

Strategy to Tackle Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Ireland*

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Summary: This paper, comprising the text of the 18th Annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture, focuses on the implementation of a national strategy to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in Ireland. In doing so, Dr Stephanie O'Keeffe provides some of her personal and professional reflections on these very topical and sensitive issues, as somebody who has experience in the development and implementation of whole-of-government, whole-of-society strategies to improve specific outcomes in a population. The second half of the paper discusses the challenges in tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as the opportunities and solutions with promise.

Keywords: Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV), national strategy, implementation, Cuan, prevalence, challenges, opportunities, solutions.

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in the area of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. Thank you also to the Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development (ACJRD) for the invitation to deliver the 18th Annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture and for the association's interest in this area of criminal justice policy and practice. One of the things I have learned about Martin Tansey was his commitment to public service, his commitment to evidence-based practice and his commitment to living a professional life full of support for his colleagues, accompanied by a vision for change. I have said this many times, but it truly is a privilege to be a public servant, having the opportunity to do meaningful, transformative work and improve the lives of citizens through evidence-based strategy and policy development. My whole career has been in public service and, since taking

* This paper comprises the revised text of the 18th annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture, delivered at the Criminal Courts of Justice (CCJ), Dublin on 1 May 2025.

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up the role of CEO of Cuan in February 2024, as a civil servant, working in a new statutory agency under the aegis of the Department of Justice.

The lecture today is about implementation of national strategy to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV) in Ireland. I am going to give you my personal and professional reflections on that, as somebody who has experience in the development and implementation of whole-of-government, whole-of-society strategies to improve specific outcomes in a population. While, many years ago, I undertook a PhD in organisational decision-making in the area of rape and criminal investigations, and worked in the area of sexual health improvement for ten years, I am not an expert in DSGBV specifically. This lecture draws on my experience of strategy development, strategy implementation, monitoring and transformation, in and across large complex organisations and government departments. I also draw on what I have learned from the many experts in the area of DSGBV, since commencing this role.

To date, there have been three national strategies to tackle DSGBV, and to give you a spoiler alert at the very beginning: we would not have a third national strategy if we had solved the problem identified in the first. I'm going to speak a little about this.

Today's lecture will set out the background of Cuan and explain its statutory functions. From there, I'll talk about the three national strategies published to date; what they have in common and where there are points of differentiation. Next, I will talk about the prevalence of sexual violence over two decades, drawing on the findings from the *Sexual Assault in Ireland Survey* (SAVI), published in 2002 and the more recent, *2022 Sexual Violence Survey* (SVS), conducted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2022). These two surveys allow us to think about the challenges of successfully addressing the widespread issues of gender-based violence in Ireland and internationally. From here, I'll talk about new threats that have emerged in the area of DSGBV. I am going to set out opportunities and what I see as critical success factors that give us hope that it is possible to create conditions that prevent and protect women, children and other victims from sexual and domestic violence and will enable us to demonstrate that we can move the dial and make progress in this complex area. Finally, I will set out practical things everyone can do to play a part in ending this pandemic that kills women, damages children, destroys lives, wreaks havoc in families and communities and poses a threat to psychosocial, social and economic development in Irish society.

The establishment of Cuan

Cuan was established following the enactment of the Domestic Sexual and Gender Based Agency Act, 2023¹ and it is a statutory agency under the aegis of the Department of Justice. Cuan is an Irish word, meaning 'haven' or 'harbour' or 'place of shelter'. Cuan has a board and a staff complement of thirty-five. Its purpose is to drive Ireland's response to the prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and the protection of all victims and survivors.²

Cuan's founding legislation sets out a range of statutory functions. Some of these functions were formerly delivered by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and by the Department of Justice. As a new entity, Cuan is working hard to establish and grow strong relationships and partnerships with both of these important partners in its work. Cuan's functions include delivering excellent services to victims of DSGBV, including delivering on the number of safe and accessible accommodation spaces available for those fleeing abuse, as well as ensuring that helpline and other supports are available to anyone requiring them. The majority of Cuan's c. €66 million budget is toward funding these services across the country.

Cuan also has functions that require it to develop service standards and monitoring systems to ensure adherence to best practice.

Cuan has functions relating to research and data to inform DSGBV policy development, strategy, monitoring and evaluation.

Cuan is required to lead on awareness-raising campaigns designed to reduce the incidence of DSGBV in Irish society, as well as ensuring that all victims know how to access the supports they require.

Cuan is responsible for co-ordinating all government actions set out in the third national strategy and reporting on their delivery to the Minister for Justice. Political oversight of the strategy is provided by the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality. Oversight is also provided by a High-Level Oversight Board, chaired by the Secretaries General of the Department of Justice and the Department of An Taoiseach.

I want to draw your attention to two functions in the DSGBV Agency Act, 2023, that are particularly important for us to deliver. The first is that we are required to pay due regard to the diverse circumstances within the

¹ Available at <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2023/act/31/enacted/en/print.html> (accessed 29 July 2025)

² *Cuan, the Domestic Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency, Corporate Plan 2025–2027*, available at <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/cuan-corporate-plan-2025-2027.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2025)

population, which means that we really need to take an intersectional lens when thinking about who we are providing services to and how we scope our prevention work. We know that sex, gender, class, race and ability all interconnect in different ways to shape individual experiences, vulnerabilities and responses to DSGBV. The second is that we co-ordinate, oversee and provide advice and support to public service bodies in the implementation of their actions. Whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategies are, by their definition, complex and involve a large number of essential and necessary partners to deliver impacts. Developing Cuan in a way that targets support to delivery partners with mission-critical responsibilities will be a key competency to develop over time. We understand that delivering on these two statutory functions, in particular, will be key to our success, and their execution requires skill and strategy in giving effect to the work.

To reflect the functions of Cuan, set out in the Act, we have established teams to lead on the education and awareness-raising elements of our work: we have a service delivery and development team; and a strategic engagement team leading our strategy co-ordination and reporting functions with c.30 implementation partners. A research and data team leads on building a knowledge-generating programme of work to inform strategy implementation and evaluation. A corporate team leads on all finance, HR, organisation development and governance work. The corporate team works hand in glove with the services team, putting in place a robust data-collection system with funded services. We need to create capability to report and communicate the volume of services being delivered from state investment in this critical area. We need to be able to describe the cost for services and the demand for services across the country and work through a plan to develop these services over time. There are two important elements here – one practical, the other strategic. From a practical perspective, Cuan is investing considerable time in designing and developing a new system and processes/procedures to collect data from services and build reporting capability. This requires funded services to also invest time and expertise working with us. Secondly, we know that a very substantial proportion of people who experience DSGBV do not tell anyone, do not report and do not access services. This is changing and our work will quicken the pace of this change. As a result, we expect to see more disclosure, reporting and service requests for support, month on month, year on year. This is an inevitable and necessary consequence of progress and success – reducing shame and stigma; enabling environments that support victims and survivors; calling out criminal behaviours; and highlighting the

people behind the statistics. We need to have evidence and data-led service development plans to underpin this likely trajectory in service demand to meet strategic objectives in government strategy to 'protect' victims and survivors.

Cuan's approach to delivering its statutory functions is set out in our first *Corporate Plan 2025–2027*. This plan, developed with our Board and approved by the Minister for Justice, outlines our vision, values and objectives for combatting DSGBV in the years ahead. It is guided by the legislation and based on feedback from frontline service providers, civil society and Cuan's implementation partners. It can be read at www.gov.ie/cuan. Our *Corporate Plan* is not only ambitious – it is an essential blueprint for the transformation needed to eliminate domestic, sexual and gender-based violence from our society. Guided by this plan, our priority is to establish the structures and systems that will allow Cuan to fulfil our core statutory functions and, working with and through others, our focus is to drive real, lasting societal change.

Evolution of government strategy to combat DSGBV

Over the past fifteen years, Ireland has had three strategies to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (see Cosc, 2010, 2016; Government of Ireland, 2022). The first strategy was from 2010 to 2014 (Cosc, 2010). Some people may remember that there was an executive unit established in the Department of Justice called Cosc, which engaged in very significant levels of consultation, to develop the first strategy in 2010. It is important to reflect that a key focus of Government during these years was on national recovery following an unprecedented national economic emergency. There were minimal references to DSGBV in the 2011 Programme for Government, *Government for National Recovery*, and it did not reference the strategy published in 2010.

COSC also led the development of the second strategy, from 2016 to 2021. There were a lot of changes during that time period, including, for example, the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in 2015. This would have involved change for DSGBV services, moving from the health service to Tusla. The Department of Justice was undergoing extensive organisational change, most notably in response to the recommendations of the independent Effectiveness and Renewal Group (ERG), established by Government in 2018. Finally, the global pandemic in 2020 required a fundamental re-think of all elements of national strategy roll-out and brought with it a set of terrible global and national challenges. The Programme for

Partnership Government, published in 2016, referenced the Istanbul Convention and the second national strategy to combat DSGBV, in addition to specific actions relating to protecting children from sexual exploitation. The 2021 Programme for Government (*Our Shared Future*) had a section specific to DSGBV. Government committed to building on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and working with NGOs and services to develop the third *National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*, placing a priority on prevention and reduction. Government also committed to conduct an audit of how responsibility for domestic sexual and gender-based violence is segmented across different government agencies, and to develop proposals to improve co-ordination and strategy implementation. The third national strategy was developed and published by the Department of Justice in 2022, following significant engagement with the sector, led by the Minister of Justice, Helen McEntee.

All three strategies were led by Ministers for Justice. The first strategy was published by Minister Dermot Ahern, the second by Minister Frances Fitzgerald, and the most recent one by Minister Helen McEntee, who prioritised this portfolio and led significant legislative reforms over the period. Political leadership and political sponsorship for whole-of-government strategies is an essential condition for success. It is widely acknowledged that Minister Helen McEntee was pioneering in championing the need for change, acknowledging DSGBV as an 'epidemic' and identifying actions for a more effective response in Ireland.

The current minister for Justice, Jim O'Callaghan, has also placed DSGBV as one of his top three priorities, thereby consolidating and further strengthening Ireland's political response in leading on these profoundly complex matters. The *Programme for Government 2025, Securing Ireland's Future*,³ has very strong commitments to addressing DSGBV. It states:

tackling the epidemic of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence will remain a major priority for the Government. We will invest in new refuge spaces, update the school curriculum, roll out training and make the criminal justice system more victim centred, in particular our Courts system.

3 Available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/publications/programme-for-government-2025-securing-irelands-future/> (accessed 29 July 2025).

Strategy content: compare and contrast

All three strategies say they take a 'whole-of-government approach'. It is clear that there was a very significant level of stakeholder engagement in the first, second and third strategy. The idea of having a victim-centred focus resonates across the three strategies, as does the emphasis on prevention. Interventions with perpetrators, particularly the language of accountability for perpetrators, are strong in the first and second strategy, and also feature in the third strategy. There is a commitment in all three strategies to data collection and research. Emphasis on legislative reform strengthens over time across the three strategies.

The first strategy focused on victim safety, perpetrator accountability and public awareness, and talked about the first ever co-ordinated response. The second strategy builds on that and talks about strengthening structures. It also talks about reducing societal tolerance, building the victim services, and clear perpetrator accountability. The second strategy references that it is getting ready for Ireland to be able to sign the Istanbul Convention. Following ratification of the Convention, the third strategy is focused on the Istanbul pillars of prevention, protection, prosecution and policy. There is more coherence in the third strategy, which encompasses the priorities set out in the first two strategies, but situates them in the context of the four Istanbul pillars.

A different approach to implementation planning can be seen across the three strategies. There are broad goals and actions in the first strategy; the second states that the action plan is a living document and therefore flexible. The third national strategy has two very detailed implementation plans, and a third and final implementation plan is in development by Cuan (*2025–2026 Zero Tolerance Implementation Plan*), working with all implementation partners. Monitoring and oversight seems to be limited in the first strategy. It gets stronger in the second, but it is still very agency-dependent. Oversight is much stronger in the third national strategy, which commits to having cabinet oversight, cabinet committee oversight and oversight from a High-Level Oversight Board, which is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach and the Secretary General of the Department of Justice.

The area of inclusivity and intersectionality deepens into the third strategy. It is reinforced in the DSGBV Agency Act, 2023. Funding has increased over time. There is no reference to additional money in the first strategy, to support implementation. The second strategy references a small number of resources. When the strategy was launched, it was clarified that there was an initial

€90,000 identified for a communications campaign. There was increased investment in services during COVID-19, as a result of heightened risk of domestic abuse. Funding has significantly increased for the third national strategy, with increased funding for DSGBV services and funding to increase emergency accommodation capacity for those fleeing domestic abuse.

To raise public awareness at the very beginning of the first strategy, the approach was to give small sums of money to lots of organisations to run campaigns; the second strategy then centralised this budget, and the first of the national campaigns was launched. This has been strengthened again in the third national strategy, with a robust approach to national campaign development, audience segmentation and evaluation.

None of the strategies have performance indicators or defined outcome measures. There is a theory of change in the back of the third national strategy, but it is not specific enough to be useful as a monitoring or evaluation tool. None of the strategies specify the main mechanisms by which strategy will be delivered at local level. Infrastructure for implementation from national to local and from local to national is not clearly specified.

As mentioned earlier, the first strategy was developed by an executive agency in the Department of Justice, as was the second strategy. The third strategy was developed by the Department of Justice and the strategy committed to establishing a dedicated statutory agency to co-ordinate and report on implementation. Feedback from the sector was that there was too much fragmentation, too much siloed working and clear opportunities to create a stronger synergy across the key implementation partners. This gave rise to the Department of Justice committing to a DSGBV Agency Act, 2023, and the establishment of Cuan in February 2024.

Progress and achievements

From my reading of these strategies, I can really see a very strong evolution. I can see evidence of strengthened governance and increased resourcing. In 2021, an audit of DSGBV structures⁴ was commissioned by the Department of Justice, in consultation with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and published in June 2021, to inform the third national strategy. The review discusses improvements in public awareness and attitudes. This finding is reinforced in other research. Just this morning [1 May 2025], the organisation One in Four published a research study on the

4 *Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: An Audit of Structures*, June 2021

prevalence of child sexual violence and abuse, using the CSO 2022 survey as well as some additional research they undertook, and it is really clear that the public is much more aware than previously about DSGBV – for example, the fact that most abuse and most violence is perpetrated by people known to the victim. We can see that knowledge and awareness have changed over time.

There has been a huge improvement in development of co-ordinated, interagency structures working on defined programmes of work, to address known issues – for example, ensuring that the voice of the child can be heard in family courts or managing high-risk sex-offenders. There have also been huge improvements in terms of policing policy and policing practice in this area, certainly since I did my PhD in the area of sexual violence over two decades ago. There have been seismic changes organisationally and professionally in how An Garda Síochána members are trained, with specialised units to lead on these kinds of crimes. In the area of domestic violence, operational policing response has also improved significantly, particularly DSGBV services reporting, since the pandemic. An Garda Síochána has prioritised this area of policing for improved response and, partly as a result of this, gardaí are now receiving more and more calls each year from victims/survivors seeking protection. When I visit services funded by Cuan, by and large, the services report that they have an excellent working relationship with local gardaí. The gardaí themselves have committed to further improving the frontline response, in response to reviews⁵ and feedback from services and victims/survivors.

The absence of measurement or data to support strategy evaluation is a limiting factor. How do we know if all of the work is having the desired effects? Where are we making inroads in terms of prevention? How do we know if there is effective access to justice and improved experience through the courts system for victims of DSGBV? There is more work to be done on data and measurement, but also on the local structures for delivery. We can have a strategy at a national level, but we also need to have a robust infrastructure for implementation at regional and local level.

Prevalence of DSGBV in Ireland, 2001–22

There are twenty-one years between the SAVI survey (data collected in 2001) undertaken by Professor Hannah McGee and colleagues in the Royal College

⁵ Garda Síochána Inspectorate (2024), *An Inspection of the Garda Síochána’s Approach to Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Victim Support*, Dublin: An Garda Síochána, available at <https://www.gsinsp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Garda-Inspectorate-Domestic-Abuse-Final-Inspection-Report-Web.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2025)

of Surgeons and commissioned by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (McGee et al., 2002) and the CSO *Sexual Violence Survey* (data was gathered as part of a commitment in the third national strategy in 2022). Both the SAVI and the CSO surveys are big population surveys on sexual violence; the CSO surveyed over 4,000 people and the SAVI surveyed over 3,000 people. Whilst there are important methodological caveats that caution against making comparisons across the two timepoints, the surveys seek to do the same thing (measure the prevalence of sexual violence) and they are supported by umpteen smaller surveys undertaken in the intervening years, all giving a general, composite picture of what we are dealing with.

Regarding the more recent CSO sexual violence survey (data collected 2022), the findings were shocking. For the whole population, 40 per cent of adults had experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime – that is 52 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men. A worrying finding in the 2022 data is that younger people reported higher levels of experience, compared to all other age groups (65 per cent of female 18–24-year-olds v. 52 per cent for all). There are multiple potential explanations for this, ranging from younger people being more likely to admit to experiencing SV, to actual increases in experience in recent years. Twenty years ago, prevalence levels were similar, with 42 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men reporting experience of some form of sexual violence in their lifetime.

If we look *only at experience of sexual intercourse during childhood*, including non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral sex, this was experienced by 7 per cent of girls (those aged under 17), and 2 per cent of boys. Twenty years ago, it was 6 per cent of girls and 3 per cent of boys. For all forms of sexual abuse during childhood, the figures are much larger. For example, CSO found that 29 per cent of the adult population had experienced some form of sexual violence as a child. Again, this was higher for 18–24-year-olds (40 per cent). For adults, the prevalence of *non-consensual sexual intercourse*, the most serious of sexual abuse crimes, the figure was 18 per cent of women and 3 per cent of men reported experiencing rape as an adult (those aged over 17). In SAVI, in 2001, it was 6 per cent and 1 per cent. Direct comparisons come with very significant caveats, but we can see how endemic sexual violence is in Irish society over twenty years.

In terms of disclosure, the question about whether the person had ever told anybody about the unwanted sexual experience before the survey, in 2022 only about half of women and a quarter of men had told anybody, and in 2001 it was 58 per cent of women and 40 per cent of men. So, effectively,

in 2022, half of adult women and more than a quarter of adult men reported some lifetime exposure to violence but almost half of the women and three-quarters of the men have not disclosed these experiences to anyone but the survey.

Domestic violence statistics

Cuan is progressing a survey on domestic violence with the Central Statistics Office (CSO), which will, for the first time, produce official statistics in Ireland on the prevalence of domestic abuse. We have just concluded a scoping study, examining data, data definitions and inclusion requirements. Generally, surveys undertaken over the years show that between 20 and 30 per cent of people report having experienced domestic abuse from an intimate partner.

The very first Dublin Women's Aid Survey (Women's Aid, 2020) reported that 1 in 5 women experienced domestic violence, and a more recent European survey (EIGE, 2025) stated that 35 per cent of women reported either psychological, physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner in Ireland. Women's Aid receives about 28,000 contacts per annum and that is increasing year on year (Women's Aid, 2024). We estimate that in 2025, through the 78 services it funds, Cuan will be supporting in the region of 44,000 individuals, men, women and children (86 per cent adults, 14 per cent children).

The Garda Síochána had 61,000 domestic violence-related contacts in 2024. That was a 9 per cent increase on the same period in 2023.

This is what Professor Hannah McGee, lead author of the SAVI survey, wrote in a column in the *Irish Times* in 2023 when the CSO data were published:

Sexual Violence is an iceberg, huge and hidden, and we need a serious National dialogue to figure out how to change it, because two decades later, much hard work, pain for many, a big financial investment by government and charities, do not seem to have brought about progress.... we need a wider sense of societal outrage about behaviours that are so common, so unacceptable and still so hidden – even after all the brave people who have spoken publicly at personal cost about these issues in the past few decades.

(McGee, 2023)

Herein lies what I see as the 'wicked' problem of DSGBV – prevention. Wicked problems, defined in 1973 by design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin

Webber, lack clarity in their articulation and they are subject to real-world constraints that prevent multiple and risk-free attempts at solving them. The problem of domestic sexual and gender-based violence has almost all the characteristics of wicked problems, including, for example, the fact that wicked problems can always be described as the symptom of other problems. While the persistent levels of DSGBV in Irish society are sobering, shocking and perplexing to many, it does require us to redouble our efforts to tackle the whole area of prevention effectively, and take a more strategic approach to formulating and defining the problem we are striving to solve, thereby supporting more effective solutions. Learning from progress in other public policy areas, also responding to wicked problems, is a good starting point.

New challenges in DSGBV

I am going to discuss changes leading to new threats in the whole area of sexual and domestic violence. I will touch briefly on technology, the impact of the manosphere and the threat of violent pornography.

The first change is technology. The internet, smart phones, social media apps, developments in AI, mean that one abusive act can become permanent, it can become scalable, and it can become global. Anybody who wants to hurt another human being and commit a criminal offence is able to find or create a community of like-minded people online. People with predatory behaviours have access to a much larger pool of potential victims online. Technology makes it easy to create and circulate abusive and criminal content.

Technology has shifted norms of interaction and communication, blurred realities between what is private and what is public, and very much de-personalises people, because people believe that is just *a person they see online*; it is not a *real person* to them. Technology also creates organised abuse and exploitation. Whether that is trafficking or the buying and selling of children or adults for sexual exploitation, technology is something that facilitates it, and it is an area into which An Garda Síochána has put a lot of investment, working with international agencies to detect and prosecute crimes of this nature. With regard to trauma, there is some evidence to suggest that emotional, psychological and social damage can be longer lasting and even more severe when it is online.

Shifting attitudes and the manosphere

It is also important for us to understand and validate new emerging data suggesting that younger males are moving towards more traditional views and there is a hardening of attitudes towards women and towards gender equality, and a belief in traditional rape myths (where there has been a lot of improvement in the population more generally). Recent omnibus data from the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (DRCC, 2024) showed that 92 per cent – a majority of people – agree that even if you have given consent, you can change your mind at any time. However, a significant minority of younger men – 29 per cent aged 18–24 – believe that once you have consented, you can't change your mind.

Eurobarometer data released last year⁶ refers to data from Ireland from 2021, showing that 27 per cent of men in Ireland tend to agree or fully agree that women may over-exaggerate claims of abuse or rape. That is in comparison to 22 per cent, which is the EU average for men. In Ireland, 13 per cent of women agreed with that sentiment. Dublin's Women's Aid also launched research earlier in the year – an omnibus survey (Women's Aid and Core Research, 2024) which reported that most Irish men, 61 per cent, reject narrow, traditional views of masculinity, moving beyond the need for stoicism and dominance; however, traditional views persist, especially in digital spaces. Notably, 39 per cent of men in this survey agreed with more conventional notions of masculinity, such as the necessity for strength, emotional restraint, and being the primary economic provider. This group tended to be younger, with nearly 70 per cent of men in their twenties being influenced by figures such as Andrew Tate and Donald Trump. Half of those with traditional views – so around 18 per cent – disregard women's opinions and view sexism as exaggerated. These are smaller-scale surveys and it will be important to develop a research programme that supports robust measurement and reporting of potential trends and/or shifts in public attitudes.

Harms of pornography

Pornography online now is very different from what it used to be years ago, when magazines were a dominant form of distribution. Many scholars and academics warn that online pornography is not equivalent to a 'top-shelf' magazine. The adult content which parents may have accessed in their youth

⁶ Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3252> (accessed 29 July 2025)

could be considered 'quaint' in comparison to today's world of online pornography (Children's Commissioner UK, 2023). Depictions of degradation, sexual coercion, aggression and exploitation are commonplace and disproportionately targeted against teenage girls. According to recent studies, most pornography has some level of violence, whether that is hairpulling, slapping, spitting, strangulation, forceful anal sex and penetration of the mouth with women until they gag. Teen porn is a very popular genre. Studies report that violence is typically used against teenage girls more than adult women who feature in this content. The Sexual Exploitation and Research Centre (SERP) (Breslin and O'Connor, 2024) published a report reviewing research in this field. They point to a study that shows nine in ten scenes contain physical aggression where women are the targets of that aggression. Ninety-five per cent of the targets are shown to respond either neutrally or with pleasure towards that aggression, and there is a very strong consensus emerging at European levels of the dangers of pornography to children, men (especially young men) and women. Children's advocates, people who work with young people and others are extremely concerned about free, easy access children have to this content; how children are targeted with this content through social media apps; and the normalisation of sexual violence in online pornography, and the role that this plays in shaping children's understanding of sex and relationships. Pornography is seen as a cause and accelerant in the perpetration of violence against women, girls and boys by (predominantly) men and boys, and particularly in rising levels of cases where sexual violence is perpetrated by children on other children. This is something that DSGBV services, child protection services, and gardai are seeing more of.

Use of online pornography in Ireland is pervasive and highly gendered. The ESRI (Nolan and Smyth, 2024) analysed results from the longitudinal survey on children, *Growing up in Ireland*. The data were collected in 2018 when the young people were 20 years of age. They found that 64 per cent of young men and 13 per cent of young women reported using pornography. Men from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to use pornography than those from less advantaged backgrounds (75 per cent v. 50 per cent). Pornography use was lower among those with a religious affiliation and where there was greater parental monitoring in adolescence. There was no strong relationship between the provision of sex education at school and pornography use, although young people who were more reliant on the Internet or (in the case of men in particular) their friends, rather than

their parents, for information about sex in adolescence were significantly more likely to use pornography at age 20.

Harmful sexual behaviours are increasingly being shaped by the content and cultures that children are exposed to online, including pornography, misogynistic trolling and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Online Safety Commission UK, 2022).

An article by Faye Curran and Róisín Ingle in the *Irish Times* in March 2022 (Curran and Ingle, 2022) gives an indication of the direct connection between online pornography and how it is shaping harmful sexual behaviours. I read this article when it appeared in the paper and I was shocked, as were friends and family I discussed it with. The article is titled: 'There is a lot of choking: How the pandemic has changed sex for Generation Z'. In the article, the authors interviewed young people on their sex lives after the pandemic.

A woman who was 20 said,

'Porn is definitely where men got ideas such as choking women during sex, I just don't think they would have come up with that on their own. This is really strange to me. I like sex to be equal but a lot of sex I hear about from my friends is not equal.'

A man, aged 23, shares:

'The way most of the gay men I know, younger ones anyway, understand their sexuality and learn about it from an early age is largely through porn. I also learnt a lot from feminist conversations on Tumblr. As I grew up my sexuality and preferences were massively influenced by porn, they still are today.'

A woman, who is 22, said:

'I think choking during sex has been normalised. Internet culture has glamorised choking for a while as a kind of trend, I have never really partaken but then again, who am I to judge?'

Another man, 23, stated:

'One thing that is a big issue for me is pornography. Like a lot of my friends, I started watching it at maybe 13.'

It is clear from talking to colleagues in the prison and probation service and people working on providing programmes to men with a history of sexual violence that mainstream pornography plays a significant part in violent offending behaviour and directly impacts on psychosexual development (desire, arousal and orgasm, and how these interact with thoughts, feelings and behaviours).

Cuan has planned a significant portfolio of work, working with a breadth of partners, to address the harms of pornography. The final two years of implementation of *Zero Tolerance* will see tangible improvements in prevention and response, to address issues of major societal concern, such as pornography and the rise in online harms.

This is a very significant area requiring urgent action to protect children, women, boys and men from all associated harms. Civil society organisations, children's rights advocates, mental health professionals, educators, statutory agencies and DSGBV services will have a key role working together to address these harms.

Opportunities and solutions with promise

Notwithstanding the challenges and emergent threats in the whole area of DSGBV, there are many opportunities to accelerate progress in areas showing some improvement and new solutions for problems not yet solved. The establishment of Cuan by the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration as a mechanism to strengthen structures for implementation at national level is positive, as is strong and consistent political leadership and commitment from Government to make progress on the complex issues giving rise to DSGBV. Many years of work across government departments, statutory agencies, civil society organisations and DSGBV services have created the conditions in 2025 for best-in-class execution of Government strategy. The following list gives a sense of the breadth of actions committed to in the final implementation plan for *Zero Tolerance*, building on years of work to put in place the foundations to make this work possible.

A broad range of awareness and education initiatives is in place to interrogate the social and cultural norms that underpin and contribute to gender-based violence. Spanning schools, higher education, public transport, places of work, and notably online spaces, there is a broad range of initiatives to make our spaces safer, reducing opportunities for sexual and gender-based violence.

Specific actions set out in the final implementation plan for *Zero Tolerance* that are designed to address threats and maximise opportunities for impact include:

- Development of an evidence-based pornography literacy strategy spanning public awareness and education;
- Framework to address sexual violence and harassment in higher education;
- Provision of prevention, consent and healthy relationships education in schools and other settings;
- Work with sporting bodies to establish a zero-tolerance culture;
- Public awareness campaigns to change attitudes and prevent and reduce the incidence of DSGBV;
- Information and education initiatives on online safety;
- Supervision, monitoring and enforcement of age assurance requirements and other relevant measures, including content rating for regulated online services;
- Increasing the availability of public transport to make travel safer and more accessible for women and other vulnerable users.

There is also a range of measures included to ensure that those who experience DSGBV can access information and support services, such as:

- Preparatory work on the National Services Development Plan to ensure availability of accessible, high-quality, specialist and community-based DSGBV services across the state;
- Phased roll-out of service enhancements and supports to sexual violence services;
- Clinical supports to victim-survivors of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM);
- Implementation and expansion of the Barnahus model – a co-ordinated interagency response to support child victim-survivors of sexual violence;
- Progress work on the voice of the child in private and family law;
- Child-friendly information to explain family justice processes to children;
- Preparatory work to introduce Operation Encompass into the Irish system.

In addition, there are comprehensive training actions across the four pillars of the plan to upskill frontline professionals across the health and social care sector, DSGBV services, the judiciary, courts and other justice agencies.

An important development led by the Department and Minister for Justice is the creation of Community Safety Partnerships at each local authority level (Policing, Security and Community Safety Act, 2024). These Community Safety Partnerships are essentially creating a structure at local authority level, whereby all the local stakeholders come together to develop a community safety action plan. The partnerships will bring together residents, community representatives, business interests, councillors, local authorities and state services, such as An Garda Síochána, Tusla and the HSE, to devise and implement the Local Community Safety Plans. These partnerships recognise that policing alone will not solve the issue of people feeling unsafe in their communities or in their homes.

The plans will detail how best the community can prevent crime and will reflect community priorities and local safety issues. The goal is to make communities safer for individuals, families, residents and businesses.

It is envisaged that every local authority area will have a Community Safety Partnership, with dedicated funding and staff, once the policy is rolled out nationally as part of reforms outlined by the Commission on the Future of Policing. It has been acknowledged that DSGBV needs to be a feature of community safety plans. I have great hope that these structures will provide an essential pathway for implementation of local actions to prevent DSGBV and other safety concerns, and will be a catalyst for change. Cuan is a part of the national steering group, supporting the roll-out of these partnerships, and Cuan will be supporting their development at local level in every way we can.

I would like to end by highlighting a recent campaign developed by Cuan in partnership with services and victims/survivors. The Hardest Stories campaign carries a message to victim-survivors that too many stories of DSGBV exist in our society and whenever they wish to share their story, they will be heard, and they will be supported.

In addition, this evergreen campaign is designed to mobilise the public into action by acknowledging that we all have an active role in creating zero tolerance of DSGBV in Irish society and can work towards the cultural and societal changes needed for a society free from DSGBV. Readers are asked to visit the campaign website, gov.ie/stories, where they are provided with information on how they can become an agent of change. This campaign is developed to respond to the evidence covered in this lecture, showing the

scale of non-disclosure of sexual and domestic violence in Ireland. It is time for us to hear the people behind the statistics and challenge cultural norms that create a sense of shame among victims and silence their voices. Here is how the campaign sets out how each person can play a part. Look up gov.ie/stories to find practical information such as:

- How to look out for red flags of DSGBV,
- How to support someone you are concerned about,
- What support there is for victims/survivors,
- How to turn your environment into a place of zero tolerance of DSGBV,
- How to reach out to those addressing DSGBV in all higher-level institutes for education in Ireland,
- How to use your voice to bring about change and advocate for victims-survivors,
- The importance of having consent conversations in our own lives,
- How to promote positive masculinity,
- Dispelling rape myths, and
- How to think intersectionality in terms of DSGBV.

You can find out more about the work of Cuan, the services it funds, progress reports on strategy implementation and its many partners on www.gov.ie/cuan. Thank you all for your interest and support. Thank you to the ACJRD for the invitation to deliver the 18th Annual Martin Tansey lecture on this important topic.

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