

YOUNG WOMEN LEAD COMMITTEE

REPORT ON SEXUAL HARRASSMENT IN SCHOOLS

YWCA SCOTLAND - THE YOUNG WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Foreword

2018 marks a century since some women were given the right to vote: the first step towards women's participation in formal political decision making. There is still much to be done! One hundred years on from that act of civic participation by women, I have had the privilege of convening a special kind of Committee meeting in the Scottish Parliament. Made up of 32 women under 30, the Young Women Lead Committee is a partnership between YWCA Scotland – The Young Women's Movement and our Parliament. The aim is to empower young women living in Scotland to engage with politics.

The women who make up the Committee are a diverse group: geographically and culturally. They are all united though in their desire to change things, and improve the lives of other young women growing up in Scotland. In this year of the #MeToo movement, the group chose to run an inquiry into sexual harassment in schools. They've taken evidence from their peers and communities through focus groups, questionnaires and social media.

The members of the Young Women Lead Committee are determined that it won't be a century before things change for young women like them. This report and its recommendations are their first step, and I am sure there will be many more accomplishments from this inspiring group - Young Women Lead.

Linda Fabiani MSP, Deputy Presiding Officer and Convener of the Young Women Lead Committee.

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Introduction

1. In Scotland in 2018, one of the things girls can experience in school is sexual harassment.
2. Sexual harassment is part of a range of gender-based violence against women and girls (VAWG), which includes
 - Physical, sexual and psychological violence including domestic abuse, rape, incest and child sexual abuse
 - Sexual exploitation including prostitution, pornography and trafficking
 - Dowry-related violence
 - Forced and child marriage
 - So called “Honour based violence”¹
3. Sexual harassment is defined as “unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature which violates your dignity, makes you feel intimidated, degraded or humiliated, [and/or] creates a hostile or offensive environment”². Recently, the #MeToo movement has shown just how prevalent it is in society. That it begins at such a young age is sadly not a great surprise, but the fact is it’s not only common, it’s increasing.³
4. The impact of sexual harassment on girls is significant and can be long-lasting. It can negatively impact everything from their mental health to their relationships and career choices. That this damage takes place in an environment where young women are meant to have space to learn about the world around them and their place in it, is fundamentally wrong and action must be taken to put an end to it.
5. Over the course of our inquiry, we heard from expert witnesses and from our communities. Our online questionnaire and focus groups highlighted real stories and real experiences from young women and teachers. A number of themes emerged, including the importance of sex and relationship education, issues around support and reporting of sexual harassment, the diverse support needs of different groups of women and the needs for consistency in access to support across the whole of Scotland.
6. This report and its recommendations provide a starting point for action which we believe must be undertaken.

¹ [Scottish Government Policy, Violence against Women and Girls](#)

² Citizen’s Advice [definition of sexual harassment](#)

³ Girlguiding UK Girl’s Attitudes Survey

Sex and Relationship Education

7. Zero Tolerance told our committee:

“There are only so many reports, surveys, statistics and polls that can show what we already know: that sexual harassment in schools is being swept under the rug and that sex and relationships education in Scotland needs a radical refresh if it is to reduce gender-based violence and work effectively for our young people.”
8. We ran two online questionnaires, one for students and one for staff, to understand more about the experience and prevalence of sexual harassment in Scottish schools.⁴ Our questionnaire revealed that 70% of student respondents and 48% of teaching staff who responded find the current curriculum does not adequately prepare students to discuss intimacy with a partner. Nearly half of both students and teachers (45% and 48% respectively) said the current curriculum does not adequately cover consent. Information about contraceptive options was also seen as inadequate, according to 47% of students and 48% of teachers.
9. Our questionnaire showed that students turn to the internet (40%) and their friends (29%) for their information on sex and relationships. This corresponds with research undertaken by Zero Tolerance in 2014⁵ which showed “only a quarter of young people surveyed listed formal sex education at school as their main source of sex education and a significant number of those wanted more sex and relationships information to be made available to them, on a wider variety of topics.”⁶
10. We agree with Zero Tolerance that:

“our education system is key to tackling the primary causes of gender-based violence. What may seem like harmless banter or teenage hijinks are hugely detrimental to a learning environment and, moreover, do not stop when young people leave school. Teachers are clearly calling for more guidance, more school time, and more resources to address sexual bullying in schools. We need to explore, develop and expand the Whole School Approach, continuing to engage young people, staff, governors, and parents, in addition to local child safeguarding bodies, police, and specialist third sector organisations.”⁷

⁴ Our questionnaire ran over April and received 104 responses from pupils (mostly aged between 14-15) and 63 responses from staff. The text of the questionnaire and collated responses will be available at www.ywascotland.org after 31 May 2018.

⁵ [Zero Tolerance Young People’s Attitudes Research 2014](#)

⁶ [Zero Tolerance Written Submission](#)

⁷ [Zero Tolerance Written Submission](#)

11. Girlguiding Scotland called for “compulsory high quality sex and relationships education covering consent, online abuse, gender equality and healthy relationships.”⁸ We believe this education should start as early as possible. Zero Tolerance conducted a survey of parents, teachers and support staff on relationship education in early primary (age 5-8) in Scotland and found:

“80% of respondents reported that they were not aware of any specific materials available for children aged 5-8 on navigating social relationships, 97.5% of respondents agreed that there should be. 57% of parents also reported seeing a marked change in attitudes towards gender roles displayed by their children when making the transition from nursery to primary school, suggesting this is a key time for intervention.”⁹

12. The Scottish Government told us:

“Learning about [Relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP)] education begins early on in primary school right up to S4-S6. Schools will equip young people with information on a wide range of issues, depending on their age and stage. They will be encouraged to discuss these subjects with their peers and parents, to help them gain knowledge, and the skills to become confident in making healthy lifestyle decisions for themselves. We ask teachers to work closely with parents and pupils in the delivery of RSHP education, by discussing proposed lessons and resources with them in advance.”¹⁰

13. The Scottish Government also commented that RSHP education:

“is not statutory and it is for local authorities and schools to decide how to deliver the curriculum based on local needs and circumstances.”¹¹

14. They added, “It is for schools to decide how they deliver RSHP education, based on the needs of the children or young people in their classroom.”¹²

15. We view sex and relationship education as key to tackling sexual harassment in schools. However, we are clear that sexual education must change as a matter of urgency. We recommend the Scottish Government expands sexual education in schools so that it includes content around respect, consent and healthy relationships. We would expect this curriculum to include materials for primary schools, and to be taught by P5 at the latest.

16. We believe sex and relationship education should be as standardised a curriculum as other subjects like maths and English. This curriculum should be the same across the country, with no option to omit areas or teach them differently.

⁸ [Girlguiding Scotland Written Submission](#)

⁹ [Zero Tolerance Written Submission](#)

¹⁰ [Scottish Government Written Submission](#)

¹¹ [Scottish Government Written Submission](#)

¹² [Scottish Government Written Submission](#)

17. We know that better quality, more relevant sexual education is essential to tackling sexual harassment. We urge the Scottish Government to establish a mandatory framework for evaluating sexual education to ensure quality and consistency across Scotland, in the same manner that it evaluates other subjects.

18. We recommend the Scottish Government involve young people in the design of age and demographic appropriate curriculum and resources around relationships and consent. In particular, we would like to see LGBTI and minority ethnic young people along with experts developing the curriculum.

Reporting

19. We want a school environment where sexual harassment does not take place. An important part of achieving this is having effective reporting mechanisms in place. Zero Tolerance told us:

“What is clear from all the cited studies is that schools are not empowered with the guidance, training, and structures to deal with incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Too often such incidents are brushed aside by staff and not taken sufficiently seriously by school leaders.”¹³

20. Scottish Women’s Aid told us, “There is inconsistency of practice around Scotland in relation to how schools tackle gender-based violence.”¹⁴ Both our research and own experience agree.

21. We heard about a lack of confidence from young women in available reporting systems in their schools, including examples of teachers breaking confidence and cases where small school environments can compromise the anonymity of the complainer. This was echoed by Rape Crisis, who wrote:

“We know that guidance teachers deal with a lot of concerns related to [violence against women and girls]. However some young people say they would find it hard to talk to guidance staff because:

- They’re concerned what they say might not be kept confidential and they might lose control of what happens
- There might not be a private space to talk to a guidance teacher, and they might have to explain things in the guidance base in front of all the teachers
- They don’t always recognise their experience as harassment or abuse. So many things that happen to girls and young women are ‘normalised’ and ‘everyday’ that they don’t necessarily know that it’s OK to complain or get support, and to trust that the issue will be taken seriously.”¹⁵

22. According to figures reported by Girlguiding Scotland:

- 64% of those aged 11 to 16 say that teachers or staff sometimes or always tell girls to ignore sexual harassment.
- 52% say that teachers or staff sometimes or always dismiss this as just a bit of banter – ‘boys mucking around’
- More than half of girls age 13 to 21 think that those who report sexual harassment may be bullied or teased.¹⁶

23. Our focus groups found that 91% of participants considered sexual harassment or gender based bullying to be a problem at their school, but only half said there was a

¹³ [Zero Tolerance Written Submission](#)

¹⁴ [Scottish Women’s Aid Written Submission](#)

¹⁵ [Rape Crisis Written Submission](#)

¹⁶ [Taken from the taken from the 2014 Girls’ Attitudes Survey, Girlguiding Scotland Written Submission](#)

teacher they could trust to tell. They expressed concerns that reports of sexual harassment were not being kept confidential by guidance staff, particularly in smaller schools or communities. They feared being called a liar, and being excluded by their peers or bullied if they reported sexual harassment.

24. The young people felt school staff lacked knowledge and understanding of issues around sexual violence, and expressed a desire for more education and opportunities to talk about sexual violence and gender in school.
25. From our questionnaire, we learned that 63% of pupils were “extremely uncomfortable” speaking to a member of school staff about a sexual/intimacy issue. 54% did not feel protected from sexual harassment in schools, with 26% feeling “extremely vulnerable”. 49% were not confident an incident of sexual harassment would be well handled by the school, with 51% believing their school would be “ineffective”.
26. We have considered several options to improve reporting in schools, such as:
 - The creation of a national help and information phone line or portal
 - A named and trained person within school who deals with all aspects of sexual harassment reporting
 - A physical safe space in schools
27. In our questionnaire, 70% of students felt they would benefit from a national service such as a phone line or online support where they could get advice about incidents of sexual harassment, but not necessarily report them. 73% of pupils said they would benefit from a “safe space” in school¹⁷. 90% of pupils felt they would benefit from having a specially trained, named contact in school to handle incidents of sexual harassment.
28. Staff felt (63%) students would benefit from a national phone line/online support service and 96% felt pupils would benefit from a safe space in school. 84% of staff thought students would benefit from having a specially trained named contact in school. Teachers thought all staff should be properly trained to handle issues around sexual harassment, rather than having one trained member of staff. They were also supportive of opportunities to regularly update their training on these issues.
29. We heard that sometimes students want to report sexual harassment. However, we also heard that some people simply want support following an incident. Decisions about reporting might in some cases only be made once support has been accessed. We also heard that victims of sexual harassment want to be involved in any course of action, and have a say in what happens to them. They do not want to be powerless but active participants.
30. Students were clear that support had to be confidential (including often omitting parental involvement) and should be standard across the country. Support and information should outline options for victims, and offer advice rather than funnelling

¹⁷ The [World YWCA](#) defines a safe space as being made up of eight key elements, these are: accessible and safe location; leadership and participation; accurate and reliable information; building trust; holistic approaches; intergenerational cooperation; dignity and respect; partnership and accountability.

the victim directly into a reporting process. Students also felt there should be appropriate interventions for “low level” harassment, and advice on how to deal with it.

31. The Scottish Government told us that they currently provide over £300,000 in funding to ChildLine to give confidential support on topics which can include sexual harassment. However:

“With regards to confidentiality, where a child protection concern exists – if a child or young person is considered to be at risk of significant harm, it would be deemed in the best interests of that child for information to be shared, in line with existing procedures.”¹⁸
32. We recommend the Scottish Government works with education authorities and child protection experts and students to establish a consistent approach to reporting and monitoring sexual harassment in schools, and supports teachers and education staff to facilitate this
33. We recommend this approach includes a public strategy to increase confidence and transparency around the reporting of incidents of sexual harassment in schools, taking account of existing child protection systems, while allowing the victim a say in the process.
34. We recommend the Scottish Government works with education authorities to ensure a named contact is in place in each school who can offer support to students and provide information on reporting an incident. Given the evidence we received, we recommend this person is not a teacher, and should suitably qualified to understand the particular concerns that may be faced by minority ethnic and LGBTI students.
35. Furthermore, we ask the Scottish Government to work with education authorities to consider a package of support measures in schools, such as, safe spaces and the provision of high quality sexual education resource.
36. We recommend the Scottish Government ensures any reporting system also provides support, and that following a complaint, victims are able to choose a path which may or may not include formal action against the perpetrator.

¹⁸ Scottish Government Written Submission

37. We recommend the Scottish Government establishes a national 24-hour student advice and support service. This service, as well as providing health and wellbeing support to the student should provide guidance on making a complaint following an instance of sexual harassment. We understand this, and any, system must also work with existing child protection systems and ask the Scottish Government to take this into account when the advice service is being developed. We also recommend that existing support mechanisms are promoted to young people directly, so that they are aware of what is available to them.
38. We recommend all teachers receive mandatory training around sexual harassment in schools. This training should be subject to regular updating and should illustrate the wider impact sexual harassment in school can have on a young woman's life, including forming career choices and paths.

Intersectionality

39. Sexual harassment can be experienced differently by different equality groups. This was highlighted in the Equalities and Human Rights Committee's 2017 report on prejudice-based bullying in schools.¹⁹ Our questionnaire found that 34% of pupils and 33% of staff reported a racial element to sexual harassment. 70% of our focus group participants also thought ethnic minority girls experiences sexual harassment "more or differently" to their white counterparts, while 62% thought LGBTI girls experiences sexual harassment "more or differently" to heterosexual groups.
40. Rape Crisis told us:
"There is a whole spectrum of VAWG and some forms happen every day and are often treated as 'normal' or 'just the way things are', such as sexual harassment, sexist comments, sharing of sexual/intimate images without consent. Some young women face sexism in combination with other forms of abuse or discrimination like racism or homo-, bi- or transphobia."²⁰
41. There are issues unique to equality groups²¹ which may make reporting harder. In particular, there may be issues for individuals who identify as LGBTI, or who come from ethnic minority backgrounds. Our Glasgow focus group was well attended by ethnic minority young women, who reported their experience of combined racism and sexual harassment. Some hijab-wearing young women experienced hijab-pulling in schools, which they perceived as Islamophobic sexual harassment: forcibly uncovering a girl against her will and without her consent.
42. The ethnic minority participants faced barriers around support as well. In our focus groups, all those from an ethnic minority background reported being "not comfortable" or "slightly comfortable" talking about sexual harassment with their families. In contrast, participants who said they were "very comfortable" were all from white backgrounds. However, the ethnic minority participants were clear that they were just as engaged with these issues, despite feeling unable to talk about them openly due to cultural issues or stigma. Participants agreed that access to minority ethnic and LGBTI contacts, support, and resources in schools is essential.
43. We recognise that many of the instances of sexual harassment faced in schools are also linked with racism, homophobia, disablism, Islamophobia, and other prejudice-based harassment. Because all these groups are affected, we recommend an intersectional approach be taken by the Scottish Government in any work to address sexual harassment.
44. Particularly in rural areas and small communities, it may be difficult to have trained staff who are expert in the issues faced by equality groups. We recognise and appreciate the

¹⁹ [It's not Cool to be Cruel: Prejudice-based bullying and harassment of children and young people in schools](#)

²⁰ [Rape Crisis Written Submission](#)

²¹ Equality groups refers to those people who are protected under the Equality Act 2010 and include LGBTI people, disabled people, minority ethnic people, and others.

role that third-sector groups and external experts can play by coming into schools and providing high-quality resources and support to students and acting as a diverse group of role models.

45. The Scottish Government is encouraged to continue to support third sector organisations and local authorities to ensure that high quality training around relationships and consent is on offer across schools in all areas of Scotland, with a particular focus on supporting and meeting the diverse needs of equality groups.

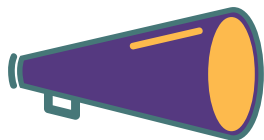
Policies and Consistency

46. Different schools take different approaches to reporting, and we heard many examples of negative experiences of reporting. These can be caused by students, and sometimes by teachers. We also heard that there can be failure to take reports seriously, or to follow through in a way that supports the victim and allows the victim a say in the process.
47. We believe consistency is key. It should be clear to students and staff what constitutes sexual harassment, and what the consequences are. Girlguiding Scotland told us that “national guidance” is needed “to ensure schools know how to take a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment.”²²
48. We recommend the Scottish Government create a standardised definition of sexual harassment in schools, and a standardised disciplinary process, which is victim-led and offers support. We recommend that this definition and subsequent sexual harassment policies are embedded in schools’ Codes of Conduct.

²² [Girlguiding Scotland Written Submission](#)

Thanks

The Young Women Lead Committee would like to thank all those who gave evidence, answered our questionnaire, attended a focus group, or shared their stories on social media. Your views and experiences helped form our report and ensure that we represented young women in Scotland as widely as possible.



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