators addressing inequality, exposure to wider demographics through higher education and can also be linked back to age and life experience. Further detailed analysis of the survey data alongside qualitative research will develop this insight further.

## 5.4 Impact of attitudinal drivers on perceptions

As outlined in the methodology, we asked a series of questions to determine attitudinal drivers. The research shows that these attitudinal drivers are key to understanding acceptance/tolerance of domestic abuse as we see significant variances in opinion based on these drivers throughout participants' responses.

### ***Stereotypical views of gender roles and underlying misogynistic views***

Across all questions and scenarios difference of opinion is observed between those who have underlying misogynistic views (see 4.1) and those who do not. This is also observed in almost<sup>7</sup> all scenarios between those who hold stereotypical views of gender roles (see 4.2) and those who do not. In the scenario testing, both groups are less likely to believe the man's behaviour is extremely wrong and that it caused the wife a great deal of harm. They also show less awareness of the prevalence of domestic abuse (see 3.1), being more likely to believe it is not common than any other group.

This suggests that perceptions about the wider roles and responsibilities of men and women impacts how people perceive domestic abuse and, by extension, that tackling gender stereotypes may be an effective way to reduce tolerance of domestic abuse and sexual abuse.

### ***Belief that domestic abuse is just 'bad people'***

It is certainly the case that perpetrators bear individual responsibility for their actions, they alone make their choices. However, understanding the structural inequalities which underpin and enable their behaviour is also key to understanding the dynamics of power and control behind domestic abuse and the context within which abusers can thrive. Without understanding inequalities and power dynamics at a societal level we also fail to understand the additional impacts and harms caused to Black and minoritised survivors, disabled survivors or those from the LGBT+ community.

It is interesting, therefore, to observe the significant variation in perceptions between these two groups. Those who believe that domestic abuse is just carried out by 'bad people' are also consistently less likely to believe the husband's behaviour is extremely wrong and that it caused the wife a great deal of harm than people who believe that people who carry out domestic abuse are enabled and worsened by sexism in society. Further analysis of the survey data, supported by qualitative research, can further explore this variation and what it means in terms of combatting attitudes and perceptions which enable abusers.

## 6. Barriers to eradicating tolerance

Whilst the majority of people believe all of the behaviours to be wrong to some extent, more detailed analysis by sub-groups, differences between scenarios and looking at changes in attitudes between original and experimental versions of the scenarios brings further insight. To understand the relationship between survivors' behaviour and perceptions of domestic abuse, our scenarios test the impact of changes to the survivor's actions within the experimental scenarios. Analysis of the change in percentage of adults who find the behaviour extremely wrong between the scenarios highlights a number of key beliefs which appear to enable tolerance of domestic abuse. We measured the drop in the percentage rating the man's behaviour as extremely wrong in both cases.

### 6.1 Some types of abuse are viewed as more tolerable than others

There are clear differences in people's perception of how wrong the abuser's behaviour was between scenarios (Chart 4). Of all the behaviours sharing photos online was seen as extremely wrong by the most people (84%), followed by the physical abuse scenario (81%). All types of abuse form part of a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour, though certain behaviours could be perceived by some people as having a lesser impact as an isolated incident. For example, criticising someone's contribution to household tasks or not speaking to them in response to an action out of their control. The research findings show that these behaviours, whilst contributing to a pattern of abuse which may escalate over time, were less likely to be perceived as extremely wrong (see 6.2).

#### **Sexual violence in intimate relationships is downplayed compared to physical abuse**

UK adults are more likely to report that the man's behaviour is extremely wrong and that it caused the wife a great deal of harm when the scenario described physical abuse (Chart 4: S2 = 81% & S2a = 71%) as opposed to sexual abuse (Chart 4: S1 = 67%; S1a = 55%).

It would appear that the harm caused by sexual violence and rape is downplayed compared to physical abuse. This is despite rape carrying much harsher maximum penalties in the justice system compared to slapping someone's face. It is clear that we need more than the justice system to change attitudes towards sexual violence. There are likely to be prevailing myths about what rape is, particularly within an intimate relationship. Marital rape was only criminalised as recently as 1991 and for many rape is a crime committed by strangers<sup>8</sup>.

*"All I know is I was treated like a piece of meat. Used for sex whenever he wanted, most days and was told I was his property so he could do what he wanted to me. I felt worthless and powerless."* – **Survivor talking about the impact of sexual abuse in an intimate relationship**

### **Perceptions of different forms of control**

The majority (59%) of UK adults believe that the man checking his wife's bank statements and not allowing her to check his is extremely wrong (S6). While less than half (46%) of UK adults believe that the husband checking his wife's clothes before she goes to the gym is extremely wrong (S7). (See Chart 3)

While both scenarios describe forms of controlling behaviour, it appears that the UK public perceive controlling behaviours related to finances to be less acceptable than controlling behaviours related to self-expression and clothing, especially if it is presented as well intentioned, as is the case in Scenario 7.

*"It isn't easy to leave because that person destroys your version of reality and sense of self therefore trapping you completely until you build up enough evidence and courage to see they are wrong."* – **Survivor talking about the impact of controlling behaviour**

### **Perceptions of different forms of harassment**

The majority (79%) of UK adults believe that the husband placing a location tracker on his wife's phone without her knowledge is extremely wrong (S8). Whilst only 26% of UK adults believe that a man sending unwanted gifts and flowers to an ex-girlfriend's work place is extremely wrong (S9).

This suggests that covert monitoring of a partner is seen as a more recognisable form of harassment than in the form of unwanted gifts, which may even be more commonly perceived by the public as a romantic gesture, rather than an act of harassment and/or stalking, without appreciating dynamics of power and control that surround this behaviour.

*"The constant stalking, questioning, accusations - making it difficult to see friends and punishing you for doing things without them. You change your behaviour so as not to trigger abuse from them..."* – **Survivor talking about the impact of stalking**

### **Tech-facilitated abuse**

Two of our scenarios featured tech-facilitated abuse. One featured sharing photos online without consent (3/3a) and the other installing tracking software (8/8a) without knowledge. UK adults are likely to think the behaviour is extremely wrong in both these scenarios compared to other forms of abuse, (84%/80% in 3/3a and 71%/79% in 8/8a), the first and third highest percentage of people in the original scenarios.

We have seen an increasing reliance on technology across society which may contribute to the importance placed on abuses of such resources. This has become even more pronounced since the Covid-19 pandemic. Women's Aid research with survivors showed that the abuse of technology, including restrictions on or removal of tech, played a key role in women's experiences of domestic abuse during the pandemic<sup>9</sup>.

*"He has hacked my account several times and watches my conversations. I am conscious of speaking to anyone about him via social media or messenger."* – **Survivor talking about the impact of tech abuse**

## 6.2 Perceptions of domestic abuse as isolated incidents masks the impact of a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour

We have seen (6.1) that certain types of abuse are perceived as more wrong or harmful than others, and that those more typically associated with patterns of control are broadly perceived as less wrong or harmful. The research also indicates a common perception of isolated incidents rather than a pattern of behaviour which can minimise the perceived impact of harm caused by abuse. Coercive and controlling behaviour is at the heart of domestic abuse and has been a specific criminal offence since the end of 2015. Coercive control is defined in statutory guidance as “a purposeful pattern of behaviour which takes place over time in order for one individual to exert power, control or coercion over another” (Home Office, 2015). These are abusive actions designed to limit a person’s freedom and autonomy and to dictate most aspects of a survivor’s everyday life. A need for wider and more consistent understanding is evident in the fact that we see a relatively small number of reports and convictions compared to the prevalence of domestic abuse. There were 33,954 offences of coercive control recorded by the police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2021 and just 706 defendants prosecuted and 374 offenders convicted of controlling or coercive behaviour in the year ending December 2020 in England and Wales (where controlling or coercive behaviour was the principal offence)<sup>10</sup>.

### Impact of pattern of behaviour/threat vs action

UK adults are less likely to perceive verbal abuse as wrong and harmful, compared to other actions which may be classified as emotional or psychological abuse, such as sharing explicit images. A much greater proportion of the population believe that the man sharing explicit images in scenario 3 is extremely wrong (84%) compared to scenario 4 where the husband demands an apology from his wife (53%) and scenario 5 where the husband repeatedly criticises his wife (49%). People are also significantly more likely to believe that the man’s behaviour is extremely wrong when he ignored his wife (S4a = 57%) for several days, versus when he only threatened to ignore her (S4 = 53%).

These attitudes are also reflected in the perceptions of harm caused by these actions, 77% of UK adults believe that the man’s behaviour in scenario 3 caused the ex-partner a great deal of harm, compared to 27% in scenario 4 and 36% in scenario 5.

The findings suggest that more awareness of the impact of a pattern of control and continuous criticism is needed. There are proportions of the population who distinguish between the threat of a particular form of treatment and the actual act, perceiving the threat to be more acceptable. We know anything where a perpetrator makes someone change their actions to pacify him is an act of control and has a significant impact on the fear experienced by the survivor.

*“Emotional abuse gradually erodes who you are, the wounds can be deep and can take a long time to heal.” – Survivor talking about the impact of a pattern of emotional abuse*

### ‘Wrong’ versus perceived harm and escalation

In scenario 8/8a, important differences arose between the numbers of respondents who believe the scenario to be ‘extremely wrong’ (71%), and who perceive it to cause the woman a great deal of harm (47%). This could suggest that the UK public view the initial behaviour to be wrong because it is a breach of trust or privacy in a general sense, rather than appreciating the safety implications that this behaviour may have on the woman. Equally, the behaviour demonstrated by the husband

in scenario 8a, when the software installed could also access the wife’s personal data as well as her location, was believed to be ‘extremely wrong’ by more people (79%) than scenario 8.

This suggests that when assessing how acceptable this behaviour is, that there are breaches of trust and privacy that are perceived as more acceptable than others. This is potentially a very harmful misconception which does not account for the escalatory nature of domestic abuse.

## 6.3 Significant proportions of the population hold some survivors responsible for the abuse they experience

*“I was called names and experienced victim blaming for going back to my abuser after it first came out that he was abusing me. It isn’t as easy as just ending a relationship. I tried to end the relationship previously and he threatened to kill himself and pulled out a knife” – Survivor explaining what they would like people to know about domestic abuse*

This report highlights the prevalence of views that survivors should report to police or seek formal support, and that it is not ‘our place’ to get involved in other people’s relationships (see 3.3 and 3.4), putting the onus on survivors and not on the wider community to address domestic abuse. As noted in those sections, there is a risk that these views may place undue responsibility on survivors to report abuse formally, and negative judgement on those who don’t. This perception may contribute to the prevalence of a culture of “victim blaming” towards survivors.

Scenarios 1/1a, 3/3a, 6/6a and 7/7a tested the impact of four examples of changes in the woman’s behaviour. Our findings show that significant numbers of UK adults seem to place responsibility on the victim for the perpetrator’s actions. The findings from this analysis indicate that the behaviour of the woman is an important factor when determining how acceptable the public perceive domestic abuse to be.

### Sexual conduct

This is first seen in scenario 1/1a which measures attitudes towards sexual abuse. The UK public believe that the man’s behaviour is more acceptable in the experimental version, where the woman initiates sexual contact. When the woman initiates contact there was an overall drop from 67% to 55% (12%) in those who felt the behaviour was extremely wrong. This drop could be in part due to the public believing that that wife is responsible for the incident because she initiated the sexual contact, therefore reducing how wrongful the husband’s behaviour is perceived to be.

Interestingly, one of the largest drops was observed in the cohort which placed VAWG in the top three priority issues for government over the next 12 months. Whilst this group are more likely to report that the man’s behaviour was extremely wrong, they also changed their opinions quite significantly between scenarios. 81% of this group reported that the man’s behaviour was extremely wrong in when the man had sexual intercourse with his wife after she had pushed him away, compared to only 66% in when the wife initiated the sexual contact – a 15% drop.

The findings reflect the need for improved public understanding of the crime of rape. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 is clear that if one person has sex with another who has not agreed to it, it is rape. The absence of consent is the defining factor. The absence of consent can be to one form of penetration, although there has been agreement to other sexual activity<sup>11</sup>.



### **Retaliatory action**

We see further evidence of the impact of the woman's behaviour in scenario 3/3a. Participants are significantly less likely to believe the man's behaviour is extremely wrong when he shared explicit images of his ex-partner after she had started dating his friend (S3 = 84% and S3a = 80%).

Younger adults aged 16-24 are significantly less likely than all other age groups to believe that the man's behaviour is extremely wrong (72%). This is particularly true of young men, just 61% say the man's behaviour is extremely wrong. However, older UK adults were the most likely to change their opinion when we added to the scenario that the woman was now dating the man's friend. We observed a drop of 8% amongst women aged 65+ and of 6% amongst men aged 65+.

### **Justification for control**

Scenario 6/6a looked at financial control and tested how perceptions change when the man's monitoring of his wife's finances seemed to be 'justified' by finding a transaction he didn't recognise.

The UK public believe it's more acceptable for the husband to ask his wife about a purchase he does not recognise whilst monitoring her bank statements (extremely wrong = 46%), than it is for him to simply insist on looking at the statements every month (extremely wrong = 59%) a 13% drop. The biggest shift in opinion is observed among UK adults who hold stereotypical views of gender roles. The percentage who viewed the behaviour as extremely wrong dropped by 24% (from 52% to 28%) amongst this group.

This would also suggest that the UK public is less concerned about the man interrogating his wife about her purchases than the man monitoring her statements, despite the fact that the latter behaviour is arguably more controlling and more intrusive. This could potentially be due to a need for more understanding of the nature of controlling behaviour, or perhaps a misconception that the husband is justified in asking the question because he does not recognise the transaction and this overrides his intrusion by monitoring her statements.

### **Infidelity**

Scenario 7/7a tested the impact on perception of the wife's infidelity. People believe it is more acceptable for the husband to control what his wife wears, if she has previously cheated on him (a 17% drop). When asked how wrong the husband's behaviour is when he insists his wife can only go to the gym if he can check that her gym outfits are not too revealing before each session, 46% said it was extremely wrong. This fell to just 29% in the experimental scenario when we added that the wife had previously cheated on her husband.

Amongst adults who have experienced domestic abuse, 51% feel that the man's behaviour in the initial scenario is extremely wrong. This is significantly more than those who have not experienced domestic abuse (45%). This group is also significantly more likely to think the behaviour caused a great deal of harm (32% compared to 27%).

However, in the experimental scenario this variation disappears. There are no significant differences in response based on previous experience of domestic abuse, in terms of believing that the man's behaviour is extremely wrong if the wife was unfaithful. It is interesting to consider how the disparity between the original and experimental versions of scenario 7/7a is greater for women than it is for men. In other words, a greater percentage of women now view the husband's

behaviour as more acceptable when the woman has cheated than men (a 21% drop for women and a 14% drop for men). This may suggest that women may be more susceptible towards this kind of controlling behaviour in a relationship when they believe themselves to have done something wrong. It may also be a result of the differences in traditional expectations of fidelity for men and women.

## **6.4 The actions and feelings of the abuser also impact perception**

We know from previous research that a common narrative which excuses male perpetrators is around their mental health and state of mind and the time of the abuse.

"when male perpetrators were associated with mental ill health it appeared to mean that they were seen in a more sympathetic light, as men overcome by illness or problems. This focus diverts from important discussions about the harm they were causing through their perpetration of abuse and violence and excused perpetrator's abusive behaviours as being the 'understandable' consequence of their mental health problems." (Gendered Experiences of Domestic Abuse, Women's Aid et al)<sup>12</sup>

This may help to explain the change in percentage of adults who find the behaviour extremely wrong between the original and experimental scenarios in 2/2a and 9/9a.

### **An apology changes perception**

Scenario 2/2a measures the impact on perception when the man apologises after an act of physical violence. The results show a drop from 81% to 66% (15%) in the percentage of people who view the behaviour as extremely wrong with the addition of the apology.

The change in tolerance when the man apologises for slapping his wife indicates that when a perpetrator shows remorse their behaviour is viewed as less wrongful by the UK public. This suggests that the woman's safety, or harm caused to her, may be de-prioritised in favour of acknowledging a show of remorse.

This shift in perception could also be influenced by the misconception that physical abuse is a momentary loss of control, rather than a conscious choice. Incidents such as this are part of a wider pattern of behaviour which creates a context of fear and control which has a wide ranging and lasting impact on survivors.

### **Mental health and harassment**

Scenario 9/9a measures change in perception when participants are asked to consider the man's mental health. The UK public are less likely to believe that the man's behaviour is extremely wrong in the experimental scenario (23%) which described him as suffering with mental health issues following his breakup compared to the original (26%). This was particularly the case amongst young adults (16-24), with only 15% responding that the behaviour was 'extremely wrong' in the experimental version.

This suggests that members of the UK public, and particularly younger people, may believe the behaviour is more acceptable if the man has mental health issues. There could be a number of reasons why this behaviour is perceived as more acceptable; it could be because the public take a more sympathetic view towards the man, or believe that this diminishes his responsibility.

## 7. Conclusion

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Whilst the vast majority of UK adults feel that the behaviours in our scenarios are wrong, to some extent, it is clear from detailed analysis that attitudes which enable and excuse domestic abuse to continue are still worryingly prevalent in the UK.

Our research gives invaluable insight into which beliefs and values which are shared with a tolerance for domestic abuse. Understanding this is essential for informing work to end this form of violence against women. The findings support the view that acceptance of domestic abuse is supported by sexism in society. We establish that those with stereotypical views of gender roles and underlying misogynistic views are more tolerant of the impact of domestic abuse and less aware of its nature. It is possible therefore that by addressing misogyny we can directly improve understanding of domestic abuse, and vice versa.

Those with a belief that the root cause of domestic abuse is in the individual rather than societal inequality are less likely to see the harm caused by abusive behaviours or understand it as a pattern of behaviour. This shows us that as we raise awareness of coercive and controlling behaviour, and the societal norms which underpin domestic abuse, we can also raise awareness of the harm it causes and reduce its tolerance.

Looking at key demographic drivers of these attitudes which are identified in this report gives further insight into how we might address these harmful attitudes which underpin tolerance of domestic abuse. By looking at understanding across age bands and education level we can suppose that increased awareness reduces tolerance. The fact that men are consistently less likely to see abusive behaviour as wrong, and less likely to see the harm it does, indicates that education and awareness may have been directed largely at women and girls in the past. This research shows the need for this to change if we are to change attitudes to domestic abuse.

Of course, formal education is not the only way we become more aware of relevant issues, though it is certainly a part of the puzzle. The fact that men are significantly less likely to have experienced any of the abusive behaviours we asked about (Table 4) suggests that personal experience also has a significant impact on people's acceptance of domestic abuse. This is further supported by the finding that those who had experienced some form of domestic abuse were consistently more likely to see the behaviour as wrong and harmful.

We see, through this research, that sexist narratives play a key part in factors which influence perception, and tolerance of domestic abuse.

### **The myth of the perfect victim.**

The idea that if a woman does not present a certain way, she is culpable in the behaviour of her abuser, is prevalent throughout our findings. Actions seen as 'bad behaviour' such as infidelity are seen as justification for abuse. This would indicate that victim blaming is still pervasive and needs to be addressed as the UK public's attitude towards domestic abuse is influenced by the behaviour of the person being abused. Sexist narratives and attitudes towards gender roles, particularly expectations of women around fidelity and sexuality<sup>13</sup>, play a key part in these perceptions which is evidenced by the prevalence of findings relating to victim blaming in this report.

### **Prioritisation of men's wellbeing over harm to women.**

We see through this research that the impact or harm of particular types of abuse, notably sexual abuse and control, are downplayed. We also see that the impact of men's actions, for some people, is used to excuse abusive behaviour. This was apparent in our scenarios where the men could be perceived as repentant or well intentioned, and where their own mental health was impacted by the end of the relationship.

### **The concept of coercive control is not widely understood.**

Throughout this report we highlight findings which point to a need for a greater understanding of the nature of domestic abuse. This includes that domestic abuse is underpinned by a pattern of power and control, which perpetrators use to control, manipulate and instil fear, rather than being an isolated incident. The impact on survivors of living in fear of an abuser's actions or threats and the escalatory nature of domestic abuse are not widely understood. Without understanding of this it may be that people are less aware of why survivors do not leave, or do not immediately recognise they are experiencing domestic abuse. In turn this misconception is likely to be a key enabler of tolerance of domestic abuse.

### **False perception of increase in abuse results from large amounts of news coverage which distracts from root cause.**

While coverage of domestic abuse in the news is important, the sheer volume of domestic abuse means that it in itself is not considered 'news', and news angles such as perceived increases or spikes are focused on. What this means, is that there is an acceptance that there is an ongoing level of domestic abuse that is not newsworthy, and to an extent tolerated because it is an everyday occurrence. To move domestic abuse from the tolerable to the intolerable, we must shift the way we talk about domestic abuse publicly, and focus on the root causes and belief systems that underpin it.

Recent work, including training news rooms, and work with IPSO as the press regulator, have helped in driving up standards in news reporting. However, the scale of domestic abuse in the news is significant, and within a 24 hour news cycle, the task is vast. Also, it must be combined with other public awareness, to increase the depth of understanding.

This research shows that societal sexism and victim blaming can enable and excuse domestic abuse. To challenge these, we must come together across society and communities, to raise awareness and increase understanding. This must stem from education about healthy relationships, and be present in our storytelling, whether in TV scripts or magazine features. The way that the public understand domestic abuse is influenced in a wide range of ways, and to address the issue we need to identify the pockets of opportunity we have to reframe the understanding. Only then can we ask the general public, with the knowledge of what causes domestic abuse, how we can together go about making it truly intolerable and what that difference will look like. The Come Together campaign aims to do exactly this, and bring people together on the basis that none of us can achieve this alone. To achieve the public buy-in we need to achieve our goal, we need to change the stories that influence the way that we think about abuse, to challenge the myths and deep-rooted sexism that exists throughout society, so that the change we want to see can come from a place of wider understanding and empathy.

## Endnotes

- 1 [https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-attitudes-violence-against-women-scotland/#:-:text=Women%20\(58%25\)%20were%20more,male%20victims%20of%20verbal%20abuse.](https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-attitudes-violence-against-women-scotland/#:-:text=Women%20(58%25)%20were%20more,male%20victims%20of%20verbal%20abuse.)
- 2 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice>
- 3 [Women's Aid \(2019\) The Domestic Abuse Report 2019: The Economics of Abuse. Bristol: Women's Aid.](#)
- 4 [Women's Aid \(2022\) The Domestic Abuse Report 2022: The Annual Audit, Bristol: Women's Aid.](#)
- 5 [Misogyny: showing feelings of hating women or a belief that men are much better than women](#)
- 6 [Those who answered yes to having experienced one or more behaviour classed as domestic abuse \(see 3.2\)](#)
- 7 [No significant difference observed in scenarios 4 and 9](#)
- 8 [https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Stern\\_Review\\_of\\_Rape\\_Reporting\\_1FINAL.pdf](https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Stern_Review_of_Rape_Reporting_1FINAL.pdf)  
<https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/1-Attitudes-to-sexual-consent-Research-findings-FINAL.pdf>
- 9 [\(Women's Aid 2022\). Technology and domestic abuse: Experiences of survivors during the Covid 19 pandemic. Bristol: Women's Aid.](#)
- 10 [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\). \(2021\). Domestic abuse prevalence and trends, England and Wales: year ending March 2021. Published online: ONS](#)
- 11 [https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Stern\\_Review\\_of\\_Rape\\_Reporting\\_1FINAL.pdf](https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Stern_Review_of_Rape_Reporting_1FINAL.pdf)
- 12 [Women's Aid, Hester, M., Walker, S-J., and Williamson, E. \(2021\) Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse. Evidence for policy and practice. Bristol: Women's Aid](#)
- 13 [Women's Aid, Hester, M., Walker, S-J., and Williamson, E. \(2021\) Gendered experiences of justice and domestic abuse. Evidence for policy and practice. Bristol: Women's Aid](#)

**Come Together to End Domestic Abuse:** a survey of UK attitudes to domestic abuse 2022

Women's Aid Federation of England,  
PO Box 3245, Bristol, BS2 2EH

E: [info@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:info@womensaid.org.uk) W: [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

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For help and support, you can access Women's Aid's direct services, including our **Live Chat**, the **Survivors' Forum** and the **Survivor's Handbook**, at [www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support)