

Article

Women most at risk of experiencing partner abuse in England and Wales: years ending March 2015 to 2017

Characteristics of women who have been victims of partner abuse, in support of the Sustainable Development Goal 5 and the aim to end violence against women and girls.

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1 . Main points

- Eliminating violence against women and girls is one of the targets under the Sustainable Development Goals, findings show that some groups of women are more likely to experience partner abuse than others.
- Young women were more likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than older women.
- Women who had a long-term illness or disability were more than twice as likely to have experienced some form of partner abuse (12.4%) in the last 12 months than women who did not (5.1%).
- Bisexual women were nearly twice as likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than heterosexual women (10.9% compared with 6.0%).
- Women who identified with Mixed/Multiple ethnicities were more likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months (10.1%) than any other ethnic group.
- Women living in households with an income of less than £10,000 were more than four times as likely (14.3%) to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than women living in households with an income of £50,000 or more (3.3%).
- Women living in social housing (11.1%) were nearly three times as likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than women who were owner occupiers (4.1%).

2 . Statistician's comment

“Today’s analysis gives insight into the characteristics of women and girls who are more likely to experience partner abuse. It also tells us about the types of households they live in. This can help to inform policies and services aimed at ending violence against women and girls – one of the key targets in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.”

Glenn Everett, Deputy Director, Well-being, Inequalities, Sustainability & Environment Division, Office for National Statistics

3 . Introduction

There is a commitment under the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls across the globe. One of the targets of this goal is to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. This will be measured by two indicators, one of which is the:

“Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months”.

For England and Wales, this indicator can be reported on using data on partner abuse from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). Although the CSEW data provide the closest available match to the SDG indicator, it is not an exact match as the CSEW data relate only to the experiences of women aged 16 to 59 years.

The CSEW asks all respondents about their experiences of partner abuse and other types of domestic abuse. Owing to the focus of the SDG indicator, this article covers women's experiences of partner abuse only. Information on partner abuse experienced by males and other types of domestic abuse experienced by both males and females can be found in the [Domestic abuse: findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales: year ending March 2017](#) article.

Headline CSEW prevalence estimates for domestic abuse included within this article have previously been published in July 2017 alongside the [Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2017](#) bulletin. The more detailed analysis in this article is based on a combined three-year dataset (survey year ending March 2015 to survey year ending March 2017), to provide a large enough sample of victims to enable differences in prevalence between different groups of women to be identified. Many of the findings included within this article are consistent with those that have been previously published, within the [Domestic abuse: findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales: year ending March 2017](#) article.

This article is a collaborative piece between the SDG and Crime Statistics and Analysis teams. Although partner abuse affects lots of different groups of women, this analysis looks to identify those women who are most at risk of experiencing it. It looks at both personal characteristics and household characteristics such as age, disability, employment, marital status and household income. It also includes new analysis on ethnicity, sexual identity and religion.

Looking at the key characteristics of victims of partner abuse is necessary to support the SDG goal of ending violence against women and girls and identifying those who are most at risk. With the SDG goal in mind this article also highlights the work that the UK government is doing in trying to tackle domestic abuse.

This article also looks at findings from the [Violence against women survey](#), which was undertaken across 28 member states by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in 2012. It offers an insight into how the prevalence of domestic abuse in the UK compares with other EU countries.

4 . What is partner abuse?

Partner abuse in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) is made up of the following different types of abuse:

- non-sexual abuse by a partner or ex-partner: physical force, emotional or financial abuse, or threats to hurt the respondent or someone close to them, carried out by a current or former partner
- sexual assault carried out by a partner or ex-partner: rape or assault by penetration (including attempts), or indecent exposure or unwanted touching carried out by a current or former partner
- stalking carried out by a partner or ex-partner: two or more incidents (causing distress, fear or alarm) of receiving obscene or threatening unwanted letters, emails, text messages or phone calls, having had obscene or threatening information about them placed on the internet, waiting or loitering around home or workplace, or following or watching by a current or former partner

Victims of partner abuse can vary by a number of personal characteristics but many of these characteristics will be closely associated (for example, marital status and age) so caution is needed in the interpretation of the effects of these different characteristics when viewed in isolation. It must also be noted that characteristics of victims are those at the time of interview and not necessarily at the time the abuse occurred.

5 . How prevalent is partner abuse?

[The latest Crime Survey for England and Wales \(CSEW\) estimates](#) (for the survey year ending March 2017) showed that 1.2 million women (7.5%) aged 16 to 59 years were victims of “Any domestic abuse” in the last 12 months¹. Of these women, 985,000 (5.9% of women aged 16 to 59 years) experienced partner abuse in the last year. Non-sexual partner abuse was one of the most common forms of abuse against women.

The rest of the analysis in this article is based on a [dataset](#) combining the three survey years ending March 2015 to March 2017.

Notes for: How prevalent is partner abuse?

1. Domestic abuse in the CSEW combines partner abuse (non-sexual), family abuse (non-sexual) and sexual assault or stalking carried out by a current or former partner or other family member. This broadly matches the government’s definition of domestic violence and abuse, but the CSEW estimates do not currently completely capture the new offence of coercive and controlling behaviour. New survey questions to better estimate experiences of this type of abuse have been introduced into the survey from April 2017 and estimates from these questions are not yet available.

6 . Characteristics of women who are most at risk of experiencing partner abuse

Young women more likely to have experienced partner abuse

Young women aged between 16 and 19 years (7.6%) and 20 and 24 years (7.4%) were significantly more likely to have experienced partner abuse in the 12 months before interview than women aged between 45 and 54 years (5.6%) and 55 and 59 years (4.4%).

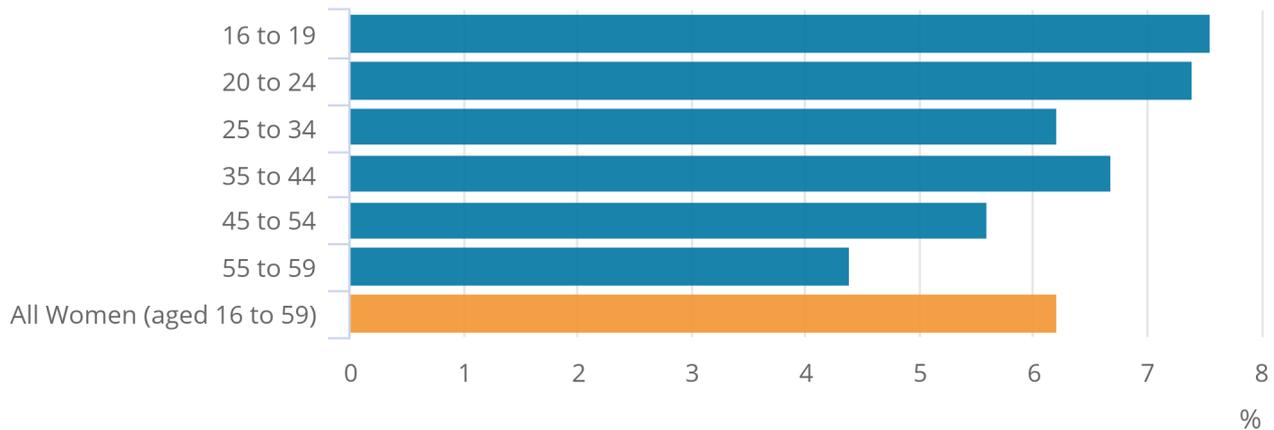
This follows a similar trend shown by women who experienced any domestic abuse, where younger women were also more likely to be victims than older women.

Figure 1: Partner abuse experienced by women in age groups from 16 to 59 years

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017

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England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales

Exploring the different types of partner abuse, women aged 16 to 19 years (1.9%) were significantly more likely to have experienced sexual assault by a partner or ex-partner in the last 12 months than any other age group.

Women with a long-term illness or disability more likely to have experienced partner abuse

Women who had a long-term illness or disability were just over twice as likely to have experienced some form of partner abuse in the last 12 months (12.4%) than women who did not (5.1%).

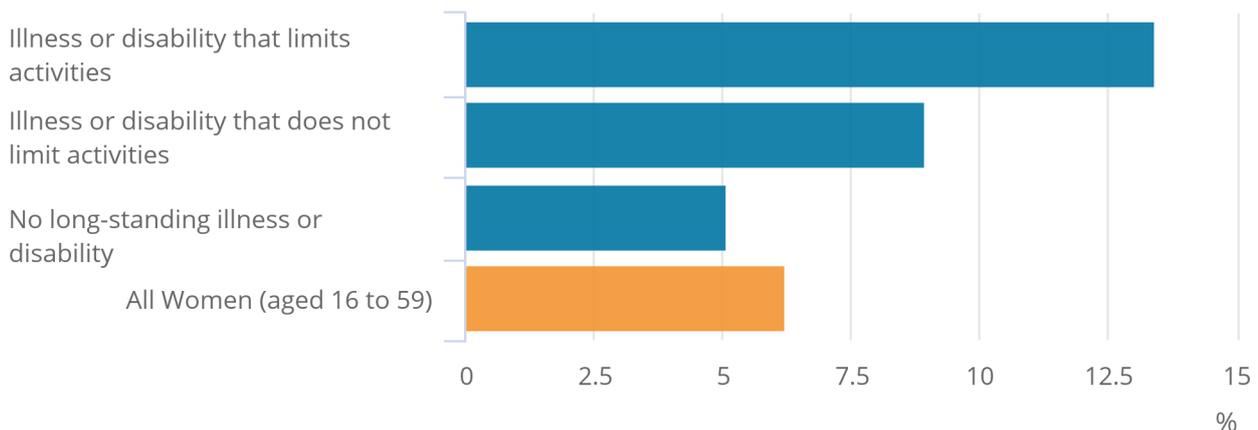
Exploring this further we can see that those who have a long-term illness or disability that limits their activities were more likely to have experienced any of the different types of partner abuse than those whose activities are not limited by their illness or disability.

Figure 2: Partner abuse experienced by 16- to 59-year-old women with a long-term illness or disability

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017

Figure 2: Partner abuse experienced by 16- to 59-year-old women with a long-term illness or disability

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales

[Public Health England \(PDF 186KB\)](#) highlighted in a 2015 report that as well as disabled people experiencing higher rates of domestic abuse than those who are not disabled, they also experienced more barriers to accessing support, such as health and social care services and domestic abuse services. Public Health England stated that this could be addressed by training health and social care professionals and staff in handling domestic abuse, by improving communication and knowledge sharing through the integration of services, and by engaging directly with disabled people.

Bisexual women more likely to have experienced partner abuse

Bisexual women were nearly twice as likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than heterosexual women (10.9% compared with 6.0%). When we look at the specific types of abuse, bisexual women were again twice as likely as heterosexual women to have experienced non-physical abuse (6.8% compared with 3.9%), but were nearly five times as likely to have experienced sexual assault by a partner or ex-partner (1.9% compared with 0.4%).

The gender of the perpetrator is important to consider when exploring partner abuse by sexual identity. Where heterosexual women experience partner abuse it can be assumed the perpetrator was a man, but when looking at partner abuse experienced by bisexual women, the perpetrator could be either male or female.

[Public Health England](#) has highlighted that there is evidence of inequalities across a range of areas, including domestic violence and sexual assault, that suggest there is an impact of discrimination and marginalisation for lesbian and bisexual women.

[SafeLives](#), working in partnership with Stonewall, has reported that their data on domestic abuse services within the UK identifies significant challenges for LGBT+ victims compared with non-LGBT+ victims. Their data, which is based on victims accessing services who use the SafeLives [Insights](#) system, shows that LGBT+ victims are almost twice as likely to have attempted suicide, more than twice as likely to have self-harmed, more likely to face abuse from multiple perpetrators and twice as likely to have experienced historic abuse from a family member.

Women with Mixed/Multiple ethnicity more likely to have experienced partner abuse

Women who identified with the Mixed/Multiple ethnic group (10.1%) were more likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than any other ethnic group.

Asian/Asian British women were the least likely to have been victims of partner abuse (2.8%).

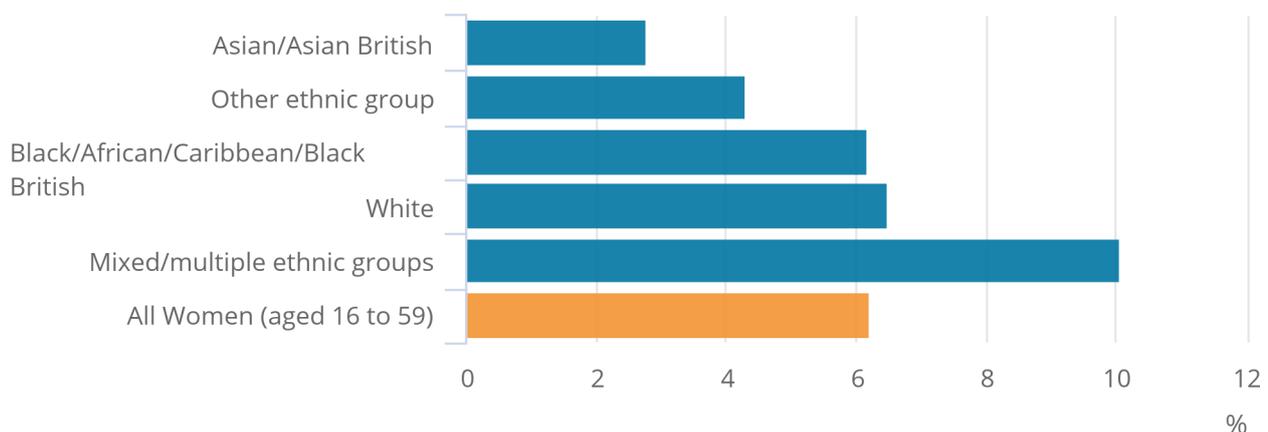
Women from the Mixed/Multiple ethnic group (10.1%) were three more times likely to have experienced partner abuse than Asian/Asian British women. White women (6.5%) were twice as likely to have experienced partner abuse than Asian/Asian British women.

Figure 3: Partner abuse experienced by 16- to 59-year-old women, by ethnic group

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017

Figure 3: Partner abuse experienced by 16- to 59-year-old women, by ethnic group

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales

Exploring the different types of partner abuse, Mixed/Multiple ethnic group women were more likely to have experienced non-physical partner abuse in the last year than any other ethnic group (7.5%).

The 2011 Census showed that the Mixed/Multiple ethnic group in England and Wales had the youngest age profile of all the ethnic groups, and as stated previously, younger women were more likely to have experienced abuse by a partner. The 2011 Census also showed that people identifying with the Mixed/Multiple ethnic group were the most likely to be in an inter-ethnic relationship (85%).

Christian women more likely to experience partner abuse than Muslim or Hindu women

Women's experience of partner abuse can vary by religious affiliation. Whilst there were not significant differences between all of the religions, there were differences when comparing some groups against others. For example:

- Christian women (5.7%) were more likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than Muslim women (2.9%) and Hindu women (1.8%)
- women with no religion were more likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months (7.4%) than Christian women (5.7%), Muslim women (2.9%) and Hindu women (1.8%)

Married women less likely to have experienced partner abuse than women with any other marital status

Experience of partner abuse in the last 12 months was least common among women who were married (2.6%). Women who were separated were significantly more likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months (19.0%) than those with other marital statuses, except for those who were divorced from their partner or had legally dissolved their partnership (16.3%).

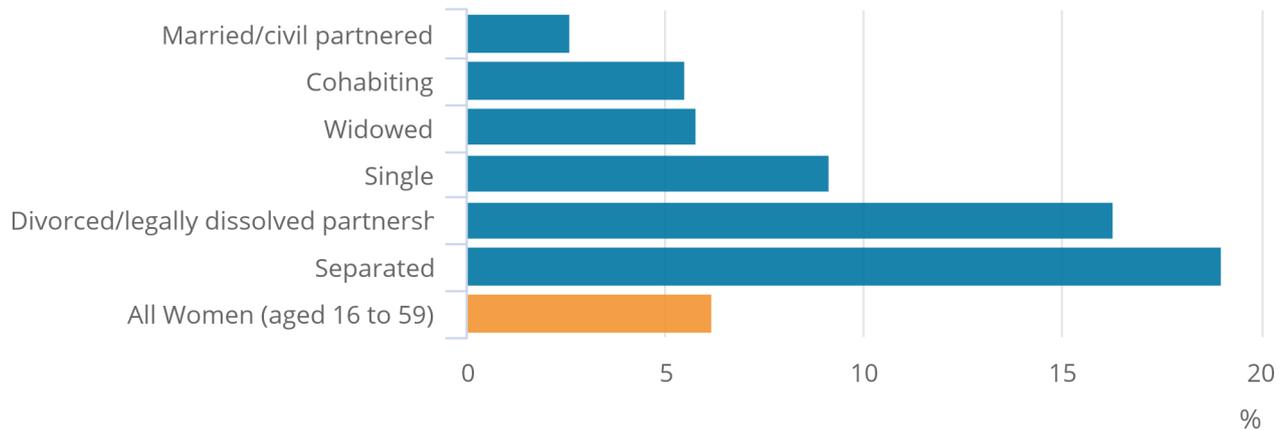
It is important to consider that characteristics are correct at the time of interview, so it is not known what the respondent's marital status was at the time of the abuse. For example, whether those who were separated experienced the abuse whilst separated, or separated from their partner following abuse. Marital status is also closely linked with some household characteristics such as household income and the structure of the household.

Figure 4: Partner abuse experienced by 16- to 59-year-old women, by marital status

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017

Figure 4: Partner abuse experienced by 16- to 59-year-old women, by marital status

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales

Unemployed women more likely to have experienced partner abuse

Unemployed women were nearly twice as likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than those in employment (10.6% compared with 5.6%). We can explore this further by looking at respondents' occupations, which shows that women in managerial and professional job roles were the least likely to have experienced partner abuse (4.6%). Students were the group of women most likely to have experienced sexual abuse by a partner or ex-partner in the last 12 months (1.8%) than any other occupation.

Women in lower-income households more likely to be victims of partner abuse

Women who lived in households that earned less than £10,000 were more than four times as likely (14.3%) to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than women living in households with an income of £50,000 or more (3.3%).

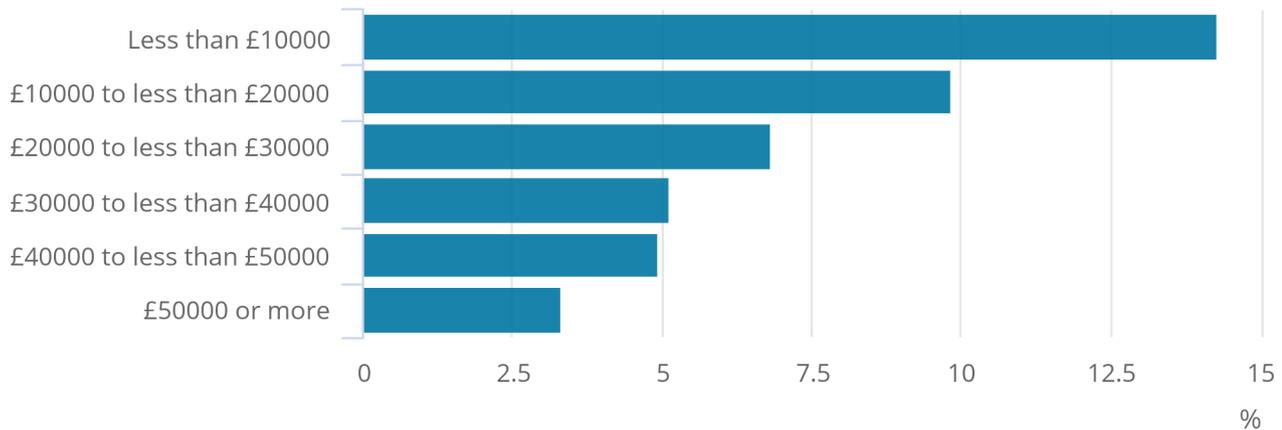
Household income is closely linked to the respondent's occupation, and the findings for household income reflect those for occupation, where women in higher-paid occupations were less likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months.

Figure 5: Partner abuse experienced by 16- to 59-year-old women, by household income

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017

Figure 5: Partner abuse experienced by 16- to 59-year-old women, by household income

England and Wales, year ending March 2015 to year ending March 2017



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales

Notes:

1. There was no income stated or not enough information provided for 5.7% of women.

The data in Figure 5 show that for non-sexual partner abuse and stalking by a partner, women in households that earn less than £10,000 were five times as likely to have experienced these types of partner abuse in the last 12 months than women living in households earning more than £50,000. For sexual assault by a partner they were three times as likely.

Women living in single-adult households with children most likely to have experienced partner abuse

Women living in single-adult households with children were the most likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months (20.5%). They were four times as likely to have experienced partner abuse than those living in a household with other adults and children (4.9%).

When looking at the different types of partner abuse, women who lived in single-adult households with children were seven times as likely to have experienced stalking by a partner or ex-partner (7.0% compared with 0.9%). They were also three times as likely to have been a victim of sexual abuse by a partner or ex-partner than women living in households made up of more than one adult and children (1.2% compared with 0.4%).

Women in socially rented housing more likely to have been a victim of partner abuse

Women living in social housing (11.1%) were more likely to have experienced partner abuse in the last 12 months than private renters (7.8%) and owner occupiers (4.1%).

It can also be seen that women living in owner-occupier households were less likely to have been a victim of sexual abuse by a partner or ex-partner in the last 12 months (0.3%) than those who lived in either social (0.6%) or private rented property (0.8%).

Women living in London least likely to have experienced partner abuse

There were regional differences in the prevalence of partner abuse, with women living in London being the least likely to have been a victim of partner abuse in the last 12 months (4.4%) compared with all other regions.

7 . What is the UK government doing to tackle domestic abuse?

Ending violence against women and girls is one of the main priorities under Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals. In order to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, 193 member states of the United Nations signed up to this priority, including the UK.

The UK government has said that it is committed to doing everything it can to end domestic abuse.

In February 2017, the prime minister announced a new programme of work leading towards a draft Domestic Abuse Bill to transform how we think about and tackle domestic abuse. That commitment was affirmed in the [Queen's Speech](#), which committed to bring forward a draft bill that proposes to:

- enshrine a definition of domestic abuse in law
- introduce a new protection order to better protect victims from their abusers
- recognise the harm domestic abuse inflicts on a child
- create a Domestic Abuse Commissioner in law
- demonstrate our commitment to ratifying the Istanbul Convention by extending extraterritorial jurisdiction over Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) related offences

The Home Office and Ministry of Justice launched the joint consultation [Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse \(PPF 1836KB\)](#) on International Women's Day in March 2018. The consultation seeks views on the measures set out in the Queen's Speech, as well as views on other steps that can be taken forward through future domestic abuse legislation. However, the government recognises that it will take more than new laws to help victims and survivors rebuild their lives, and the consultation accordingly also sets out and seeks views on the non-legislative steps that can be taken to raise awareness, support victims and ensure perpetrators are stopped.

In March 2016 the Government published the new Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, and has now pledged increased funding of 100m through to 2020 to provide a secure future to rape support centres, national helplines, and FGM and Forced Marriage Units. This funding also includes the £17m VAWG Service Transformation Fund, which promotes and embeds best practice locally with an emphasis on prevention and early intervention, as well as the £20m Domestic Violence Accommodation Services Fund provided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.

8 . How does partner abuse data in the UK compare with other countries in the European Union?

As the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) only covers those two countries, we can use data from a European Union (EU) survey to provide an insight into women's experience of partner abuse across the whole of the UK, and how this compares with women in other EU countries.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights' [Violence against women survey](#) in 2012 covered the 28 member states of the EU. The results were published in 2014 and were based on interviews with 42,000 women, who were asked about their experiences of physical and sexual violence by a current or former partner in the last 12 months.

The [results](#) showed that there was little variation between member states in the proportion of women (aged 18 to 74 years at time of interview) who had experienced physical and/or sexual violence in the 12 months prior to interview by a current or former partner.

Results showed that the EU average was 4%, compared with 5% of women from the UK who had experienced partner abuse in the 12 months prior to the interview.

However, it is important to remember that the results are based on interviews conducted in 2012 and may not reflect the picture today. The latest CSEW estimates (for the year ending March 2017) show a significant reduction in the prevalence of domestic abuse for women compared with the year ending March 2012.

Overall prevalence rates for women who experienced partner abuse in the previous 12 months in other countries, according to the survey ranged from 6% for countries such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania and Slovakia, to 2% in Estonia, Poland, Slovenia and Spain.

Highest prevalence rates for women who experienced partner abuse were with women in the youngest age group and who were aged 18 to 29 years (UK 9% compared with EU average 6%). The prevalence rates decreased as women got older, with the lowest rate of occurrence among women who were aged 60 years and over.

Data on partner abuse experienced by women aged over 59 years isn't yet available from the CSEW, but the age range for completing the questions on domestic abuse was increased from 59 to 74 years in April 2017 and data for this new age range will be published in July 2018 alongside the [Crime in England and Wales, year ending March 2018 release](#).