The lacking awareness about domestic violence in adolescent relationships can also mean that the young people themselves are unaware of the fact that what they are experiencing is actually abuse, and that they can seek help.

Acknowledging and responding to violence and abuse within young people’s relationships is very beneficial in the long term if damaging patterns of behaviour can be changed at an early stage.

Evidence shows that abuse of all kinds within young people’s relationships is widespread. 1 in 5 teenage girls have been assaulted by a boyfriend.6

The UK government’s definition of domestic violence as “any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members, regardless of gender or sexuality” contributes to the limited awareness that domestic abuse is widespread within the relationships of young people who are not legally considered adults. It is important to note here however, that the Welsh Assembly Government does not specify that abuse only happens between adults.3

The lack of awareness of violence and abuse within young people’s relationships means that appropriate services which could offer support and advice to young people are scarce.

Whereas girls use violence predominantly for self-defence, boys mainly use violence as the primary aggressor to exert control over their partner.

Girls are more likely than boys to say that the violence was experienced repeatedly and also that it either remained at the same level of severity or worsened.

Being in a relationship with an older partner, and especially a ‘much older’ partner, is a significant risk factor for girls.

Overall, 75% of girls with a “much older” partner experienced physical violence, 80% emotional violence and 75% sexual violence.

Culturally specific forms of abuse such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation affect young women in particular. Support organisations addressing these issues have found that many service users are young women referred by schools.
The impact of abuse in young people’s relationships:

- In-depth research shows that girls report that abuse has a highly detrimental impact on their welfare, while more boys report being unperturbed.13

- In cases of sexual abuse, 70% of girls and 13% of boys stated that the abuse had negatively impacted on their welfare.13

- For girls, issues of self-blame are often prominent, especially in relation to sexual coercion, where girls can feel that they have “given in” to sexual pressure.4

- Confusion about what is happening is very common. A 19 year old girl who had been in an abusive relationship with a boy she had met at 13, told Women’s Aid England that

> I felt confused, I knew what was happening was wrong but I also didn’t know what was right. I had never been told what was normal in a relationship and I didn’t realise that it’s ok to say no and that he should have respected that.15

- Some studies have suggested that violence in teenage relationships can act as a precursor for violence in adult relationships.16

- Abuse within young people’s relationships can also have significant health impacts, especially on reproductive and sexual health:

> Abuse by an intimate partner is associated with higher levels of pregnancy and decreased condom use among sexually active female adolescents.17

- Young women’s mental health can also be severely affected; one study in the US found that young victims of severe physical abuse were more likely than non-victims to consider suicide.18

- Sexual abuse can result in sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and genital injuries as well as:

> Feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, anxiety, and fear; post-traumatic stress disorder; multiple somatic complaints.19

- Studies have shown that there is a high level of acceptance of abuse within young people’s relationships. One study has shown that 1 in 3 teenagers believe it is acceptable to be abusive to a partner.20

- A national survey conducted by the NSPCC found that 43% of teenage girls think it is acceptable for a boyfriend to get aggressive. Two thirds of those think cheating on a boy gives him the right to become aggressive towards his girlfriend.21

- Another study conducted in Scotland found that;

> 36% of boys think that they might personally hit a woman or force her to have sex.22

- The same study found that one in five young men believe that women ‘often’ provoke violence and almost two-thirds agree with the statement that:

> You have to stick up for yourself, and sometime this means getting violent.23

Young people’s attitudes towards abuse within relationships:

- 36% of boys think that they might personally hit a woman or force her to have sex.

- The same study found that one in five young men believe that women ‘often’ provoke violence and almost two-thirds agree with the statement that:

> You have to stick up for yourself, and sometime this means getting violent.
Today young people develop their social and sexual identities whilst being bombarded by images and messages that objectify women, celebrate sexual exploitation and normalise abusive behaviour.  

Some studies have suggested that the increasing sexualisation of young people, and girls in particular, has contributed to a society in which violence against women and girls is increasingly accepted.  

An online survey carried out by the National Union of Students during 2009 and 2010 of female students studying in the UK, found that one in seven survey respondents had experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their time as a student.  

Welsh data: The same survey found that 72% of respondents studying in Wales have experienced some kind of verbal or non-verbal harassment in and around their institution. This includes groping, flashing, and unwanted sexual comments.  

These statistics are representative of wider societal issues relating to women’s position in society and the normalisation of abusive behaviour.

Young victims of domestic abuse rarely disclose abuse, and those that do tend to turn to peers.  

There are several barriers that prevent young women from disclosing abuse within their relationships. These include fears that: disclosure may lead to an escalation of violence, they may not be believed or taken seriously, they may be judged or not treated sympathetically.  

Young mothers may have further fears that they may be regarded as bad mothers, and even have their children taken away if they disclose the abuse.  

Young women strive for independence, and consequently they will often avoid talking to parents or other adults about the abuse they are experiencing.  

Black and minority ethnic women and children in particular under-use services and have little awareness of what services are available. It therefore often takes them longer to seek help.  

Young women may be unused to having access to legal services or exercising their rights; they may therefore be unaware of the services they can turn to.

Media representation and sexualisation of children may influence teenagers’ understanding of relationships, reinforcing the belief that control and dominance within a relationship is normal or even romantic and desirable.  

It has been suggested that for some young women in abusive relationships, the desire to have a boyfriend, and the social acceptance that this brings, outweighs the desire to leave violent partners.  

Certain culturally specific concepts such as izzat (honour) and sharam (shame) can act as significant barriers to seeking help for young women from some BME communities.
### Publicity Campaigns

- In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to abuse within young people’s relationships and several campaigns have been launched. These campaigns have included:

  - **2010 Home Office campaign** - £2m TV, radio, internet and poster campaign as part of the government strategy announced in 2009 to reduce violence against women and girls. [http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk/](http://thisisabuse.direct.gov.uk/)

  - **2008 Women’s Aid England & Bliss magazine campaign – ‘Expect Respect’** - campaign featuring real life stories and videos of teenagers who have been directly affected by domestic violence, with stories being published both in Bliss and on [www.thehideout.org.uk](http://www.thehideout.org.uk) the Women’s Aid England website for children and young people.

### Useful Contacts:

- **Wales Domestic Abuse Helpline**  
  www.wdah.org.uk or 0808 80 10 800

- **Welsh Women’s Aid**  
  www.welshwomensaid.org
  Especially the STAR Programme for Teenagers

- **NSPCC**  
  www.nspcc.org.uk

- **Childline**  
  www.childline.org.uk

- **www.thehideout.org.uk**  
  Women’s Aid Website for Children experiencing domestic violence

- **www.respect4us.org.uk**  
  Interactive game and informative website for young people about issues including domestic violence, sexual bullying and sexual discrimination

- **www.freefromfear.org**  
  Birmingham Women’s Aid’s website for children experiencing domestic violence.

- **www.u-wales.org**

- **www.zerotolerance.org.uk**

- **www.teenrelationships.org/abuse**
Sources

3. Welsh Assembly Government, All Wales Domestic Abuse Strategy, 2005
7. Sugar magazine and NSPCC online survey 2005; Teen Abuse survey of Great Britain
8. Welsh Women’s Aid ‘Children, Young People & Domestic Abuse’

Sources

16. End Violence Against Women Poll, October 2010
17. NUS, 2010 ‘Hidden Marks: A study of women students’ experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault
18. NUS, 2010 ‘Hidden Marks: A study of women students’ experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault
19. Professor Liz Kelly, EVAW Chair, End Violence Against Women Coalition, Press Release 8th March 2010
25. e.g. Young Women’s Housing Project, Sheffield.
26. Bristol Domestic Abuse Forum - Summer Teenage Relationship Abuse Campaign
http://www.bdaf.org.uk/professionals/summer-teenage-relationship-abuse-campaign
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Alternative formats of this briefing are available on request. If you require this briefing in a different format, please contact us on 01495 742052 or rhiannon.griffiths@torfaenwomensaid.org.uk