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To cite this article: Claire Edwards, Robert Bolton, Mariano Salazar, Carmen Vives-Cases & Nihaya Daoud (2022): Young people's constructions of gender norms and attitudes towards violence against women: a critical review of qualitative empirical literature, Journal of Gender Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2022.2119374](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2119374)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2119374>



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Published online: 02 Sep 2022.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Young people's constructions of gender norms and attitudes towards violence against women: a critical review of qualitative empirical literature

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## ABSTRACT

A growing body of work highlights the increasing significance of violence against women (VAW) in the lives of young people. Research focusing on young people's gendered attitudes and beliefs towards VAW has a key role to play in explaining and addressing this serious societal phenomenon, but to date, there has been no critical synthesis of empirical literature. This article addresses this lacuna by critically reviewing qualitative empirical research which explores how young people's attitudes towards, and understandings of, VAW are intertwined with their constructions of gender. We find that young people's gendered beliefs around men's perceived physical strength, their construction of heterosexual gender norms and relations, and use of bio-deterministic discourses, are highly salient in moderating attitudes towards VAW, and can lead young people to normalize and justify VAW. Young people express complex and contradictory attitudes towards VAW. Thus, while declaring an intolerance of violence in general, they indicate differing levels of acceptability for different types of violence, dependent on situational context. Reflecting on the methodological scope of the literature, we suggest that qualitative research tools have an important role to play in exploring this attitudinal complexity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 June 2021  
Accepted 19 August 2022

## KEYWORDS

Young people; violence against women; attitudes; gender; masculinities

## Introduction

Despite significant legislative and public policy intervention, violence against women (VAW) remains an intractable issue across Europe and globally. While recognizing the deleterious effects that VAW has across all age groups, there has been a growing focus in recent years on VAW as it affects young people (Krahé, Tomaszewska, Kuyper, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2014). The World Health Organization's (World Health Organisation (2013)) report on the global prevalence of VAW notes that in terms of lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among ever-partnered women, it 'is striking . . . that the prevalence of exposure to violence is already high among young women aged 15–19 years, suggesting that violence commonly starts early in women's relationships' (p. 16). These findings are

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particularly concerning given the significance of adolescence and early adulthood as critical developmental life stages.

One important area of research which can contribute to understanding VAW amongst young people focuses on their attitudes and beliefs. Notwithstanding the complexity of debates about attitudes as social and psychological constructs (Pease & Flood, 2008), attitudes can be understood as a broad range of beliefs, dispositions and norms relating to the perceived seriousness, harm, acceptability, and tolerance of VAW. Attitudes and beliefs have been shown to have multiple significance in terms of VAW: they have been linked directly to perpetration of VAW (Courtain & Glowacz, 2018), affect how women who experience victimization understand and respond to their experience, and also shape broader community and societal responses to VAW (Flood & Pease, 2009).

In understanding these attitudes, *gender* has been shown to be a major contributing influence. This reflects not only the 'gender gap' – referring to how men and women express and hold differential attitudes towards VAW – but also crucially, perceptions and constructions of wider gender norms (Flood & Pease, 2009; Pease & Flood, 2008; Storer, Schultz, & Hamby, 2020a). Regarding the latter, research has demonstrated that boys and men are more likely than women to hold views which support VAW (Courtain & Glowacz, 2018) and their gender inequitable beliefs are more predictive of various forms of VAW (Lacasse & Mendelson, 2007). The differential views held by men and women also have to be understood as intimately intertwined with broader cultural scripts around gender roles and norms. Gender relations which cohere around a hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) associated with emotional control, risk-taking, competitiveness, and homophobia, have been shown to have consequences in terms of both partner and non-partner violence.

Despite a considerable body of empirical work exploring young people's experiences of and attitudes towards specific types of violence (Courtain & Glowacz, 2018), there has up to now been no review of qualitative research which foregrounds the question of how young people's constructions of gender influence and are intertwined with their attitudes towards, and understandings of, VAW (although see Storer et al's (2020a) US review in the specific context of dating violence). We suggest that this is a significant deficit because adolescence and early adulthood is a key time at which to intervene in re-constituting problematic attitudes towards gender norms and relations (McCarry, 2010). In addressing this lacuna, this paper critically reviews qualitative empirical literature which explores how young people's attitudes towards, and explanations of, VAW, are underpinned by constructions of gender and gender norms. Thus, we ask how gender features in young people's understanding, attitudes and explanations of VAW, and more specifically, what these constructions of gender, and in particular, masculinity, are. We therefore follow Pease and Flood (2008) in arguing for a 'social constructionist approach to attitudes' (p. 547), which moves beyond individual responses to recognize the broader societal contexts in which they are created.

## Conceptualizing gender relations and violence against women

Our conceptual starting point for the review is an understanding of VAW as intimately tied to dynamics of power as they are enacted through gender relations, and the ways in which societies construct and position 'men' and 'women' in terms of social norms, attitudes, roles and practices (Frazer & Hutchings, 2020; Lombard & McMillan, 2013). While it is well-recognized that there are challenges in measuring and defining the parameters of VAW (Boyle, 2019; Frazer & Hutchings, 2020; Walby et al., 2017), research and policy which uses the term 'violence against women' refers to a specific *model* of research drawn from feminist theorizing in understanding how and why violence is inflicted upon women (Lombard & McMillan, 2013). One of the most commonly cited definitions of VAW comes from the United Nations (1993) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, which defines it as:

any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

We regard this definition as helpful insofar as it recognizes the breadth and continuum of acts and harms that constitute VAW and indicates the need to pay attention to a diversity of categories of VAW as they have been constituted by researchers, including dating violence, IPV and sexual violence and harassment.

The VAW 'approach' contrasts with the conceptual framework of 'family violence' in which researchers have argued that violence between intimate partners is symmetrical; in other words, both men and women commit an equal number of violent acts towards one another (Johnson, 1995; Reed et al., 2010). This approach has been criticized for taking little account of 'the gender asymmetric harm of a given action (the same action from a man to a woman typically causes more injuries than the same action from a woman to a man)' in understanding violence perpetration (Walby et al., 2017, p. 34), and yet as Reed et al. (2010) argue, it continues to underpin a significant body of research on IPV and other forms of violence which erase gender-based norms as explanatory frameworks. Critiques of 'gender-neutral' studies have been aimed particularly at quantitative surveys of IPV and dating violence which, it has been suggested, decontextualize experiences and understandings of violence, and lack the sensitivity to elucidate the complex situational factors, perceptions and beliefs which underpin VAW (Reed et al., 2010; Storer et al., 2020a). We develop our review as a response to this critique, and in doing so, concur with Storer et al. (2020a) that there is a need to pay closer attention to the potential of qualitative research in exploring nuanced and situated analyses of how gender is intertwined with young people's attitudes towards VAW.

## Method

The review was undertaken as part of a wider European empirical study exploring the discourses that young people use in making sense of gender and masculinity in the context of challenging VAW. The aim of the review was to contextualize the study by thematically synthesizing and summarizing what is known about how gender and gender norms shape and influence young people's understandings of and attitudes towards VAW, based on qualitative empirical literature.

### *Defining review parameters*

For the purposes of this review, we focused on the 10–25 age cohort as a proxy for 'young people'. This generally aligns with the WHO's definition of young people as falling between ages 10 to 24, but we recognize a lack of consensus by experts on such definitions (Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine, 2017). Recognizing the challenges of terminology in relation to VAW and the diverse ways in which studies frame and define violence, we sought to maintain broad definitional parameters. There are few studies which ask young people explicitly about 'VAW' as a term; rather, studies refer to dating violence, IPV, sexual violence and harassment and so on, and we opted to include these in our search. However, we recognize that such terms are fraught with social and political meaning and contestation.

The basis for study inclusion in the review was academic and commissioned government and agency empirical research published in English in the past 20 years (2002–2022), covering the 10–25 age group, that utilized qualitative research methods. Studies were included if they were *predominantly* about young people's attitudes, meaning making and/or understandings of men's violence against women or allied forms of violence *and* discussed gender and gender norms. Exclusion criteria were studies where young people were over the age of 25 or under 10; were solely quantitative studies; had little or no discussion of young people's attitudes towards or meanings of men's VAW

(but instead focused on experiences of violence, or interventions, for example); and did not discuss gender or gender norms.

### **Analytical process**

The first two authors conducted a search of the EBSCO Academic Search Complete, Scopus, Web of Science and JSTOR databases, and Google Scholar, using the following Boolean operators: (gender-based violence OR violence against women OR dating violence OR intimate partner violence OR IPV OR partner violence OR relationship violence OR sexual violence) AND (young people OR youth OR adolescents OR teenagers OR young adults) AND (attitudes OR perceptions OR opinions OR thoughts OR feelings OR beliefs). We scanned the titles and abstracts and excluded solely quantitative studies, articles which did not explore perceptions of VAW or related forms of violence and intervention evaluation studies, those which did not address the 10–25 age category, or that fitted within the designated timescale of publication.

Decision-making regarding final article selection was conducted by the first two authors independently reading and discussing the full text of the articles. Decision-making around the criteria that articles had to be *predominantly* about young people's attitudes and beliefs *and* gender and gender norms was not always clear-cut, for a number of reasons. In some cases, studies had a number of aims (they explored young people's experiences as well as their perceptions of violence); in others, researchers do not directly ask young people about 'violence' per se, but for example, the 'good and bad aspects of dating' (Chung, 2007, p. 1276). Having decided on the included articles, the reference list of these items was also scanned for any further articles which met the inclusion criteria.

On selecting the studies, we coded and charted the data in two ways (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Firstly, we organized the studies to provide a descriptive account of their key definitional and demographic characteristics, by developing a table displaying the study aims, gender of participants and other demographic information where available, age range, type of violence addressed, country context, and types of methods used. Secondly, and most importantly, we developed a thematic analysis of the included sample, to identify key attitudinal domains across the studies.

### **Sample characteristics and thematic domains**

Our search identified 40 studies, of which 30 were in the Global North (including the United States (n = 12), United Kingdom (n = 6), Canada (n = 4), Australia (n = 3)), and ten in the Global South (including India, Thailand, South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Papua New Guinea, Ecuador and Nicaragua). All studies with the exception of two were international peer-reviewed journal articles. Some articles (Lombard, 2013, 2016; McCarry, 2009, 2010) drew upon material from the same respective data sets but explored slightly different thematic angles. There was a concentration of studies in the 11–19 age category (n = 28), with many focused on secondary school pupils. Over half of the studies included a mix of male and female participants (n = 24), with the remainder having only female (n = 7) or male (n = 9) participants.

Reflecting the definitional complexity of VAW, the most common types of violence referred to in studies were dating violence (n = 12), which was particularly evident in the US context, followed by sexual violence and harassment (n = 11) and IPV (n = 8). However, a multitude of other terms were used in studies, including 'gendered violence', 'interpersonal violence' and 'abusive behaviour'. While it is beyond the scope of the paper to explore the precise implications of these differences, it indicates the need for researchers to be cognizant of these categorical complexities and how they may affect young people's responses. Finally, it is worth noting the methodological diversity of the studies: 18 studies used focus groups as their sole methods, 13 used interviews, and nine used a mix of qualitative methods that included both interviews and focus groups, but also ethnography and other approaches. We note a variety of specific methodological tools utilized within the studies to

elicit young people's perceptions and attitudes. For example, while some used direct questions in interviews about how young people understand violence, others made use of scenarios, vignettes and even photographs to facilitate and elicit young people's sense-making.

Having descriptively categorized the studies, we identified three key thematic domains across the literature: firstly, young people's definitions of violence itself and who perpetrates it; secondly, attitudes towards the un/acceptability of VAW, and justifications and explanations of VAW, and thirdly, young people's constructions of gender norms, and in particular, masculine gender roles. We identified sub-themes within these overarching domains and also returned to the articles to interrogate where and how references to gender were interwoven into these themes and sub-themes.

## Findings

### *Young people defining violence: what is it and who perpetrates it?*

One of the key themes evident across the reviewed studies relates to how young people define violence itself. Naming acts or behaviours as 'violence' is part of the process of recognizing the seriousness and thus the (un)acceptability of different forms of violence and abuse. Our review demonstrates that some young people are able to recognize and 'name' a range of different acts or behaviours as violence and abuse, from physical violence through to sexual harassment and emotional abuse (Bowen et al., 2013; Burman & Cartmel, 2005; Haglund et al., 2019; McCarry, 2009; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Sears, Byers, Whelan, & Saint-Pierre, 2006; Sundaram, 2013). However, these more expansive definitions of violence are not cited by all young people; neither are they immediately invoked by them in interviews and focus groups, but rather develop as discussion proceeds (Reeves & Orpinas, 2012). Indeed, our review shows that across a range of studies young people are most likely to associate violence with physical violence and abuse (Lombard, 2013; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Sears et al., 2006; Storer et al., 2020b). In Lombard's (2013) study of 11 and 12-year-olds' understandings of men's IPV, 'real' violence was associated with physical fighting between adult men; similarly, in being asked to define dating violence based on scenarios, African American teens in Storer et al's (2020b, p. 83) US study 'designated scenarios as "definitely dating violence" when they contained references to male perpetrated physical abuse'. Storer et al. (2020b, p. 86) note however that young people found it harder to 'conceptually and uniformly distinguish between more subtle types of coercive behaviours in romantic relationships'.

Storer et al.'s (2020b) observation reflects a common finding in our review that young people use cultural scripts to construct boundaries around what constitutes 'real', 'legitimate' (Lombard, 2013) violence and abuse – which can in turn lead to the mis-naming or non-naming of certain behaviours as violence. This is particularly the case in terms of sexual violence and harassment (French, 2003; Hlavka, 2014; Jeffrey & Barata, 2017; Totten, 2003). In her study of young women who had experienced sexual violence, Hlavka (2014, p. 245) notes that 'harassment was dangerously constructed as romance and flirting', with some women drawing boundaries between 'real' and 'little' rapes, where the former were constructed as involving only intercourse. Similarly, in Tinkler, Becker, and Clayton's (2018) US study of college-aged individuals, non-consensual sexual contact was dissociated from the terms 'aggression' and 'violence'.

A range of contextual factors are linked to young people's naming of acts as 'violence', including the perceived severity of the act and the intent behind it. Young men in Robinson's (2005, p. 24) Australian study constructed non-physical sexual harassment as less serious than physical sexual harassment and even a 'joke' since they believed it did not really hurt anybody. Bowen et al. (2013) also found that young people perceived violent acts as more severe if physical injury occurs. These understandings of severity and intent are gendered: young men have been shown to construct an act as abusive if the intent behind it was negative or if it was underpinned by anger, and are also more likely to associate violence with physical acts (Taylor, Calkins, Xia, & Dalla, 2021). Conversely,

women are more likely than men to construct abuse in terms of the emotional and psychological impact on the victim (Chung, 2007; Reeves and Orpinas, 2012; Sears et al., 2006; Taylor et al., 2021).

Gendered constructions also extend to understandings of *who* perpetrates violence. Young people in our review most commonly associated violence with men (Lombard, 2013, 2016; Sundaram, 2013), but some studies (Bowen et al., 2013; McCarry, 2009) note that while men are *initially* positioned as the main perpetrators of violence within relationships in focus groups, as discussions progress, young people move to a position of gender symmetry by suggesting that women also perpetrate violence against men, or are even the key aggressors in relationships (McCarry, 2009; Taylor et al., 2021). Gendered assumptions also complicate understandings of 'who' enacts 'what' form of violence. Young people generally associate physical violence with men and emotional and/or verbal violence with women (Bowen et al., 2013; Lombard & McMillan, 2013; McCarry, 2009; Scarduzio, Carlyle, Harris, & Savage, 2017; Sundaram, 2013), based on essentialised understandings of men's dominance and strength, and women's vulnerability. While recognizing that women can enact physical violence, young people perceive it as more acceptable and less serious than male violence, because they believe it causes less physical harm (Lehrner & Allen, 2018; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Scarduzio et al., 2017; Sundaram, 2013).

### *Justifying and explaining violence*

Young people's definitions of violence are closely related to their attitudes towards the tolerance and/or acceptability of violence. Across many studies, young people, especially young men, express a 'near unanimous intolerance' (Reeves & Orpinas, 2012, p. 1689) of men's use of VAW based upon the 'code of chivalry' (Scarduzio et al., 2017, p. 102) – that is, the understanding that 'men should not hit women' (*ibid*; see also Black & Weisz, 2005; Bowen et al., 2013; Fredland et al., 2005; Goicolea, Ohman, Torres, Morras, & Edin, 2012b; Haglund et al., 2019; Lehrner & Allen, 2018; Sears et al., 2006; Sundaram, 2013). Statements of unacceptability are however underpinned by significant contradictions and assumptions. Studies show that while young people may express intolerance for violence in general, there are specific situational contexts which lead them to excuse or justify it in practice (Black & Weisz, 2005; Bowen et al., 2013; Boyle, 2019; Burman & Cartmel, 2005; Haglund et al., 2019; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Sears et al., 2006; Storer et al., 2020b; Sundaram, 2013; Totten, 2003).

Our review identifies a number of contextual factors which moderate young people's justifications of VAW. Cross-nationally, the domain of a female partner's *perceived or actual infidelity* or the *fear* of a possible infidelity is one of the most cited justifications for VAW (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Black & Weisz, 2005; Bowen et al., 2013; Boyle, 2019; Burman & Cartmel, 2005; Chung, 2007; Fredland et al., 2005; Goicolea et al., 2012b; Haglund et al., 2019; Haglund, Belknap, & Garcia, 2012; Lombard, 2016; Lombard & McMillan, 2013; McCarry, 2009, 2010; Mulumeoderhwa, 2021; Salazar & Ohman, 2015; Sathiparsad, 2005; Senior, Helmer, & Chenhall, 2017; Towns, 2009; Valls, Puigvert, & Duque, 2008; Wood, Lambert, & Jewkes, 2008). Part of young people's legitimation of VAW in the context of infidelity is their perception that the jealousy that underpins violence is a sign of love, care, and protection by the man (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Chung, 2007; Lombard, 2016; Mulumeoderhwa, 2021; Senior et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2021; Valls et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2008). In turn, some women may police their own attire as a 'gesture of commitment' to their boyfriend (Chung, 2007, p. 1280). In the case of Mulumeoderhwa's (2021) study in the Democratic Republic of Congo, males argued that jealousy – and the violence it provokes – is 'necessary' in a relationship as it is proof of love.

Another factor moderating perceptions of acceptability of VAW relates to gender role transgressions and a need to adhere to 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Totten, 2003, p. 159). Studies find that young people justify and normalize control within a heterosexual relationship, believing that men should be the 'boss' of the relationship; that women should defer to and 'listen' to male partners; and that men should be entitled to tell their female partners what to do (Black & Weisz, 2005; Iyer, 2019; Lombard, 2016; McCarry, 2009; Sathiparsad, 2005). Subsequently, young people justify men's VAW if a woman fails to fulfil expectations within a heterosexual relationship (Burman & Cartmel, 2005;

Goicolea et al., 2012b; Goicolea, Salazar Torres, Edin, & Öhman, 2012a; Lombard, 2016; Lombard & McMillan, 2013; McCarry, 2009, 2010; Sathiparsad, 2005; Senior et al., 2017; Sundaram, 2013), and women are thus blamed for their own victimization (Black & Weisz, 2005). More explicit paternalistic discourses are evident in Global South studies where men justify VAW based on protection and knowing what is best for female partners (Iyer, 2019; Kelly-Hanku et al., 2016; Mulumeoderhwa, 2021; Salazar & Ohman, 2015; Wood et al., 2008; Zietz & Das, 2018).

Other factors moderate perceptions of acceptability of VAW, such as the perceived intent behind the act, for example if it is constructed as a 'joke' or underpinned by anger (Bowen et al., 2013; Sears et al., 2006). Self-defence (Burman & Cartmel, 2005) and revenge and retaliation where women are blamed for 'provoking' men (Black & Weisz, 2005; Salazar & Ohman, 2015; Thongpriwan & McElmurry, 2009) are also invoked justifications. Perception of severity and seriousness is also a factor (Burman & Cartmel, 2005; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Sears et al., 2006), where some young people deploy gradations of severity and corresponding gradations of acceptability (Bowen et al., 2013; Mulumeoderhwa, 2021; Wood et al., 2008); For example, while males in Black and Weisz's (2005, p. 80) study stated that they did not believe that using (physical) violence against women was acceptable, their narratives included statements such as 'Just yell at her, but not hit her'; 'I'd threaten her' and 'I'll try to make some fun of her whenever I can'. In so doing, young people trivialize emotional and verbal violence (Burman & Cartmel, 2005) and construct it as more justifiable than physical acts (Thongpriwan & McElmurry, 2009).

While young people hold gendered ideas about how men and women should behave, these are often not cited directly by young people as *explanations* for VAW. Instead, our review shows that both young men and women commonly construct *individualistic explanations* for violence such as stress, anger management, mental health issues, or use of drugs and alcohol (Burman & Cartmel, 2005; Chung, 2007; Goicolea et al., 2012b; Haglund et al., 2012; Scarduzio et al., 2017; Senior et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2021; Thongpriwan & McElmurry, 2009). Chung (2007) found that some women who were victims of IPV attributed their victimization to 'choosing' the wrong boyfriend, while women who were not victims of IPV attributed women's choice to stay in an abusive relationship to low self-esteem. These explanations place the responsibility and blame for violence on women who stay, rather than on the perpetrators (Chung, 2007).

Some studies note a tendency for young women to cite more 'structural explanations' of men's VAW (Burman & Cartmel, 2005, p. 41; see also Taylor et al., 2021) such as 'negative masculinity' and 'patriarchal society' (Burman & Cartmel, 2005, p. 41), and our review shows that some young people *do* recognize the relationship between men's VAW and how such violence can function to maintain masculinity and gender norms (Haglund et al., 2012; McCarry, 2010; Scarduzio et al., 2017; Sundaram, 2013). For example, young Ecuadorian men in Goicolea et al.'s (2012b) study who had previously received training on gender issues and who were engaged in educating other young people on these issues linked the causes of VAW to notions of hostile 'machismo' masculinity and described this configuration of masculinity as a form of violence in itself.

### **Constructing men and masculine gender roles**

While young people may not cite gender norms in explaining VAW, constructions of gender roles – particularly in terms of men and masculinity – appear in our review as a key moderating factor in terms of attitudes. Young people draw upon constructions of hegemonic masculinity, associating masculinity with dominance, being a breadwinner, heterosexuality and control over, or as a protector of, women (Goicolea et al., 2012a; Kelly-Hanku et al., 2016; McCarry, 2009, 2010; Sundaram, 2013; Totten, 2003; Valls et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2008). As part of this construction of a 'normative' or 'idealised' masculinity, young people more readily associate men with the capacity to be violent and dangerous, such that violence and aggression is seen as something that men 'do'.

These constructions of masculinity are often 'classed' and 'raced'; in Sundaram's (2013) study, for example, young people associated violence with particular intersectional categories of men, particularly

with working class young men and ‘young alcoholics’ (Sundaram, 2013). Young people from schools which had a higher proportion of minority ethnic students also discussed stereotypes that existed about Asian men as associated with violence (Sundaram, 2013). Similarly, in Goicolea et al.’s (2012b) study in Ecuador, some young men linked IPV with people deemed to be poor and uneducated.

The chivalric understandings that ‘men should not hit women’ (Scarduzio et al., 2017, p. 102) which inform some young people’s non-justification of VAW is based partly on hegemonic beliefs about men’s physiological gendered bodies, namely, the *perceived greater physical strength of men* (Black & Weisz, 2005; Bowen et al., 2013; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Scarduzio et al., 2017; Sears et al., 2006; Sundaram, 2013; Thongpriwan & McElmurry, 2009). Thus, a commonly invoked explanation is that men enact VAW because they have the physical strength to do so. Essentialist ideas about male sexuality are also commonly referenced as influencing young people’s justificatory and minimizing attitudes towards sexual violence, specifically, the idea that men have uncontrollable sexual urges (Aghtaie et al., 2018; French, 2003; Hlavka, 2014; Jeffrey & Barata, 2017; Salazar & Ohman, 2015; Sathiparsad, 2005; Tinkler et al., 2018; Totten, 2003; Towns, 2009).

The consequence of these bio-deterministic discourses is that young people, including young women, believe that women are *responsible for igniting male sexual desires* and are to blame for their own sexual victimization (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Chung, 2007; Hlavka, 2014; Salazar & Ohman, 2015; Tinkler et al., 2018). Males are positioned as natural sexual aggressors (Hlavka, 2014; Tinkler et al., 2018), where sexual harassment and violence is thus ‘considered inevitable because it is a “natural” reaction to women displaying their sexuality’ (Salazar & Ohman, 2015, p. 141; McCarry, 2010). Consequently, women self-blame and are blamed for not adequately enacting ‘gatekeeping’ measures to ward off men’s sexual advances (Chung, 2007; Hlavka, 2014).

Salazar and Ohman’s (2015) Nicaraguan study exemplifies how different discourses about men and women can moderate attitudes towards VAW. Young men who used a discourse which challenged inequality did not attribute sexual violence to essentialist ideas and thus, placed responsibility for IPV and sexual abuse on men. In contrast, young men who constructed ‘machismo’ beliefs about men attributed IPV to men’s supposedly ‘uncontrollable’ nature and thus, blamed women for sexual violence. What this study articulates is the variety of masculine positionalities that are described and enacted by men in relation to VAW. The existence of a ‘challenging inequality discourse’ is significant, insofar as it suggests opportunities to actively challenge entrenched dominant masculinities which connect manhood with control, violence and danger.

## Discussion and conclusions

Our review of qualitative empirical literature reveals the multiple and complex ways in which gender shapes young people’s understandings and perceptions of VAW. While maintaining cognizance of diverse national, cultural and socio-economic contexts in which attitudes are produced and enacted, at the root of the studies are remarkably consistent gendered norms and roles. These norms essentialize men as dominant, sexually aggressive, and physically strong; construct women as weak, vulnerable and ‘over-emotional’ (Scarduzio et al., 2017, p. 99); and position women as subordinate in heterosexual relationships. Bio-deterministic discourses which reinforce gender binaries and ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Totten, 2003) in relationships lead to young people explaining and justifying VAW when gender roles are transgressed (through partner infidelity, for example), and because violence is constructed as ‘naturally’ something that men do. Such beliefs arguably have a depoliticizing effect as they suggest that because men’s violence is ‘natural’, it is immutable and difficult to change (McCarry, 2010).

One of the particularly troubling aspects of young people’s attitudes and understandings revealed by our review is the disjunctures and boundaries that exist around young people’s narratives and definitions of VAW: that is, while young people may claim an intolerance for men’s VAW *in theory*, they excuse and justify it on the basis of particular situational contexts. Young people place boundaries around what is deemed ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ violence (Lombard, 2016). Physical violence is particularly

well-recognized, but the failure to identify more coercive behaviours and sexual violence and abuse is concerning, as it leads to a minimizing and acceptance of VAW. Indeed, a striking finding across many of the studies is how violence is so widely normalized within young people's lives.

Our review suggests a number of important trajectories in terms of developing future practice and research. Firstly, there is a need to further interrogate but also challenge young people's 'sense making strategies' (Tinkler et al., 2018, p. 50) around VAW, particularly essentialist explanations which place the blame on women for 'provoking' the supposedly uncontrollable urges of men. Young people who do not invoke essentialist or individualistic understandings of VAW place more responsibility onto men (Goicolea et al., 2012b; McCarry, 2010; Salazar & Ohman, 2015), and we suggest that deconstructing these individualistic explanations is crucial for enabling young people to interrogate VAW in terms of critical education. We recognize however that attitudes are only one of several elements of how a culture of VAW is maintained (Pease & Flood, 2008) and that educational endeavours without broader institutional and socio-structural change are unlikely to succeed.

Secondly, there is a need for further qualitative research exploring young people's contradictory, complex and shifting attitudes towards VAW. Some studies comment positively on the use of focus groups and vignettes to promote comfort and greater discussion amongst participants (Aghtaie et al., 2018; Fredland et al., 2005; Haglund et al., 2019; McCarry, 2009; Salazar & Ohman, 2015; Sears et al., 2006); to minimize power differentials in the research interaction (Lombard, 2016; McCarry, 2009); and to facilitate educational objectives, by building critical discussion and awareness amongst young people (Boyle, 2019; Mulumeoderhwa, 2021). Situational and contextual factors matter in how young people perceive VAW and we suggest that vignettes may be very useful in illuminating and exploring how attitudes and perceptions vary depending on multiple contextual factors. The effects and dynamics of using different methodological tools however require further investigation. For example, a number of authors note how in the context of interviewing young people about VAW, 'question wording activates particular constructs and obscures others' (Tinkler et al., 2018, p. 36). We therefore need to be aware of the way in which terminology and wording configuration may elicit particular responses from young people.

In addition to developing qualitative research, there is a need to explore young people's gendered attitudes in a wider variety of violent contexts, given the dominance of dating violence and IPV in our study sample, and towards a range of different, and emerging, forms of violence, including for example 'image-based abuse' (Boyle, 2019). While beyond the scope of this paper, we also identify a need to pay greater attention to the intersectional nature and construction of attitudes in which gender, 'race', and socio-economic contexts intertwine to produce particular perceptions and understandings, as well as to diverse socio-cultural and geographical contexts. Only through exploring these situated and multi-faceted contexts of young people's lives can we gain a richer understanding of their gendered attitudes towards VAW, and in turn tackle this intractable societal issue.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This paper was part of a multi-site study supported by GENDER-NET Plus Co-Fund. It was funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain (Ref. PCI2019-103580); the Swedish Research Council (Grant Number 2018-00968); the Irish Research Council (GNP-77); and the Ministry of Science and Technology of Israel (3-15662).

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