

CYPE(6)-07-22 – Paper 3

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg ynghylch aflonyddu rhywiol rhwng cyfoedion ymysg dysgwyr](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Peer on peer sexual harassment among learners](#)

Ymateb gan: Yr Athro EJ Renold

Response from: Professor EJ Renold

5. Your views

Record your views against the inquiry's terms of reference, which have been grouped into 5 themes:

1. Scale
2. Impact
3. Effectiveness of interventions
4. Wider context
5. Other

5.1 Scale

- The scale and nature of the issue in education settings and how many learners are affected.
- The extent to which this issue also occurs outside the formal education setting, including online.
- Schools, colleges and local authorities' collection and use of bullying and harassment data.

There are over two decades of [research](#) into sexual bullying and harassment between children and young people within and beyond educational settings. There have also been some high profile government inquiries on sexual harassment in schools (Women and Equalities Committee 2016) and public spaces (Women and Equalities Committee 2018). In Wales, we have seen a range of guidance published by Welsh Government, from the statutory 2019 "Challenging Bullying: rights, respect and equality" guidance (which includes sexual, sexist, and homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying), and the more recent [2020 Peer sexual abuse, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour](#). However, concerns have resurfaced since Soma Sara launched the Everyone's Invited movement in 2022 (Charnock [2021](#); Firmin [2020](#)), and both Ofsted and Estyn carried out their own inquiries.



The overwhelming key messages from research in this field confirm many of the findings in Estyn's own review into sexual harassment between young people. They include:

- 1) Verbal and non-contact sexual harassment between young people is widespread in schools and increasingly prevalent online ([Ringrose et al. 2021](#)) and in public spaces ([Renold et al. 2016](#)). 50% of secondary school students in Wales reported being called sexually offensive names by boys, and this increases with age (SHRN 2019).
- 2) Sexual harassment between young people disproportionately affects girls/women, gender and sexuality non-conforming young people and LGBTQ+ young people ([Renold et al. 2016](#), SHRN 2019).
- 3) Sexual harassment needs to be understood in the context of how harmful gender and sexual norms routinely regulate young people's identities, experiences of their body and appearance, their social activities (offline/online), and friendship and relationship cultures. These norms also underpin and are used to justify a range of harmful sexual behaviours.
- 4) Recent research into image-based harassment has shown that 66% of the requests for nude images that girls received came from people under the age of 18. Of those teenagers who requested girls' nudes, 39% came from a romantic or sexual partner, 36% came from a friend or acquaintance, and 21% came from a stranger. A key finding of this research was how masculinity norms motivate boys to solicit and/or forward nude images from girls ([Ringrose et al. 2021](#))
- 5) Sexual harassment is not confined to the secondary school or older teens. but is happening in the everyday lives of pre-teen children and in primary school. This includes heteronormative, homophobic, biphobic and transphobic harassment (see [Renold 2013](#); [Renold and Huuki 2015](#); [Renold et al. 2019](#)). However, little is known about image-based harassment amongst primary school aged children.
- 6) A growing number of young people are beginning to speak out about their experiences, particularly vis a vis social media, but also through gender equality or feminist youth clubs, and LGBTQ+ youth groups ([Mendez et al. 2018](#))
- 7) There is a rapidly expanding vocabulary that is providing young people with a language to describe not just types of sexual harassment (e.g. cyber-flashing, up-skirting, revenge porn, gaslighting etc) but concepts that are helping us understand the wider conducive cultures that enable sexual harassment in all its formations to thrive (e.g. rape culture, lad culture, toxic masculinity etc. ([Renold 2016](#)))
- 8) We are witnessing a wider range of collective movements, particularly online movements, which young people have access to, and participate in. Some of these are affirmative and focused on supporting and understanding victims' experiences of sexual harassment (e.g. 'Everyday Sexism' and 'Everyone's Invited'). Other movements are creating and inciting a complex culture of hate that perpetuates and discriminates against girls, women and gender and sexual minorities (e.g. Alt right groups and Incels, see [Ging 2018](#)).

NB. Terminology: the shift from sexual bullying to sexual harassment

The concept of sexual harassment, rather than sexual bullying, is a welcome shift in terminology. The individualising logic of 'bullying', with its psychological categories of victim, perpetrator and bystander, struggle to address the social and cultural power relations that children are caught up in and negotiate on a daily basis.

'Harassment' can better capture the textual, verbal, physical, material, emotional and psychological sexual and gendered abuses of power in children's everyday peer cultures, relationships and social and cultural worlds more widely, including the routine and normalised



everyday sexism and rape culture circulating across their 'online' and 'offline' worlds and in wider media representations.

However, the ways in which both learners and schools understand what constitutes sexual harassment and/or sexual bullying informs what is reported. Moreover, the focus on defining the phenomenon through the available categories and reporting procedures, and not on the wider conducive social and cultural contexts within which sexual harassment thrives, often means that prevention programmes and pedagogy in this field are limited in scope at best, and driven by a shame and blame pedagogy at worst.

5.2 Impact

- The impact on pupils' learning, mental health and well-being.
- The impact on education settings and staff, for example in terms of discipline and the extent to which harassment among learners has become 'normalised'.
- The specific impacts on particular groups of learners (e.g., older pupils, girls, LGBTQ+ pupils, etc.).

"Most of the girls, when something happens to them, like they get sexually assaulted or something they don't tell the teachers" (age 14, [Renold and Timperley 2021](#), *Unboxing Relationships and Sexuality Education*).

As outlined above, sexual harassment, the normalisation of sexual harassment (offline and online) and the subtle and explicit ways in which sexual harassment is steeped in and consolidates gender and sexual norms is widespread in secondary schools, but begins in children's formative years. As the quote above illustrates, however, children and young people "don't tell the teachers". This is often due to a number of reasons including; feelings of discomfort, embarrassment and shame; a wider victim-blaming culture that is steeped in harmful gender and sexual norms; peer group dynamics and reporting on 'friends'; its normalisation and thus the futility of the reporting process.

Research on gender and sexual harassment has conclusively demonstrated that girls/young women, LGBTQ+ young people and those young people who are perceived not to conform to the normative categories of 'femininity', 'masculinity' and 'heterosexuality' are most at risk of discrimination, exclusion and abuse ([Mayo and Blackburn 2019](#); [Meyer, 2018](#); [Ging and Neary, 2019](#); [Renold et al. 2016](#)).

For example in relation to our research with young people aged 12-14 ([Renold, Bragg, Ringrose and Jackson 2016](#); 2018):

- Girls, gender/sexuality non-conforming youth and LGBTQ+ youth in particular reported feeling at risk of judgement based on norms around the body and appearance; pressures around heterosexual relationship cultures and heterosexual double standards.
- Just over one third (35%) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had experienced sexual harassment because of their gender. Indeed, when young people did



not conform to heteronormative identity constructions or normative ideas about gender they could be subject to various forms of harassment, attacks or unwelcome regulatory sexual banter, especially in public places.

- While reporting was rare, those young people who did report experiencing sexual harassment in school, online and in public spaces, felt unsupported by schools or parents in dealing with these issues.

In research into the gender and sexual cultures of pre-teen children ([Renold 2013](#)) **most children age 10-12 reported either witnessing or experiencing direct or indirect incidents of sexual harassment, particularly slut-shaming and anti-gay talk** (at school, in the street, and online), with gender and sexual stereotypes used by children and some staff to justify these forms of harassment. Much of this occurred in and across the gendered and sexual dynamics of children's everyday peer cultures, and the severity and impact were context and locality specific. Moreover, young boyfriend-girlfriend cultures were a volatile mix of anxiety, pain, pleasure and power. Indeed, many children talked about group coercive sexual practices, such as being 'forced to kiss' in the playground by their peers, which urges us to shift our understandings from consent as a process between two individuals to consent as a social process negotiated in peer group cultures.

***Intersectionality matters** Central to understanding the impact of sexual harassment upon different groups of learners is paying attention to how sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia work *together* in how sexual harassment is experienced and normalised (Pasco, 2011; Payne and Smith, 2012, 2018; Ringrose and Renold, 2010). Indeed the way that teachers and other educators (struggle to) understand the diverse ways in which intersectional gender norms impact upon young people's experiences of sexual harassment, informs the approach and effectiveness of school-based interventions and pedagogies.

5.3 Effectiveness of interventions

- The effectiveness of existing policies and guidance, and the identification of potential solutions and improvements.
- The effectiveness of the roles of a wide range of statutory bodies (including the police, social services, local authority education departments, pupil referral units and schools themselves) and the extent to which a multi-agency approach is being taken where appropriate.
- The effectiveness of the Welsh Government's response across all its relevant departments with a focus on education, social services and community safety and its inclusion of non-devolved services such as the police and the criminal justice system.



This section focuses specifically upon school-based interventions with an understanding that schools are key sites for prevention, protection and change.

International research shows that promising interventions in educational settings to address sexual harassment do so when they are proactive, not reactive (e.g. in response to a disclosure or incident); addressed within the full spectrum of gender-based and sexual violence; and situated within a rights and gender-equity based, trauma-informed, whole school approach. Some of these elements are summarised below:

Cross-curricular: A holistic, cross-curricular approach to sexual harassment, will include but does not stop and start with knowing the law, knowing how to report, or knowing where to seek advice. Rather, it uses the full curriculum, and within a whole school approach, to progressively explore how and why sexual harassment happens. For example, a upper secondary school project exploring the regulation of gendered clothing or gendered bodies through history and across different cultures (e.g. a project on ‘skirts’ or ‘public toilets’) could enable a rich exploration of how girls’ and women’s bodies have been objectified, sexualised and commodified, as public property and always under surveillance. This could be complimented by a fact-finding project on organisations and movements which have addressed ‘street harassment’ (e.g. [Hollaback](#), see Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2018) and ‘cyber-flashing’ (Ringrose et al. 2021). External providers with specific expertise could be drawn upon to support key topics/areas.

Rights and Gender Equity: Schools need to proactively find ways to address and advance a rights-based approach to gender *and* sexual equalities and equity. This could include, for example, providing resources and commitment to youth led feminist and LGBTQ+groups and using existing or co-creating new resources and curricula with young people that situates sexual harassment in a range of sites and spaces (from social media, to public places) and within a wide range of gender-based and sexual violence.

Intersectional and global: An intersectional and local and global understanding of power relations around girls and women’s bodies, and understanding the nature and impact of sexual harassment across public, institutional *and* private spaces need to be prioritized in teacher training, curricula materials and dedicated RSE lessons.

Pupil Voice: Children and Young People’s own understandings and experiences must be prioritized in the design and delivery of resources, strategies and prevention programmes in order to be relevant, responsive and developmentally appropriate. They must be affirmative in their approach, and mitigate against potential binary victim-blaming or perpetrator-shaming and in ways that are inclusive of all gender and sexual identity and expression. See the following two examples from a recent research project in Wales with young people, aged 13-17 (Renold and Timperley 2021) which highlights the limits to drop-down days and external providers:

Rosa and Lissy (age 14) describe annual visits from a school community police officer in Year’s 7 and 8. As part of the lesson the policeman shows the class a video on ‘sexting’.
Lissy: We were just sitting there for, like, two hours just talking to this police officer, who was talking at us, not with us, in terms of what to do and what not to do.
Rosa: We learned about it, but all we really do is... like, they just tell us it’s wrong and then show us a video, that’s just kind of it.



Lissy: Yeah! I was just about to say about the video, it's the same video every year and it's still boring.

Rosa: It just looks really staged, it's not very... it's not very accurate, I don't think.

Lissy: Really stereotypical as well.

When asked about the kind of video they would create ...

Lissy: I would probably show, like, how you would actually deal with it, because at the end it just says, like, "Don't send nudes," not ... it doesn't talk about the, like, pressure, and how to, like, actually say no, it just says, "Don't do it," at the end.

Rosa: Like, it doesn't go into any, like, detail and also, it doesn't talk about how you shouldn't shame people when they get that kind of thing, like ... because people just shame them automatically and call them a slut. Or they, like, stereotype it, it's always the girl doing it to ... like, it's always the boy asking for it or something.

Lissy: Yeah... yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, it is'!

Rosa: I don't think there should be a video at all.

Trauma-informed: All of the above, is part of what is being conceptualised as a trauma-informed approach to sexual harassment. A trauma-informed approach focuses on affirmative, empowering and transformative practices to address harmful sexual behaviours ([Renold, 2019](#); [Biglia and Alldred, 2015](#), [Jones et al., 2016](#)) and interventions that focus on collective (rather than individual) understandings, actions and solutions ([Fava and Bay-Cheng 2013](#)). Central here is knowing how to create a safe, non-judgemental and inclusive learning environment, across the whole school.

Over 28 case studies that take a rights and equity based approach address gender-based and sexual harassment and violence in schools can be found in the AGENDA resource (www.agendaonline.co.uk, Renold 2019)

5.4 The wider context

- The impact of online content and influences on young people's attitudes, and the wider context of online safety and potential legislation at Westminster.
- The role of families, parents, and carers.
- The role of the new Curriculum for Wales in developing healthier attitudes towards relationships and sexuality issues.



Image-based abuse and online safety

Space precludes an extensive response here, but the recent research by Ringrose et al. (2022) into understanding and combatting young people's experiences of image based sexual harassment includes a range of recommendations for schools, families, parents and carers. <https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Campaigns/Understanding-and-combatting-youth-experiences-of-image-based-sexual-harassment-and-abuse-full-report.pdf>

As outlined above, it is vital that our understanding and interventions to address sexual harassment and image-based abuse in the context of young people's online learning and experience is not viewed in isolation from their 'off-line' worlds. They are part of the same social and cultural landscape.

While new laws and legislation, such as the new offence of 'cyber-flashing' in the Online Safety bill are crucial and welcome, they must be accompanied with an educational response that both joins-up and goes beyond the existing policy-focused guidance that is rarely accompanied by a fully resourced and evidence based robust professional learning framework.

Wales' forthcoming RSE and the need for specialist RSE professional learning

Wales' new forthcoming cross-curricular statutory [Relationships and Sexuality Education](#), has rights, equity, empowerment, and a whole school approach as key principles for RSE provision.

The [RSE code](#) enables schools to begin creating safe, inclusive and empowering learning environments to explore the fundamentals of rights, consent and gender equity from the early years. And while the third strand in the RSE code, "Empowerment, Safety and Respect" focuses on how "*Learners need to develop an understanding of the social, emotional, physical and legal nature and impact of harmful behaviours, including all bullying, and LGBTQ+ based bullying, sexual violence and gender-based violence in a range of contexts, including online*". This focus on understanding harm is embedded in a range of rights and equity 'what matters' statements that support learners to understand the role of harmful gender and sexual norms in influencing social interactions, behaviours and relationships, and how sex, gender and sexuality rights have changed over time and around the world. The code thus provides schools to develop a holistic approach and a progressive scaffolding, that if realised, can enable schools to address sexual harassment across the curriculum and as part of a whole school approach.

However, as I have repeatedly outlined in previous inquiries and consultations one of the biggest challenges facing schools is the time, resources and access to research-informed professional learning and training. Of the 150+ primary, secondary and special school teachers that have participated in our own ([Renold et al. 2021](#)) professional learning workshops designed to prepare them for the new RSE (2019-2022), very few have had any RSE training, and gender, sexuality and violence are often identified as one of their curriculum panic zones.

Key to any future professional learning, training and interventions in this area will mean reviewing how existing programmes or interventions are specifically challenging the shame and blame, risk-based approaches to 'healthy/unhealthy' relationships education' and supporting those that advance a much wider understanding that foregrounds the complex and intersectional abuses of power in all inter-personal relationships – relationships that include, but also go beyond, peer relationships (i.e. relationships that young people don't have control over). Such interventions might depart from what is expected from a conventional 'healthy relationships', 'anti-bullying' or 'sexual harassment' resource. Some of these interventions and resources may be targeted to supporting particular at-risk groups such as girls/women, LGBTQ+ young people or



specific issues such as ‘toxic masculinity’. The AGENDA resource is one such example (www.agendaonline.co.uk).

The DfE (England) has recently commissioned a piece of work to explore a range of interventions that can support schools to better understand the impact of sexual harassment and address the wider conducive context and culture. This could be something that Welsh Government undertake and/or learn from.

The need for a national RSE Network

There are many interventions and resources currently available that collectively could provide educational settings to develop a holistic, affirmative and rights and equity based approaches to address sexual harassment in schools, and beyond.

However, many of these resources are not bilingual, some have not been revised to meet the requirements and principles of the new RSE curriculum in Wales, and most teachers, and in some cases, external providers are unaware that they exist, because there is still no national policy/practice/research RSE network or hub through which Government approved and endorsed resources can be shared and developed.

The new RSE for Wales carries the potential for schools to develop a preventative pedagogy and spark the culture shift that is needed to enact change. However, schools need to be fully supported on that journey, and the role of external providers and specialists cannot be underestimated. If Wales is committed to addressing the prevalence and normalisation of sexual harassment in the lives of young people, then a fully resourced, research informed, multi-agency response which supports schools to know how to develop a whole school approach to the issue within (and not in isolation to) a wider programme of RSE, is certainly a step in the right direction.

5.5 Other

Please record any views you have below that do not fit into the themes above.

