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Authors	Bolton, Robert;Edwards, Claire;Leane, Máire;Ó Súilleabháin, Fiachra
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UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

‘I would love to do something about it.’: Young men’s role in addressing violence against women in Ireland

Abstract

This paper reports on how young people (aged 18-24) and stakeholders working in the area of violence against women (VAW) in Ireland, perceive young men’s role in addressing VAW. We find that men are considered well positioned to intervene as active bystanders and to engage in feminist allyship. However, several barriers to men’s active bystanding and engagement with the issue of VAW, as well as ethical, theoretical and practice issues, need to be considered. These include: the privileging of men’s willingness to listen to other men, thereby devaluing women’s perspectives; pluralistic ignorance where men feel other men do not share their discomfort of violence-supportive practices; and a tendency for men to default to confrontational modes of active bystanding. We highlight how these issues are even more pertinent to address given the presence of political forces that seek to stymie men’s support for feminist activism and causes related to gender politics.

Key messages

1. Equipping young men with positive, theoretically informed and evidence-based bystander intervention skills is considered vital in addressing men’s VAW.
2. The roll out of bystander intervention programmes generally and the introduction of better reporting policies in licensed venues is perceived as important in promoting an overall supportive culture of active bystanding.
3. Addressing the stigma associated with men’s support for activism, causes and concerns relating to feminism, gender and gender-based violence is identified as essential.

4. Appealing to intrinsic values such as ‘doing the right thing’ rather than ‘doing the manly thing’ may offer a way for men to engage in issues around VAW that are not based on protective masculinity and paternalism.

Key words/short phrases

Men’s violence against women; violence prevention; bystander intervention; young people

Introduction

Recent surveys and high-profile cases have drawn attention to the problem of violence against women (VAW) in Ireland, particularly amongst young people (Burke et al, 2020; Crowley, 2022; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2014; MacNeela et al, 2022; Women’s Aid, 2020). The term VAW is underpinned by an understanding that the violence that women experience relates to dominant patriarchal gender norms and gendered inequalities, which is evidenced in the way that this violence is mostly perpetrated by men (Flood, 2018). In addressing VAW therefore, there have been growing efforts to position men as ‘part of the solution’ (Fenton and Mott, 2017; Flood, 2018).

Developing this theme, this paper reports on findings from the Irish data of *PositivMasc*, a multicounty study that seeks to understand the discourses that young people (aged 18-24) use in their understandings of masculinity and VAW, and to explore both young people’s and stakeholders’ views on how positive, ‘anti-violence’ masculinities might be supported. In this paper, we deal with this latter theme by exploring the explicit and implicit ideas within young people’s and stakeholders’ narratives on the role that young men can play in addressing VAW.

Addressing Men’s VAW: the context of Ireland

Historically, victim-blaming and a focus on ‘avoidance strategies’ within sexual violence prevention programmes have implied that VAW is a ‘women’s issue’ (Rich et al, 2010: 270).

Although there is much work to be done to counteract victim-blaming, public protests in Ireland (see Riegel et al, 2018), media commentary (Crowley, 2022) and recent Irish government policy (Department of Justice, 2022) evidence a shift to a focus on perpetrators and men's role as both perpetrators and active bystanders in addressing VAW in Ireland. This aligns with an increasing recognition that boys and men can act as allies and proponents of gender transformation in efforts to address and prevent VAW (Flood, 2018). Scholars argue for men's involvement in gender justice because men perpetrate most acts of VAW; because constructions of masculinity shape men's disposition to use VAW; and finally, because men are in positions of power to champion change (Flood, 2018).

Bystander approaches have been conceived as one of several avenues to promote men's allyship and role in preventing VAW. These focus on enabling men to be 'active bystanders' who intervene in a positive way if they witness socio-negative events and practices (Kaya et al, 2020; Oesterle et al, 2018). This is because although men are less likely than women to intervene as bystanders (Kaya et al., 2020), they are also seen as more credible by other men (Flood, 2018). Therefore, men's active rejection of other men's violence-supportive behaviours is considered to play a key role in addressing VAW (Casey and Ohler, 2012).

More broadly, men's potential as activists is also seen as key in promulgating social change (Flood, 2018). This encompasses different forms of community mobilization and public pronouncements of allyship. In 2012 for example, SAFE Ireland, an organisation advocating for an end to domestic violence against women, launched the 'Man Up' national campaign which emphasised 'the positive and powerful role that men can play in ending domestic violence, in challenging abuse and supporting women and children' (SAFE Ireland, 2019). The Men's Development Network (2023) in Ireland also promotes the international White Ribbon Campaign which advances men's commitment to end gender-based violence.

The recent *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence* (Department of Justice, 2022) represents yet another example of a shift towards engaging men in relation to gender-based violence. The policy pledges to support sexual consent and bystander initiatives as well as campaigns such as White Ribbon ‘and other initiatives to engage men and boys in ending gender-based violence’ (Department of Justice, 2022: 6). Indeed, Prevention Pillar 1 of the policy specifically aims to:

Prioritise the development of effective approaches to engaging men and boys in tackling gender-based violence and changing male behaviour which supports a zero-tolerance attitude to violence against women. (Department of Justice, 2022: 7).

Aligned with this growing emphasis on the role of men in addressing VAW, this paper contributes to these developments by exploring young people’s and stakeholders’ views on young men’s role in addressing VAW.

Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with young people aged 18-24 and stakeholders who work in the arena of VAW or cognate areas. We recruited a convenience sample of 27 young people (12 men and 15 women) between January and May 2020 using a paid Facebook advert, an email advert sent to all students at a local university and snowball sampling. We provided a basic demographic sheet for participants to complete prior to the interviews. At the time of the interviews, eighteen of the young people were currently enrolled in or had completed, third level education. Seven were currently enrolled in or had completed secondary education. Two young men were Irish Naval cadets. The sample of young participants is thus slightly skewed to those who had experience of the university setting where specific forms of VAW are more likely to be experienced (e.g., Anitha et al, 2021; Gunby et al, 2020). The demographic sheet also asked about sexuality, but under half of participants chose to respond to this question: of

the 13 who did, ten described themselves as heterosexual and three as bisexual. While we recognise that participants' views and experiences may be shaped by other intersectional identities such as 'race' and disability, we did not collect this data as it was not the study's aim to explore in depth the influence of these identities on participants' perceptions.

The interviews focused on topics such as perceptions of gender, VAW and their ideas on how VAW can be addressed, including the specific role that young men can play in addressing VAW. We also recruited 14 individuals or stakeholders who work in the area or cognate areas of VAW. The interview explored topics such as how their respective organisations work to prevent VAW, how the organisation understands gender as a social construct and finally, ideas on how VAW can be addressed and the specific role that young men can play in addressing VAW.

We took a thematic analytic approach to the interview data (Saldaña, 2016). Identification of codes and themes was informed by our main question: What are young people's and stakeholders' perspectives on the role of young men in addressing VAW? We open coded the data and agreed on sorting these into more primary codes towards generating themes (Saldaña, 2016). The need to deconstruct dominant gender norms, challenge violence-supportive attitudes and beliefs, and how we can promote more positive or alternative forms of masculinities was a key theme in the data; however, this is not the subject of this paper due to space limitations. Instead, this paper focuses on another specific theme: young men's potential role as active bystanders and feminist allies. Ethical approval for the study was granted by University College Cork Social Research Ethics Committee and all names are pseudonyms.

Promoting men's capacities for active bystanding

Participants argued that men's active bystanding constitutes an important part of addressing VAW, as 'evil happens when good men stay silent' (James, stakeholder). It was clear through

the interviews that some young men recognise various situations as problematic and take the initiative to intervene. Young people reported examples of themselves (as men) engaging as active bystanders while others reported witnessing and/or knowing other men in their close social networks who have intervened in situations where a woman's physical and/or psychological comfort was threatened. Amy (female, 24) cited an example of male friends who put a stop to another man's harassment of her, which 'really meant a lot to me'. Cathal (male, 24) cited three examples of intervening on his part, one of which involved him physically reprimanding another man which resulted in Cathal being punched 'straight into the head', a point which we return to later. Philip (male, 23) described how he challenges victim-blaming beliefs expressed by individuals through social media, with the aim of showing others that there are alternative points of view:

Philip: If it's Facebook, I would get in arguments with them. I do it all the time.

Interviewer: Oh, on comments, is it?

Philip: Yeah...It's a constant war. But I do it all the time, basically. It's... not to like to convince them... It's more of you're trying to convince people who don't know much about it that they're not right... Because this person's already saying their mind, otherwise they wouldn't have commented something like they did. So it's more or less if anyone does come around this message, they'll at least see my responses and know that whatever he's saying isn't like proven in fact or whatever.

As Philip's narrative indicates, young men's role in addressing VAW can manifest as consciousness-raising of other men about the problem of VAW and the ideologies and beliefs that underpin it. Brian (male 24) for example, described how he used to use sexist insults such as 'what a bitch' or 'she's a cunt' 'when I was a teenager... if a girl or a woman, had like

wronged me'. However, he articulated how he has undergone considerable change in his attitudes and beliefs due to the intervention of a male peer:

I have a friend who actually has educated me a lot... And he explained to me like the origins of these words. And just even explaining like the social implications throughout history of like why we—like bitch is like because women were made to be—like they're made to look and feel that they're meant to serve and giving them these certain words almost made them less human almost, subservient almost.

Young men were perceived to be well positioned to engage in active bystanding based on the principle that 'men listen to other men' (Mark, stakeholder). They argued that men who are 'called out' by other men for socio-negative behaviour are more likely to desist than if a woman attempts the same thing. Amy's (female, 24) narrative, exemplifies both this point and many of the issues that other participants raised in relation to this theme:

... unfortunately, like, men respect what men say much more... You know, whereas if it was a girl, they'd be like, oh, ha, ha, it's just a laugh. Whereas with a guy it'd be like, oh, sorry, dude, I didn't realise that was your girlfriend—stuff like that, which really annoys me. You know, unfortunately, like, men do listen to other men more. Like even if a guy is like hitting on a girl and won't leave her alone, they'll only leave her alone when she's like, oh, no, I have a boyfriend. And then they like respect this imaginary guy more than the actual real person who's just said no.

Amy says 'unfortunately' as she and other participants believe and recognise that the deference that men give to other men is based on devaluing women's agency (Gunby et al, 2020), where a woman's challenging of unwanted or problematic behaviour is met with laughter from men. She, like other participants, also noted that one of several 'strategies of reworking' (Anitha et al, 2021: 2057) is to invoke a real or mythical boyfriend to deflect unwanted male attention (also Anitha et al, 2021; Gunby et al, 2020). Similar to other studies (Gunby et al, 2020), Amy's

narrative highlights how women are critical of this approach. She recognises the inequality embedded within this strategy, but argues that sometimes women are left with no other option but to say ‘I have a boyfriend even when you don’t’.

Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, participants also argued that men’s active bystanding potential needs to be destigmatised. Here, the ‘men listen to other men’ discourse was also cited as a *barrier* to men’s willingness to intervene, in that men fear peer shaming in the form of ostracism, or being seen as ‘the “other” in the group’ (Eva, female, 22), ‘the odd one out’ (Philip, male, 23), or being ‘looked down on as weak, or like oh, why can you not just take a joke?’ (Laura, female, 23). As Eva elaborated:

... maybe they don’t want to look like they’re sensitive or that they, you know, care too much about it. They don’t want to look stupid in front of their friends or go against the grain. If the group of boys say bad things and there’s one or two of them that are thinking, ‘This isn’t right, but I might go along with it because these are my group and I don’t want to look like a pussy or whatever.’

This theme is consistent with the bystanding literature which shows that men fear being perceived as unmasculine for intervening for different reasons - for example, being perceived as ‘cock blocks’ who interrupt another man’s attempts to ‘score’ (Casey and Ohler, 2012; Kaya et al, 2020). These dynamics are complex however and depend on a range of factors within the situation, as intervening can also be a way of demonstrating masculinity (Oesterle et al, 2018).

Related to this theme, some young people and stakeholders also pointed to the specific role of ‘popular’ and ‘dominant personalities’ (Carrie, female, 22) as key moderators of masculine norms and bystanding dynamics:

[In] my experience... what you will get is a very dominant personality in a group... And then actually the quiet, good men stand by and do nothing... And if you could get those strong personalities-or people to turn away from the strong personalities, that’s where the

bystander stuff really seems to have an effect... Do you focus on them or do you focus on the 22 other[s]... (Hazel, stakeholder).

Recounting her experiences of secondary school, Grace (female, 18) similarly emphasises her perception that the ‘mob mentality’ in boys is largely driven by individual but dominant young men within peer groups:

There was one boy in this group who if he snapped his fingers and said shit on the floor, they would... And if he was the one who stepped in and said, ‘Man, get off her, like, this is it,’ they all would have stepped in and they all would have helped.

The point that Carrie, Grace and Hazel make is that some peer groups are led by ‘one or two *strong* personalities with very warped ideas’ (Hazel, stakeholder), where the others in the group may in fact disagree or express discomfort at the practices and ideologies of the dominant personality. This speaks to a view in participants’ narratives of the need to combat pluralistic ignorance among men around the issue of gender-based violence (Berkowitz, 2011). Pluralistic ignorance describes ‘the phenomenon of incorrectly thinking that one is in the minority when one is in fact in the majority’ (Berkowitz, 2011: 161). Some participants felt that young men are in fact, *discomforted* by the attitudes, beliefs, actions and discourse of other men, but do not know that other men share this discomfort. Darragh (male, 19) for example, came forward for interview as he had known a close female in his life who was raped. He ‘would love to do something’ about VAW, but had anxieties about whether other men feel the same way:

You could be in a room with four other men and like all of you might want to take a stand against it, but you never know what they think. So you might think that, oh, you know, they’re not on this side, you know, I don’t want them to think I’m a wuss or something.

Reflecting back on his experiences of secondary school, Liam (male, age 24) felt that much of young men’s sexist hostility were contrived acts of masculine bravado:

... a lot of lads kind of feel like they have to subscribe to say things or like talk about women or talk about... girls in a certain way even though they don't believe it themselves... they genuinely don't believe it, but they, for that kind of—the social part and to keep their face and save face they've got to say it there. Or go along with it... to not do it would be—would hurt their, you know, their standing in that group.

Some young men already engage in active bystanding in attempts to thwart other men's unwanted behaviour towards a woman. Participants gave examples of witnessing such intervening, but they argued that too many men intervene problematically – that is, in ways that are confrontational and aggressive. Aoife (female, 24), who worked as a neurological nurse argues that 'when men tackle men, it's a disaster'. At work, she described having witnessed 'so many serious brain injuries' as a consequence of men using physical aggression in instances where it was deemed that another man was inappropriately interacting with their partner or girlfriend. Indeed, as Cathal's earlier account of active bystanding exemplifies, some male participants approached intervening through a confrontational and/or physically aggressive approach, reflecting a tendency to invoke a protector masculinity and paternalistic language in their understanding and response (Kaya et al, 2020; Rich et al, 2010). There was also an assumption that some situations are inherently confrontational. Cathal (male, 24) described a situation where he intervened with a friend on a beach as he perceived two men were harassing a woman:

Now, the whole time there was loads of people walking past... I think at this point you're probably even less likely to intervene because they already saw us and thought it was becoming really confrontational... It's kind of one of those situations where it's instantly confrontational. There's no way of saying nicely 'you are clearly harassing this girl...' And these guys obviously have certain attitudes about it and they're like, 'Who the fuck are these guys? This is going to be a fight, like, you know.' So when people say or talk

about intervening with violence against women, you'd better be prepared for the fact that there's going to be a violent situation occur...

Cathal's narrative sheds light on the consequences of an approach to intervening based around confrontation and physical reprimand. He pointed out that 'there was loads of people walking past' but perceived that such others 'saw us and thought it was becoming really confrontational.' This suggests that a confrontational approach may inhibit support from others in the situation. Cathal also assumes that certain situations are 'instantly confrontational', which further assumes that there are no effective non-confrontational or de-escalation skills that can be applied in bystander intervention scenarios. The conclusion that Cathal makes then is that intervening is only open to those who are ready and 'prepared' for a 'violent situation'. For men to play a *positive* role in active bystanding to address VAW therefore, participants argued that men need to be equipped with non-confrontational and non-aggressive strategies.

Promoting overall cultural support for active bystanding

Participants argued that men's active bystanding needs to be promoted as a positive social value within society overall and a skill that should be taught to all young people, and not solely young men. Consequently, they advocated for the establishment of bystander initiatives across society and within different spaces such as schools, universities and workplaces. This theme is consistent with findings that men express more willingness to intervene if they perceive their peers will be supportive and/or feel their peers will do the same (Casey and Ohler, 2012; Kaya et al, 2020). The more individuals are equipped with active bystanding skills, the more likely they are to feel confident that their active bystanding will be supported.

Some argued that such initiatives and related ones such as consent workshops need to be mandatory, as there was a perception that the men who are in most need of this training are those who are most unlikely to attend if the initiative was optional:

... but [what] I do see so often through university that they run consent workshops... one thing I'd seen was that it was mandatory for sports teams to have one person go forward, one or two go forward... which again sounds so, so positive, but year after year, I suppose through knowing guys on the rugby team, is it *never* the lads who you would think need it who end up being the ones attending... (Carrie, female, 22, her emphasis)

Carrie's point here aligns with research that shows that those men who are the most resistant to participating in such workshops are more likely to subscribe to rape myths and to illustrate a lack of empathy for women (Rich et al, 2010).

Both young men and women indicated that a key barrier to their willingness to intervene was their fear of physical confrontation. A central need expressed by young people then, was for such initiatives to equip people and men especially, with the skills 'to call something out safely' (Amy, female, 24) and to engage in non-confrontational and non-shaming methods of intervening:

We actually have no idea how to do and approach someone and challenge someone. I think that's the big thing is that I talk about there is that people don't have the educational skillset to actually challenge someone in a constructive manner, that like how do you de-escalate the situation where they could potentially get violent. (Brian, male, 24)

We suggest this is particularly crucial for young men. A tendency on the part of young men to engage in confrontational forms of intervening may contribute to broader fears and beliefs that there are little to no methods of intervening that will not result in hostility.

Finally, as part of promoting a broader culture of active bystanding generally and for young men specifically, participants argued for the need to create and institute clear, actionable harassment, assault and reporting policies in licensed venues. Young people expressed a lack of confidence that reporting VAW will lead to action that challenges the perpetrator, particularly in bars and clubs. Echoing other studies (Anitha et al, 2021), some young women

gave examples of club bouncers and management not taking their reports of sexual harassment seriously, some of which was based on victim-blaming logics:

But even when you go and tell the bouncer, oh, the guy has grabbed my ass, the bouncer is going to tell you if you don't want your ass to be grabbed, don't be dressed like that or don't be going into the bar. You know, he's not going to throw the guy out and tell him oh, you shouldn't be grabbing asses...

This theme highlights how active bystanding should be supported by broader multi-level initiatives to better support cultural change (Flood, 2018).

Promoting men's voices and involvement in feminist and gender-based violence issues

Some participants advocated for men's role in feminist activism. Kate (female, 23) suggested that campaigns should be developed which involve men more directly as she perceived that 'MeToo felt very exclusive to women and a lot of men felt that they couldn't get involved because if they did they'd be viewed in a certain way.' Here, this 'certain way' is negative. Kate cited the example of how American actor Terry Crews's support for the MeToo movement due to his own experience of sexual assault was met with gendered abuse: 'And then you had big names coming out and calling him, you know, a little bitch, a pussy, all these different things... because he came out and said MeToo.' Similar to the stigma that surrounds some forms of men's active bystanding, participants identified a need to destigmatise and to make 'more acceptable' (Laura, female, 23) young men's support for feminist activism, causes and concerns. Young people perceived that men who do express support for feminist causes are perceived as unmasculine, 'gay' (Michael, male, 22) or 'sissies and that they're mummy's boys' (Siobhan, female, 22). Darragh (male, 19) highlighted his need to be amongst like-minded men as key in securing his confidence to get involved with feminist activism:

Because personally I would love to do something about it. I'd love to join something. Like the thing is, like, let's say, for example, me and a roomful of like twenty girls and we had to go on a march. Like I would love to do it, but it would be hard. But if I knew there's be another like four boys with me, it would be easy... I feel like if I'm the only man here that means I'm a wuss, you know, that this isn't what men do. You know, we don't speak about this. It's not our problem, you know.

These points highlight fears around 'unmanly politics' (Bridges, 2014) and the alignment of support for certain feminist issues as gay and emasculating. Here ultimately, hegemonic masculinity sustains men's VAW as women's issues and a 'feminine' concern, suppressing and policing meanings whose expression would otherwise contribute to its deconstruction.

We note that in the context of the perceived stigma of men as feminist allies here, no participant spoke about the broader backlash against feminism (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022) where male feminist allies are sometimes castigated as 'traitors' (Hopton and Langer, 2022). Philip only passingly referred to the sexual entitlement of incels (male 'involuntary celibates' who blame women for their lack of romantic and sexual experience) (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022) while James (stakeholder) briefly mentioned the internet as a source of learning about inequalitarian gender ideologies.

As well as being allies in the context of feminist activism, young people perceived it to be important that men be afforded the spaces and opportunities to discuss and debate issues to do with sex, gender relations and gender violence more generally. Brian (male, 24) remarked that *PositivMasc* was 'the first time I've actually even heard of a study that's allowed young men to come forward and talk about [violence against women]'. In fact, Chloe (female, 22) and Sorchia (female, 24) mentioned how they had never considered the role that young men who already have supportive and positive attitudes towards tackling VAW, can play in raising consciousness about the issue:

I never really considered the ways that could encourage men to speak out on this topic. It's an area I've never heard a lot on, either because there's not much research done or its not heavily publicized on mainstream media. Male friends of mine have always looked out for me and told me to be careful so I assume the protective mindset is there in a lot of them... (Sorcha)

Sorcha's mentioning of the 'protective mindset' is noteworthy as it invokes the notion of 'protector masculinity' (Jordan et al, 2022: 713) which, though well intentioned, is a particular and problematic way of conceiving men's role in addressing VAW as we discuss in the next section.

Some participants spoke about the need for 'online platforms' or forums that men can go to ask questions about topics such as consent while others noted that such online spaces can enable men to see that there are 'other men who feel the same way' (Chloe, female, 22) about VAW, again highlighting the key role of spaces in tackling the pluralistic ignorance that inhibits young men's voices. Brian and Fiona (female, 24) cited men's retreats as a means to engage men in self-development work relating to gender. In fact, Brian spoke highly positively about a three-day men's retreat he undertook in the West of Ireland and how this contributed to his personal development which included more insight into gendered identity and gender norms.

Engaging young men: appealing to intrinsic values

The question of how to involve men in issues of gender justice is a key theme in the literature (Keddie, 2021). Explicit and implicit within participants' narratives were ideas on 'finding that hook' (Mark, stakeholder) to promote young men's engagement in these issues. Literature finds that some men intervene or express a willingness to do so as it bolsters their sense of protector and paternalistic masculinity (Casey and Ohler, 2012; Kaya et al, 2020), where men who hold

attitudes coalescing around ‘benevolent sexism’ attain a sense of status by assuming themselves as a ‘white knight’ who protects and/or saves women from distress (Leone et al, 2020). Indeed Carrie (female, 22) did feel that men’s motivation to intervene can be about ‘put[ting] someone-oneself across as the better guy.’ Such motivations have been problematised in the literature (Jordan et al, 2022; Kaya et al, 2020; Leone et al, 2020), as they can rely on rigid gender constructions, where women are constructed as helpless and men as strong. In contrast to these extrinsic motivations, it was perceived that such engagement can be developed by appealing to intrinsic values or the values that some young men already believe in. Some participants argued for example, that many young men already know that certain behaviours are wrong, but do not speak out for fear that they are in the minority and could be cast as ‘the “other” in the group’ (Eva, female, 22).

One way of engaging men cited by some participants then was to appeal to a sense of ‘doing the right thing’ (Philip, male, 23) (Berkowitz, 2011). This is based on more intrinsic values and was posited as a way to enable young men to feel a sense of personal pride for active bystanding and which would counteract the potential shame from peers who ‘might challenge their masculinity’ (James, stakeholder) for declaring oneself a feminist:

Like it’s something they should be proud of—like it might not be the stereotypical type of man and masculinity, but like standing up for what is right is something that everyone should be able to do and sort of what they should believe in. (Laura, female, 23)

Laura here implicitly invokes Stoltenberg’s (2000) idea of ‘men of conscience’ who pledge allegiance to justice and moral selfhood rather than to masculinity and who do not depend on one-upmanship about who is the ‘better man’ (Casey and Ohler, 2012).

Another theme in the data was that of appealing to the idea that ‘the personal is political’ (Margaret, stakeholder) as a way of engaging men. Margaret cited the Irish 2015 and 2018 referenda on same-sex marriage and abortion and noted how activism around those issues

centred on getting people to think about how the issues affect themselves personally and their families. Some others suggested that it would be helpful to appeal to men's desire for better relationships with their partners. Luke (stakeholder) noted that men's engagement can be promoted by capitalising on locally based issues or events relating to VAW and cognate areas. Examples could include drawing men's attention to for example, cases of victim-blaming in Irish courts, some of which have garnered activist and media attention (Riegel et al, 2018). Another key variation of the 'personal is political' theme was the argument to appeal to young men's love for close women in their lives (Bolton et al, 2021), a theme which other studies have found as a motivating factor for men's active bystanding (Kaya et al, 2020). Indeed Darragh (male, 19) and Eoin (male, 18) came forward for interview because they had known a woman who was close to them who had recently experienced sexual violence.

Engaging young men in gender justice is fraught with complex possibilities and limitations (see Burrell, 2018; Carline et al, 2018; Flood, 2018). Similarly, appealing to intrinsic values is delicate work. For example, calls to recognise that the 'personal is political' should be cognisant of not falling into the trap of protector masculinity or protective paternalism (Kaya et al, 2020) and instead focus on the taking up of feminist and egalitarian motivations. This would involve linking the violence that *individual* women experience to broader patriarchal gender relations and masculine norms which affect *all women* and which need to be challenged if VAW is to be addressed.

Discussion

In this paper, we offer an Irish context to a growing international literature exploring responses to VAW amongst young people, including those situated within higher education settings (Anitha et al, 2021; Kaya et al, 2020). Paralleling Gunby et al (2020: 36), our research finds that men are perceived as both key to VAW as a major societal issue, 'but also pivotal to its

resolution.’ The need to equip young men specifically and individuals generally with non-confrontational intervening strategies, is consistent with both a growing literature on the subject (Fenton and Mott, 2017), localised Irish bystander intervention initiatives (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) and more recently, support indicated by Irish government policy for initiatives addressing sexual and gender-based violence (Department of Justice, 2022). Young men do report positive experiences of bystander programmes (Casey and Ohler, 2012; Kaya et al, 2020), but ‘being a “positive” bystander is a difficult undertaking under the best of circumstances’ (Casey and Ohler, 2012: 77). It is therefore important that any bystander programmes are ‘meticulously designed’, based on a solid empirical and theoretical evidence base and include sensitivity to the local and national contexts in which they are located (Fenton and Mott, 2017: 456). We also recognise that as one of many forms of community education, bystander initiatives constitute one example of prevention along the ‘spectrum of prevention’ (Flood, 2018: 56) and are not a panacea in addressing VAW; meso and macro level structural initiatives are also needed (Carline et al, 2018; Flood, 2018).

Participants’ narratives highlight that there are ethical, theoretical and practice issues to consider in this area. Participants recognised that men’s power in intervening and/or tackling other men is based on the devaluation of women’s autonomy. Mixed-sex bystander initiative formats could provide opportunities for men to *listen* to women’s perspectives (which is a theme that young women desire from young men generally). These formats have shown positive effects on men’s attitudes and perspectives (Rich et al, 2010) and young people themselves advocate for this format (Ustunel, 2020). Similarly, men’s motivation for intervening can be based on notions of protector masculinity and chivalry where men are constructed as ‘white knights’ who protect and save helpless women in distress. Here we suggest that appeals to ‘do the right thing’ rather than ‘do the *manly* thing’ may offer a route

into intervening that is not based on benevolent sexism, paternalistic protection and the reification of gender norms.

The need to promote men's voices and allyship in gender justice issues was also highlighted. There is insufficient space here to fully outline the multiple complexities of men's allyship and engagement in gender justice (see Burrell, 2018; Flood, 2018). We do note however, that while efforts to motivate men's engagement in gender justice are important, methods that are overly concerned with diminishing young men's discomfort in order to foster their engagement can inhibit recognition by young men that gender equity is an issue that pertains to them (Keddie, 2021). This is because meaningful change requires an examination of the inevitably discomforting behaviours and emotions underpinning boys' and men's complicities in gender injustice (Keddie, 2021). Relatedly, there is a tendency for those men who draw on notions of the 'protector mindset' - as referenced by Sorcha for example - to construct themselves as the 'good guys' in opposition to the 'bad guys' who sexually violate women (Carline et al, 2018; Jordan et al, 2022). The potential implication is that it is these 'bad guys' who need to be the target of gender justice interventions, not the 'good guys'. Fundamentally, we agree with others (Carline et al, 2018; Jordan et al, 2022) that the best way to anticipate and engage with these complexities is through interactive sessions (within bystander programmes and beyond) with male peer groups where real conversations and 'disruptive moments' can take place (Jordan et al, 2022: 715).

Promoting dialogue and conversation to engage men as allies is more pertinent than ever as some young men are discussing these issues and seeking support for their questions around sex and relationships through the 'manosphere' (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022). This refers to a collection of websites loosely united by an anti-feminist worldview (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022). While both stakeholders and young people referenced the problematic role of pornography and social and digital technologies, in facilitating gender-violence and the learning of normative

sexual scripts, no participant referred to this online ‘networked misogyny’ (Dickel and Evolvi, 2022: 4) that focuses on opposition to popular feminism. Yet the presence of such spaces and individual ‘alpha male influencers’ (Stokel-Walker, 2023) who seek to direct the hearts and minds of young men *against* the idea that VAW is a major social issue in the first place and represents a serious challenge to engaging men in activism against VAW. The views in this paper align with growing calls to involve men in efforts to end VAW and illustrate some key issues that need consideration in doing so. We would do well to recognise the presence of potentially regressive political and societal forces that are actively seeking to work against progress in this area.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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