



The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence  
An Oifig Náisiúnta um Fhoréigean Baile, Gnéasach agus Inscnebhunaithe a Chosc

## Attitudes to Domestic Abuse in Ireland

*Report of a survey on perceptions and beliefs of  
domestic abuse among the general population of Ireland*

*Executive Summary*

## Executive Summary

Domestic abuse affects all types of people in Irish society (Watson and Parsons, 2005). Support services for victims<sup>1</sup> of domestic abuse are provided by State and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). However, research has shown that victims are reluctant to seek help and continue to suffer. Attitudes and beliefs about violence are critical in deciding what kind of support victims will get from family, friends, and neighbours as well as from State and Non-Governmental Organisations.

State and Non-Governmental Organisations are working together to improve preventive and responsive actions. In order to inform these improvements Cosc – The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence - decided to undertake a study of public attitudes to domestic abuse. This research sets out to gauge attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and behaviour around domestic abuse in two respects. First the study analyses various facets of people’s awareness of the problem among men and women in contemporary Ireland. A second research area examined is the public’s willingness to act or respond should they encounter domestic abuse at some point in their lives.

The survey undertaken for this study builds on national and international research. The study covers the perceptions of the seriousness of domestic abuse, understandings of the phenomenon and the perceptions of impact on men and women. The study also covers the most likely responses and the rationale underpinning these when people are asked to consider what they would do if they were to witness domestic abuse.

The data arising from this survey have the potential to serve as a baseline from which to measure the effectiveness of awareness raising, education, prevention and intervention strategies developed and/or applied in Ireland in the future. Repeating this survey on a regular basis would facilitate the systematic tracking of attitudinal trends over time.

The study is based on a survey of a representative sample of 2,008 adults resident in Ireland. The data were collected by telephone interviews.

## How Common is Domestic Abuse?

» Just over 70 per cent of those surveyed said they consider domestic abuse against women to be a fairly or very common problem. This view was reported more often by women (81 per cent) than men (60 per cent), by younger than older age groups and by groups with lower education.

» Far fewer people consider domestic abuse against men to be common (42 per cent). In fact a greater share felt that it was not a common occurrence (54 per cent). Again, more women (50 per cent) than men (34 per cent) and groups with lower education regard domestic abuse against men as common. There is no indication that whether people live in a rural or urban setting is related to how widespread people think domestic abuse is.

<sup>1</sup> *There is much debate over what is the most appropriate term to identify a person who has experienced domestic and/or sexual abuse. Terminology ranges from “victim”, “victim/survivor” to “survivor”. Each of the terms defines the person in relation to the experience of abuse. From a legal point of view the term “victim” is often used as a statement of fact - i.e. the person being a victim of a crime. However, the use of this term is often criticised for its negative labelling and disempowering of those who have experienced abuse. The term “survivor” is often used by individuals and agencies to describe a person who has survived domestic and/or sexual abuse recognising their strength in living through and recovering from those events. The authors of this report recognise the complexities in using either/both terms. These terms are not to be confused as being synonymous with one another and so it is for this reason the authors of this report have opted for the term “victim” capturing as it does both the legal point of view highlighted above and the active role of the perpetrator of such abuses and its impact on the abused. By using the term “victim” throughout the report we do not intend to characterise or label people who have experienced domestic abuse in any negative way and we also very much recognise the resilience shown in surviving domestic abuse.*

» The share of people who reported domestic abuse against women to be increasing (46 per cent) was larger than those who felt there was no change (40 per cent) over the last 3 years in Ireland.

» In terms of the perception of change regarding domestic abuse against men, there is a relatively small difference between the share who report the problem as increasing (42 per cent) and those who regard it as unchanged (44 per cent).

» 44 per cent of people said they knew somebody who personally had been a victim of domestic abuse. A much greater share of respondents said they knew a woman (40 per cent) than a man (21 per cent) who had been subjected to domestic abuse. Women were more likely to report knowing a woman (41 per cent) and men were more likely to report knowing a man (23 per cent).

» The largest share of people who knew a woman victim was friends/acquaintances (36 per cent), followed by family members (28 per cent) and from work (14 per cent). Women were more likely to mention knowing a woman victim through their family, while work was the context most mentioned by men.

» The largest share of people who knew a man victim said they were a friend/acquaintance (41 per cent), a family member (23 per cent<sup>2</sup>) or that they knew them from a work context (17 per cent). Work as the situation for becoming aware of a victim was cited more frequently by both the younger and older age groups and by the better educated.

» Most respondents were not worried that they themselves or somebody close to them might become affected by domestic abuse (70 per cent). 32 per cent of women and 28 per cent were men were worried about this possibility. The youngest age group of women were the most concerned.

## What is Domestic Abuse?

This study examines if respondents find that particular behaviours such as slapping or punching a partner constitute domestic abuse, and under which circumstances they believe this to be the case.

» An overwhelming majority felt that all of the behaviours enquired about in the survey were, under all circumstances, forms of domestic abuse. The shares for each respective form of abuse in descending order were: forcing a partner to have sexual intercourse (more than 97 per cent), punching a partner (more than 97 per cent), slapping a partner (87 per cent) and finally calling a partner hurtful names (67 per cent).

» There were no substantial differences between men and women on forcing a partner to have sexual intercourse, punching a partner or slapping a partner. Overall, men (64 per cent) were less inclined to agree that calling hurtful names was a form of domestic abuse under all circumstance than women (71 per cent).

## Is Domestic Abuse a Criminal Offence or a Private matter?

» Of all respondents 88 per cent indicate a strong agreement and a further 9 per cent indicate some agreement that abuse in the domestic context is a criminal offence. People with higher levels of education are more likely to agree with this belief.

» Most people disagreed that domestic abuse is a private matter that should be dealt with in the family. Women (86 per cent) were more likely to hold this view than men (81 per cent), as were the more educated groups.

## How Does Domestic Abuse Affect Men and Women?

The research enquired about people’s views on the relative impact of domestic abuse on women compared to men. Respondents were first asked to consider the impact of physical harm, emotional harm and fear. They were then asked whether they thought domestic abuse was something more serious if the victim was a woman or a man.

» Overall the public considered women to suffer more physical harm than men (83 per cent). Women are also thought to suffer more emotional abuse than men (52 per cent). Fifty-three per cent of respondents felt that the fear arising from domestic abuse would be greater for women.

» In terms of slapping, 72 per cent think that it is equally serious whether a man slaps a woman or a woman slaps a man. Sixty-six per cent felt that punching a partner was equally serious whether the perpetrator was a man or a woman. Seventy-two per cent felt there is no differential impact between men and women when it comes to forcing a partner to have sexual intercourse. A man calling a woman hurtful names and a woman doing the same to a man is considered to be equally serious by most respondents (94 per cent). Women are more likely than men to consider slapping, punching and forced intercourse to be equally serious for women and men.

## Encountering Domestic Abuse: What would you do?

» When asked about what they would do if they suspected a friend was a victim of domestic abuse, 95 per cent said they would talk to their friend, 93 per cent would encourage the friend to contact a helpline, 87 per cent would encourage the friend to contact An Garda Síochána, 85 per cent would encourage their friend to contact a social worker, 77 per cent would ask the victim directly about the abuse, 74 per cent said they would speak with other friends about the problem, 43 per cent would report it to An Garda Síochána themselves and 35 per cent said they would speak with the perpetrator.

» 94 per cent of respondents said they would help a friend, 65 per cent said they would help a stranger and 38 per cent said they would help a neighbour being subjected to domestic abuse.

Respondents were also asked whether they think other people who had witnessed domestic abuse would report it to An Garda Síochána and if not, what the reasons would be.

» 74 per cent said that other people would be unlikely to report domestic abuse incidents to An Garda Síochána.

» In terms of reasons for not reporting, respondents greatest concern was the feeling they should not get involved in other people’s business (88 per cent), followed by fearing they might make matters even worse (75 per cent), that it might result in the removal of children from the family (73 per cent), that it would not improve the safety of those involved (70 per cent). Fifty-two per cent said that people feel An Garda Síochána would not treat the problem seriously enough.

The results conclude by examining respondents’ perceptions of the type of help they might receive if they were to visit a general practitioner if they had been subjected to domestic abuse.

» The majority (96 per cent) reported that a GP would give advice about where to get further help. This was followed closely by people feeling that the GP would understand the nature of the problem (93 per cent) and would record evidence of injuries (92 per cent).

## Conclusions

» A large majority of the Irish population exhibit high levels of awareness of the problem of domestic abuse. People perceive domestic abuse against women to be a common and increasing problem and have a broad definition of what constitutes domestic abuse.

» Domestic abuse is perceived to be more common among women and the consequences are perceived to be more severe for women than men.

» The findings support the view that the Irish population regards domestic abuse to be unacceptable.

» People feel responsible and are willing to intervene if they witness domestic abuse. However if the victim is somebody outside the family milieu, such as a neighbour that they don’t know well, people are reluctant to become involved. Not wanting to interfere in other people’s business and the concern or fear of making things even worse are the main reasons given for not intervening.

» There is little evidence pointing to significant changes in many attitudes to domestic abuse over the last ten years.

The survey provides a baseline for understanding public attitudes to domestic abuse in Ireland. Cosc will use this survey to inform work being undertaken to improve the system of prevention and response to domestic abuse in Ireland. This includes the development of accessible information for the public, to assist them in understanding, and being prepared to act to counter these crimes. The complete report of the survey, and more information on domestic, sexual and gender-based abuse, is available on [www.cosc.ie](http://www.cosc.ie).

<sup>2</sup> *This share reflects the shares for close family and extended family combined.*