

Women and Equalities Committee

Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings

Fifth Report of Session 2022-23

HC 331



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relating to the report

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Summary

In recent years there has been a significant increase in awareness of sexual harassment and sexual violence against women and girls in educational settings. Thousands of children and young people have posted testimonials of their experiences on the Everyone's Invited website, while school teachers have voiced concerns about the toxic influence of social media and some of the purported 'influencers' who use it to broadcast misogyny to boys and young men.

Access to online pornography has left children and young people, especially boys and young men, with a misguided representation of women, men, and what sexual relationships look like. The Online Safety Bill presents an opportunity to regulate online pornography and to address issues such as boys cyberflashing hardcore pornographic images at girls, the Airdropping of nude images and other forms of sexual harassment. However, those responsible for the safety of girls in educational settings should not wait for the Bill to become law to tackle this behaviour.

We welcome Ofsted's 2021 review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. Ofsted should not hesitate to undertake a similar review in the future if its inspectors find a lack of progress has been made in tackling peer-on-peer abuse in schools. As part of their inspections Ofsted should also investigate the level of abuse experienced by female staff, at the hands of pupils, parents and other staff.

The teaching of relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) can help to keep children safe. It contributes to reducing relationship violence by helping children to recognise situations that are unhealthy, abusive or harmful, and by teaching children that they have a right to ask for and to get help. However, delivery of RSHE has been inconsistent. The Government must take steps to ensure that teachers and teachers in training have the funding and time they require to learn how to deliver RSHE effectively.

RSHE is compulsory in secondary schools up to the age of 16, however young people are required to remain in some form of education until they are 18. This leaves young people making their first steps in the adult world under-supported and less equipped to navigate potentially harmful and dangerous situations and keep themselves safe and healthy in relationships. RSHE should be extended to young people in post-16 educational settings.

The Government's review of RSHE must be evidence-led and include engagement with children, teachers, parents and specialist violence against women and girls (VAWG) organisations to ensure that any developments in policy support effectively the Government's commitment to tackling sexual harassment and violence in schools and colleges. As part of the review, the Government should develop a specific strategy for engaging with boys and young men in primary and secondary schools on the topics of sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Women students experience high levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence, both on and off the university campus. We welcome the Office for Student's (OfS) commitment to survey its prevalence in the university sector which will help interventions to be better targeted. Evidence-based bystander intervention programmes should be made compulsory for all first-year students and the ability of universities to use non-disclosure agreements to silence victims of sexual harassment and violence must be banned.

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Introduction

Our inquiry

1. Since the Women and Equalities Committee was established in 2015, it has been concerned with the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual violence in educational settings—towards children and young people in schools (2016) and women in universities (2018).¹ In this inquiry we considered how effective schools, colleges and universities are at keeping girls and women safe and addressing attitudes underpinning violence against women and girls. While our inquiry focused on students, we are aware that female staff also face gender-based harassment. Many of the observations and recommendations we make in this report are also relevant to tackling this abuse.
2. We held three oral evidence sessions between 28 June and 12 October 2022. We also took evidence on relationships, sex and health education on 10 May 2023 and have included relevant observations from that session in this report. Witnesses included academics and authors, expert practitioners, Ofsted, the Office for Students and the relevant Government Ministers. We would like to thank all witnesses for contributing to our inquiry. We also owe thanks to Dr Christine Barter, Professor of Interpersonal Violence Prevention at the University of Central Lancashire, who was our specialist adviser for the inquiry.²
3. For the purpose of this report we use the Equality and Human Rights Commission's definition of sexual harassment:

unwanted behaviour which is of a sexual nature and which has the purpose or effect of violating a student's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for the student. 'Of a sexual nature' can cover verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct including unwelcome sexual advances,

1 Women and Equalities Committee, Third Report of Session 2016–17, [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#), HC 91; Women and Equalities Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2017–19, [Sexual harassment of women and girls in public places](#), HC 701

2 As a Specialist Adviser, Dr Christine Barter's declared she had no relevant interests.

inappropriate touching, forms of sexual assault, sexual jokes, displaying pornographic photographs or drawings, or sending emails with material of a sexual nature.³

4. Sexual violence, as defined by the Department for Education (which uses definitions under the Sexual Offences Act 2003), consists of sexual offences such as rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault, and causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent.⁴ Throughout this report we use the terms sexual violence, sexual abuse, and sexual assault interchangeably. Where the term sexual misconduct is used, this covers both sexual harassment and sexual violence. None of the above definitions are meant to be exhaustive.

3 Equality and Human Rights Commission, [‘What is harassment?’](#), accessed 14 December 2022

4 Department for Education, [Keeping Children Safe in Education 2022](#), 1 September 2022, p 105

Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools and colleges

5. In recent years we have seen a significant increase in awareness of sexual harassment and sexual violence against women and girls in educational settings. Thousands of children and young people have posted testimonials of their experiences on the Everyone's Invited website, while school teachers have voiced concerns about the toxic influence of social media and some of the purported 'influencers' who use it to broadcast misogyny to boys and young men.⁵
6. In giving evidence to us, Soma Sara, Founder of Everyone's Invited, an online forum where individuals can safely share their stories, gave us her view that sexual harassment and sexual violence had become normalised in society, and that this culture had leaked into our schools and colleges.⁶ Tender Education and Arts, a charity that works with young people and schools to prevent domestic abuse and sexual violence, explained that because sexual harassment was commonplace in schools—and often went unchallenged—it had a detrimental effect on girls' and young women's confidence.⁷ Susie MacDonald, Chief Executive of Tender Education and Arts, observed that girls felt a "sense of defeat" and did "not feel able to do anything other than normalise and accept it [sexual harassment]".⁸ Girls were more likely to make excuses for what had happened to them instead of holding boys and young men to account. For example, girls questioned the length of their skirts, the spaces they occupied, or who they were friends with.⁹ Jackie Doyle-Price, a Member of this Committee and the then Chair of our Sub-Committee, which led on this inquiry, told a Westminster Hall debate of her experience in speaking to 13 year old girls during a school visit. She asked the girls how many of them had been harassed:

5 See for example, "['Vulnerable boys are drawn in': schools fear spread of Andrew Tate's misogyny](#)", the Observer, 7 Jan 2023

6 Q7 [Soma Sara]

7 Tender Education and Arts [[AES0003](#)]

8 Q9 [Susie MacDonald]

9 Q10 [Susie MacDonald]

The answer was every single one of them, and for most it had happened in school. That abuse is exactly what we are talking about. [...] The girls told me that they are pressurised into sharing intimate pictures, which are then shared by phone. One girl said to me, “If you make a stand, you just attract more attention to yourself and end up getting more harassment, and if you comply you’re easy. What are we supposed to do in those circumstances?”¹⁰

7. The evidence we heard was not revelatory or, sadly, a surprise. Seven years ago, our predecessor Committee noted in its 2016 report:

- almost a third (29%) of 16–18 year old girls say they have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school;
- nearly three-quarters (71%) of all 16–18 year old boys and girls say they hear terms such as “slut” or “slag” used towards girls at schools on a regular basis;
- 59% of girls and young women aged 13–21 said in 2014 that they had faced some form of sexual harassment at school or college in the past year.¹¹

8. Surveys of teachers have shown that they are not immune from being victims of sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour. Tender Education and Arts told us that “Some boys struggle with the notion that female teachers are an authority figure and challenge their status.”¹² A TES survey in 2021 found one in four female secondary school teachers had been sexually harassed or abused over the previous 12 months, while a 2022 poll by the NASUWT teachers’ union of 1,500 female members found 58% had experienced misogyny from pupils, 45% from the senior leadership team, 42% from other teachers, 30% from their headteacher and 27% from parents—in 45% of reported cases no action was taken.¹³

10 Relationships and Sex Education in Schools, HC Deb, 30 June 2022, [col 190WH](#)

11 Women and Equalities Committee, Third Report of Session 2016–17, [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#), HC 91

12 TES, [Wave of pupil sex abuse ‘violating’ teachers](#), 23 July 2021

13 Guardian, [70% of teachers have faced misogyny in schools, poll shows](#), 16 April 2022

Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges

9. After the testimonials on the Everyone's Invited website went viral, the Government asked Ofsted to conduct a rapid review of the prevalence of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. Ofsted's report, published in June 2021, revealed the shocking extent to which children experienced harmful sexual behaviour by their peers every day.¹⁴
10. Ofsted's review found evidence that peer-on-peer sexual harassment was commonplace in schools and that sexist language, behaviours and attitudes persisted unchallenged.¹⁵ Some nine in 10 girls and half of boys told Ofsted that they or their peers were regularly exposed to unwanted explicit images or videos. Most girls and boys, 92% and 74% respectively, told inspectors that sexist name-calling was frequent. Children were not telling teachers and other adults about their experiences because such behaviour had become normal. Ofsted concluded that school leaders should assume they had a problem with sexual harassment and sexual abuse, even with no reported incidents.
11. We questioned Ofsted on why it had taken the Everyone's Invited testimonials for them to give sufficient attention to the problem, not least given that our predecessors in 2016 called for "Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate to assess schools on how well they are recording, monitoring, preventing and responding to incidents of sexual harassment and sexual violence."¹⁶ Yvette Stanley, Ofsted's national director for regulation and social care, told us:

Our inspections cover a lot of things; they are very broad in a reasonably tight envelope. This was a very specific commission to look at peer-on-peer abuse, and it gave our teams the space and the opportunity to talk to a much larger number of young people and we did that in single-sex groups.

Children told us that they very rarely raised the issue of peer-on-peer abuse. They would talk about other things but were not raising this specific issue. The adults, while conscious of the general safeguarding issues for children, just did not understand. As adults, we did not understand how pervasive and how awful this is.

14 Ofsted, [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#), 10 June 2021

15 As part of its research sample, Ofsted visited 32 schools and colleges in April and May 2021. The sample included 14 state funded schools (including two primary schools), 14 Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) inspected independent schools, two Ofsted inspected independent schools, and two further education colleges.

16 Women and Equalities Committee, Third Report of Session 2016–17, [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#), HC 91

I have been in this world for 25 years at least but the content of some of the pornography and the invidious nature of the exploitation among peers was something that none of us saw in as much depth as we did on those school visits. [...] It was news to the teachers that it was as pervasive as it was. They had assumed that the young people would escalate it to them. The young people knew how to escalate a safeguarding matter but they weren't escalating peer-on-peer abuse.¹⁷

- 12.** Ofsted made several recommendations to schools and the Government to better protect children from peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence.¹⁸ Ofsted told us that its review had “in a sense, triggered a good positive response”.¹⁹ It noted the biggest shift was that schools now recognised that peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence was happening regularly, and should be addressed.²⁰ Ofsted also made recommendations for itself including “to update training and inspection handbooks where necessary. This will strengthen inspectors’ ability to inspect how schools and colleges are tackling peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online.”²¹
- 13.** Since the review, Ofsted told us it had seen better communication and engagement with children about their experiences, as well as improved relationships with local safeguarding partners.²² When we asked about children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), who might be unable to communicate what had happened to them, Ofsted told us that it was “looking at an individual child-centred approach, where children have more complex needs so the right support is given at the right time”.²³ We heard from Lucy Emmerson, Chief Executive at Sex Education Forum, that “children with additional needs are more likely to have been sexually and physically abused, compared to the wider population. They are also less likely to receive relationships and sex education.”²⁴
- 14.** To help schools safeguard against peer-on-peer sexual abuse, the Government has incorporated its advice on tackling sexual violence and sexual harassment into the statutory ‘Keeping Children Safe in Education’

17 Q67

18 Ofsted, [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#), 10 June 2021

19 Q76 [Andrew Cook]

20 Q69

21 Ofsted, [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#), 10 June 2021

22 Q71

23 Q68 [Yvette Stanley]

24 Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q75 [Lucy Emmerson]

(KCSIE) guidance. The updated guidance came into effect in September 2022. The then Minister for Schools and Childhood, Kelly Tolhurst, told us that schools had a legal duty to be mindful of the strengthened guidance.²⁵

- 15.** Several witnesses told us that not all schools had the time, money or expertise to provide adequate training for their staff or to deal with incidents when they occurred.²⁶ For example, Keziah Featherstone, a headteacher, observed that few specialist trainers were available for schools and were often expensive.²⁷ Tender Education and Arts noted that schools felt they were fulfilling multiple roles and struggled to find time to do anything effectively.²⁸ Speaking about her own school, Keziah Featherstone told us:

I do quite quickly run out of time for training because, to be honest, with the best will in the world I can put 150 staff in the hall and talk to them for an hour, but it will not necessarily impact what they do day to day when a matter arises, or whether they teach a subject in a particular way, or what should happen if something arises.²⁹

We questioned Ofsted on the barriers preventing schools from tackling sexual harassment and abuse. They told us:

The biggest barrier that our review found was that school leaders, governors and staff just did not think it was an issue. They did not think it was a problem. “It did not happen here”, and “It does not happen here”, is the big story that comes out of a review. Yes, it does and you should start thinking that it is happening in your school and about what should you do about it.³⁰

25 Q96 [Kelly Tolhurst]

26 Q11 [Keziah Featherstone]; Q14 [Soma Sara]; Keziah Featherstone [[AES0001](#)]; Tender Education and Arts [[AES0003](#)]

27 Keziah Featherstone [[AES0001](#)]

28 Tender Education and Arts [[AES0003](#)]

29 Q11

30 Q69

16. RECOMMENDATION

Sexual harassment and sexual violence continues to be a scourge in our schools, with many girls and women feeling powerless. The issues are longstanding and warnings have been frequent, including from our predecessor Committee. It is saddening that it took the public testimonies of thousands of school-aged children for Ofsted and the schools they inspect to acknowledge the seriousness of the problem. The Government must take steps to ensure that all schools, including both mainstream and special schools, recognise the seriousness of the problem of sexual harassment in educational settings of female students and staff and have the funding they require to deliver safeguarding effectively.

17. RECOMMENDATION

Ofsted did not act quickly enough in undertaking its review in 2021, however we welcome it and their commitment to strengthen requirements for inspectors to assess how schools address sexual harassment and abuse. Should Ofsted inspectors find a lack of progress has been made in tackling peer-on-peer abuse in schools, Ofsted should not delay in undertaking a further thematic review of the adequacy of safeguarding policies in schools and colleges. As part of their inspections Ofsted should also investigate the level of abuse experienced by female staff, at the hands of pupils, parents and other staff.

18. CONCLUSION

The Government has updated the statutory Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance to include tackling peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence. This is a positive step to ensure that schools better protect children and young people from harmful sexual behaviour. However, schools need the appropriate time and money to implement the guidance properly and provide effective safeguarding training.

19. RECOMMENDATION

The Government should undertake an evaluation of how well schools are following the Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance and the impact that guidance is having in practice. The evaluation should include scrutiny of any barriers preventing schools from implementing the guidance effectively. This evaluation should be completed within the next six months.

Attitudes towards women and girls

20. Our work on violence against women and girls, and that of our predecessor Committee, consistently found that men and boys were overwhelmingly the main perpetrators of sexual harassment and sexual violence.³¹ We have also examined the attitudes that perpetuated gender-based violence, such as male ideas around gender, what it was to be a man, and masculinity.³² Several contributors to this inquiry noted the prevalence of misogynistic attitudes—rooted in myths about rape and violence against women—that have allowed men and boys to get away with sexual harassment and sexual violence, invalidated women’s and girls’ experiences, and inhibited disclosure.³³
21. Those witnesses who worked with young people in schools suggested that negative attitudes towards women and girls had worsened during the coronavirus pandemic, which schools were unable to counter during lockdowns.³⁴ Children were working remotely, with often unsupervised access to the internet, and sometimes in homes with traditional or entrenched attitudes towards the roles of men and women.³⁵ Teachers had noted that some secondary school students, often the younger ones, were returning to the classroom having missed key moments in their social development; and often displayed more extreme attitudes and behaviours.³⁶

31 See for example, Women and Equalities Committee, Third Report of Session 2016–17, [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#), HC 91, para 45; Women and Equalities Committee, Sixth Report of Session 2017–19, [Sexual harassment of women and girls in public places](#), HC 701, para 24; Oral evidence taken on 28 April 2021, [HC \(2019–21\) 1335](#), Q1 [Dr Burrell]; Q19 [Professor Stanley]

32 See for example, HC 701, para 24, Oral evidence taken on 28 April 2021, [HC \(2019–21\) 1335](#), Q1 [Dr Burrell]

33 Q4 [Soma Sara]; Q52 [Dr Fenton]

34 Q3 [Keziah Featherstone]; Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#))

35 Ibid

36 Ibid

The role of pornography

- 22.** Most witnesses were concerned that access to online pornography had left children and young people, especially boys and young men, with a misguided representation of women, men, and what sexual relationships looked like.³⁷ Professor Nicky Stanley, Professor of Social Work at the University of Central Lancashire, told us that her research found an association between regular access to online pornography and coercive and violent sexual behaviour. Young men who used pornography were also likely to hold negative attitudes on gender equality.³⁸
- 23.** Online harms expert, John Carr, told us during an evidence session on male attitudes that easy access to porn “has completely changed the culture in the playground” and that it was having a “very corrosive impact within schools”.³⁹ Witnesses described boys cyberflashing hardcore pornographic images at girls in the corridor, and Airdropping nude images to other students in class.⁴⁰ Jonathan Baggaley, Chief Executive of the PSHE Association, told us that his organisation had supported a piece of research on nude image sharing which received over 5,000 responses such was the scale of the problem. He explained that through understanding the social norms around image sharing, his organisation was able to develop lesson plans that responded to the gendered nature of the problem, but that while the framework exists, more needed to be done. He told us “it comes back to support for teacher training and for schools to feel confident in delivering this material.” Soma Sara, founder of Everyone’s Invited, explained that it was difficult for schools to get a grip on behaviour because it was happening, not only outside the school gates, but on young people’s phones:

we are living in a different age, with the rise in the mainstreaming of hardcore pornography and the digital revolution of the social world. Young people are conducting much of their lives online, building relationships, finding out who they are, and it is all happening online. There has been a whole host of new kinds of abuse and digital-based violence emerging in recent years.⁴¹

- 24.** Digital-based abuse has also been targeted at teachers. One in 20 of the teachers who took part in the NASUWT poll said the misogyny they had experienced had been posted on social media including Facebook,

37 Q19 [Professor Stanley]; Q50 [Melanie McCarry]; Q57 [Richie Benson]; PSHE Association ([AE0002](#))

38 Q19

39 Oral evidence taken on 28 April 2021, [HC \(2019–21\) 1335](#), Q27

40 Ibid; Q5 [Soma Sara]

41 Q4 [Soma Sara]

WhatsApp and TikTok.⁴² Teachers have reported their faces being superimposed on pornographic images and being victims of upskirting. In 2019, a court found a student guilty of taking upskirt pictures of teachers, the judge noted that his actions had left his victims feeling violated, objectified and vulnerable.

- 25.** The Ofsted review into sexual abuse in schools and colleges concluded that, while schools could play their part in tackling online sexual harassment and sexual violence, it was incumbent upon the Government to address the problem through the Online Safety Bill.⁴³ We wrote to the then Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to advocate for stronger regulation of online pornography. We recommended that Ofcom should be required to set clear, minimum standards for age assurance technology utilised by services that are likely to be used by children and where pornography is easily accessed, such as Twitter. We also questioned whether the proposed cyberflashing criminal offence as set out in the Bill would be sufficient to deter potential offenders and enable those committing such behaviour to be held accountable for their actions.⁴⁴

26. RECOMMENDATION

The Online Safety Bill is a landmark piece of legislation with the potential to significantly tackle violence against women and girls, in part through the regulation of online pornography. It presents an opportunity to address issues such as boys cyberflashing hardcore pornographic images at girls, the Airdropping of nude images and other forms of sexual harassment. However, those responsible for the safety of girls in educational settings should not wait for the Bill to become law to tackle this behaviour. Head teachers must do more to address the harmful use of mobile devices on school and college premises. Government guidance should make clear the harmful effect such technology can have and the Department for Education and Ofsted should improve their monitoring of its impact in educational settings and the effectiveness of school leaders in tackling this corrosive problem.

Education as prevention

- 27.** The Government has legal obligations to tackle violence against women and girls, including under the Equality Act 2010, the Human Rights Act 1998, and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It has recently ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and girls

42 Guardian, [70% of teachers have faced misogyny in schools, poll shows](#), 16 April 2022

43 Ofsted, [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#), 10 June 2021

44 Letter from the Chair to Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, dated 13 June 2022

(the Istanbul Convention), chapter three of which outlines obligations on prevention. Article 14 of the Istanbul Convention, on education, states that signatories should include teaching materials on gender equality and non-stereotyped gender roles.⁴⁵ The Government's refreshed Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy prioritised prevention and acknowledged that educational interventions were effective at changing attitudes; and that those teaching should have the appropriate training and guidance.⁴⁶

Relationships, Sex and Health Education

- 28.** Since September 2020, schools have been required by law to teach relationships education in primary schools, relationships and sex education (RSE) in secondary schools, and health education (collectively known as RSHE) in all state-funded schools. All schools must pay due regard to the Department for Education's statutory RSHE guidance when delivering the curriculum. The introduction of compulsory RSHE and the statutory guidance received cross-party support and was supported by our predecessor Committee. Professor Nicky Stanley explained the value of embedding RSHE as part of a whole-school approach to tackling sexual harassment and gender inequality, and told us that Ofsted should do more to promote that approach. She noted that her research revealed an important association between children's positive evaluations of a school's culture and the effect that RSHE-type programmes had on them.⁴⁷
- 29.** In our recent session on RSHE we heard about the benefits of RSHE in helping to keep children safe. We were told how it contributes to reducing relationship violence by helping children to recognise situations that are unhealthy, abusive or harmful, and by teaching children that they have a right, as a child, to ask for and to get help.⁴⁸
- 30.** However, several experts have observed that schools' delivery of the RSHE curriculum has been inconsistent.⁴⁹ Most acknowledged that the pandemic had forced schools to delay implementation, which meant that some schools were behind others in the quality of provision.⁵⁰ In a November 2022 letter to the Secretary of State for Education, Girlguiding highlighted one such inconsistency in that only 36% of children and young people aged 11 to

⁴⁵ Council of Europe, [Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, Chapter 3, Article 14](#)

⁴⁶ HM Government, [Violence Against Women and Girls](#), July 2021, p 34

⁴⁷ Q24 [Nicky Stanley]

⁴⁸ Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q61 [Lucy Emmerson]

⁴⁹ Q18 [Jenny Barksfield]; [Girlguiding Advocate panel open letter to the Secretary of State for Education on RSE in schools, dated 20 November 2022](#); SafeLives, [I love it - but I wish it were taken more seriously](#) (December 2022), p 39

⁵⁰ Q18 [Jenny Barksfield]; Q96 [Kelly Tolhurst]; [Girlguiding Advocate panel open letter to the Secretary of State for Education on RSE in schools, dated 20 November 2022](#)

17 had learned about sexual consent, even though it was now mandatory. They argued that delays in embedding RSE in secondary schools had real consequences for young people’s safety and wellbeing.⁵¹ A report in 2021 commissioned by Brook, a charity supporting people with their sexual health and wellbeing, found that RSE “is seen [by young people] to be out of date, both in terms of old-fashioned binary sexual politics (straight and gay) and a failure to engage constructively with contemporary digital cultures”.⁵² We heard from Lucy Emmerson that, “Young people are saying that they want more open discussions, with proper lesson time; these topics are perhaps being squeezed into tutor time, or entirely neglected from their education.”⁵³

31. Jenny Barksfield, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Education at the PSHE Association, told us her concerns that the spotlight would soon shift from RSHE.⁵⁴ She told us that when the Government and Ofsted were focused on it, schools were empowered to make adequate time on the timetable for RSHE—rather than relegating it to assemblies and off-timetable days.⁵⁵ Since her evidence to us the focus on RSHE has magnified, primarily as a result of concerns that RSE has included content and material considered by some to be inappropriate and unsuitable. In March 2023, in response to those concerns, the Government announced that it would be bringing forward a review of RSHE, which would be completed by the end of the year.⁵⁶
32. Relationships education is compulsory in all primary schools in England and relationships and sex education is compulsory in all secondary schools. Health education is compulsory in all state-funded schools. However, young people are required to remain in some form of education until they are 18.⁵⁷ This leaves a gap, where young people remain required to attend some form of education or training, but their education does not include RSHE.

51. [Girlguiding Advocate panel open letter to the Secretary of State for Education on RSE in schools, dated 20 November 2022](#)

52. Brook and the University of Sussex, [Summary Report Digital Intimacies and LGBT+ Youth: Celebration, Equity and Safety](#), September 2021

53. Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q74 [Lucy Emmerson]

54. Q23

55. Ibid; Q18

56. “Review of relationships, sex and health education to protect children by end of year”, [Department for Education press release](#), 31 March 2023

57. School leavers must undertake full-time education, an apprenticeship or traineeship, or spend 20 hours a week volunteering or working while engaging in part-time education or training. Gov.uk, [Schools leaving age](#), accessed 8 June 2023

33. RECOMMENDATION

A lack of compulsory RSHE for young people until they are 18 leaves young people making their first steps in the adult world under-supported and less equipped to navigate potentially harmful and dangerous situations and keep themselves safe and healthy in relationships. We recommend that compulsory RSHE is extended to young people in post-16 educational settings.

Review of RSHE

- 34.** We questioned witnesses at our session on RSHE about the Government's proposed review. We were told that it should be evidence-led, that the voices of children and teachers should be heard, that existing guidance should be built on rather than disregarded and that more needed to be done to ensure teachers were adequately supported and trained to deliver the curriculum.⁵⁸ Jonathan Baggaley, Chief Executive at the PSHE Association, explained:

This is such a critical subject for children and young people's lives and for society in general and we risk undermining teacher's confidence and sense of safety in delivering this subject. The more teachers are challenged by parents and the less they are supported by Government on areas where they are being left without the right levels of training resulting in a lack of confidence, it risks having that chilling effect on schools.

It is critical that the review is hugely supportive of the consensus around the subject, of the progress that has been made so far, looks at the evidence around how teachers are implementing and how that is going, and builds on the steps we have taken so far and does not take any steps backwards.⁵⁹

- 35.** We were also reminded of the role RSHE has in helping to tackle violence against women and girls. Dr King-Hill, referring to her work on masculinity in boys, explained that the development of incel culture and the impact of those who influence it meant "educating and working with young people in terms of gender is crucial. It would be incredibly dangerous to take it out of the curriculum."⁶⁰
- 36.** Ahead of the session, the Minister for Schools set out that the Department was developing more detailed non-statutory guidance to support schools to teach about sexual harassment and sexual violence effectively. He told us:

⁵⁸ Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q93

⁵⁹ Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q96

⁶⁰ Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q87

We have already commissioned an independent literature review and user research, as well as gathering views from a range of experts. We will consider the final version of the guidance in the context of the wider review to ensure consistency, as many of the topics covered will be age sensitive.⁶¹

37. RECOMMENDATION

The Government's review of RSHE must be evidence-led. The review team should engage with children, teachers, parents and specialist VAWG organisations to ensure that any developments in policy support effectively the Government's commitment to tackling sexual harassment and violence in schools and colleges. The review should include an assessment of the reasons why some children are leaving school without having received the mandatory elements of the RSHE curriculum and whether that curriculum is meeting the needs of children.

Tackling gender inequalities and gender norms and engaging boys

- 38.** Government research has shown how gender norms, such as what it is to be a man and ideas of masculinity, have underpinned violence against women and girls.⁶² We have previously called on the Government to use that research as a starting point for change.⁶³ Although the statutory RSHE guidance instructs primary and secondary schools to build a culture in which everyday sexism, misogyny, and gender stereotypes are not tolerated, some witnesses were concerned that schools might not be doing this.⁶⁴ Indeed, we heard that some schools were not sufficiently promoting gender equality and healthy relationships, championing female students, or acknowledging the problem of violence against women and girls.⁶⁵ Lucy Emmerson told us:

there is a cluster of issues in secondary RSHE that seem to be repeatedly neglected. We are finding that things like learning about the attitudes of boys and men towards women and girls are often not tackled, along with power imbalances in relationships. This comes back to the fact that this is not something you can just reel

61 [Letter](#) from the Minister for Schools to the Chair of the Committee, 4 May 2023

62 Government Equalities Office, [Changing Gender Norms: Engaging with Men and Boys](#), October 2019

63 [Letter from Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee to the Minister for Safeguarding, Minister for Online Harms and Minister for Schools, dated 7 June 2021](#)

64 Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#)); Q19 [Professor Stanley]; Oral evidence taken on 28 April 2021, [HC \(2019–21\) 1335](#), Q14 [Dr Mott]

65 Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#))

off some facts about, it relies on the confidence of the teacher to open up discussion to a diverse group and to manage some of those complexities.⁶⁶

Professor Nicky Stanley suggested that the statutory guidance focused on encouraging children to protect themselves from different types of abuse, but did not address sufficiently the fact that some children and young people might be using controlling and abusive behaviour themselves.⁶⁷

- 39.** A December 2022 report by the domestic abuse charity SafeLives, which surveyed 1,025 secondary school students, reinforced those concerns. It revealed that only half (54%) of the young people they surveyed were taught about gender roles and gender equality in RSE, and only 31% of those agreed it had been taught well.⁶⁸ The report also showed that half of students surveyed were taught about sexual harassment and sexual violence, while only 24% said they learned about coercive control.⁶⁹
- 40.** Professor Nicky Stanley argued that the RSHE guidance should better recognise that most serious interpersonal harm and abuse was done by boys and young men and that teaching needed to reflect this.⁷⁰ She found, in an evaluation of a UK-wide prevention programme in primary schools, that engaging the interest of boys was “a real challenge for these programmes, particularly with what we know about the rate of boys’ learning on these matters”.⁷¹ She said that girls consistently benefitted much more from the lessons than boys.⁷² SafeLives reached a similar conclusion in its study of RSE in secondary schools. It argued that in its current form, RSE might be less applicable to boys than to girls.⁷³
- 41.** Susie MacDonald, Tender Education and Arts’ chief executive, told us that boys and young men often did not understand sexual harassment in the same way as girls and young women.⁷⁴ Most were unaware of how their behaviour affected women and girls and did not see that they, or their peers, had done anything wrong.⁷⁵ When Tender Education and Arts spoke to young men in schools, it found that most were unable to define sexual harassment and could not see why low-level behaviour, such as catcalling, was unacceptable.⁷⁶

66 Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q76

67 Q19 [Professor Stanley]

68 SafeLives, [I love it - but I wish it were taken more seriously](#) (December 2022), p 22

69 Ibid p 20

70 Q19

71 Q20

72 Q19

73 SafeLives, [I love it - but I wish it were taken more seriously](#) (December 2022), p 29

74 Q9 [Susie MacDonald]

75 Q56 [Richie Benson]

76 Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#)); Q9 [Susie MacDonald]

42. Professor Stanley suggested that those developing RSHE programmes should consult with boys on what was meaningful to them.⁷⁷ For example, SafeLives spoke to boys who wanted more confidence in their emotional literacy and the ability to start tricky conversations about their own feelings.⁷⁸ Ofsted told us that boys had also asked for more support in challenging sexist and misogynistic behaviour in schools when they saw it.⁷⁹ Professor Stanley observed that boys had spoken about a desire for more male teachers to deliver RSHE lessons.⁸⁰
43. Several witnesses cautioned that boys and young men were unlikely to engage with learning and other interventions if they were shamed or put on the spot.⁸¹ The PSHE Association’s research into nude image sharing found that such behaviour was not always done with the intention to cause harm, but in some cases was a misunderstanding on the part of boys, which education should help to rectify.⁸² Susie MacDonald, chief executive of Tender Education and Arts, called for more clarity on what policies schools should put in place to deal with ‘low-level’ incidents of sexual harassment that were often overlooked because they were not criminal. She argued that those policies should hold the alleged perpetrator accountable, without criminalising or condemning them.⁸³
44. A supportive and compassionate approach to engaging with boys and young men—both in compulsory and tertiary education settings—was endorsed by most witnesses.⁸⁴ Some suggested that boys and young men should be able to inhabit a safe space in which they could reflect on the effects that their words and behaviours had on the girls and women around them.⁸⁵ Beyond Equality, an organisation which works with men and boys on gender equality, also suggested an intersectional approach to educating young men because some might have encountered different cultural expectations of what it was to be a man, as well as the social stigma of not living up to those expectations.⁸⁶ Richie Benson, Universities Project Lead at Beyond Equality, noted that:

There is a lot of shame involved in these conversations, particularly for young men recognising the impact of their behaviours, maybe for the first time. We cannot remove shame from the conversation,

77 Q19

78 SafeLives, *I love it - but I wish it were taken more seriously* (December 2022), p 29

79 Q76 [Yvette Stanley]

80 Q19

81 Q19 [Professor Stanley]; Q20 [Jenny Barksfield]; Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#))

82 PSHE Association ([AES0002](#))

83 Q10 [Susie MacDonald]; Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#))

84 See Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#)); Q10 [Susie MacDonald]; Q20 [Jenny Barksfield]; Q57 [Richie Benson]

85 Q9 [Susie MacDonald]; Q56 [Richie Benson]

86 Beyond Equality ([AES0011](#)) para 4

but we do not want to use it as a tool for anything. It is about really compassionately working with wherever these behaviours and attitudes come from.⁸⁷

45. RECOMMENDATION

Engagement with boys and young men is crucial for tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence in educational settings. As part of the review of relationships, sex and health education (RSHE), the Department for Education and the Government Equalities Office should work together to develop a specific strategy for engaging with boys and young men in primary and secondary schools on the topics of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. The Government should lay that strategy before Parliament by the end of 2023 alongside the review. The strategy should include the guidance and follow-up support the Department for Education will provide to primary and secondary school leaders to enable them to:

- design and deliver an RSHE curriculum that places a greater focus on boys and young men;
- access learning materials covering gender norms and gender equality. As a signatory to the Istanbul Convention, the Government has an international obligation to provide such materials. The Government should work with experts in education, academia and preventing violence against women and girls to create an online repository of evidence-based material;
- provide support for students who experience all types of harmful sexual behaviour to come forward without fear of invalidation; and a safe, non-judgmental space for students who are responsible for 'low level' behaviours to reflect on and talk about their behaviour;
- train all teachers how to engage with boys and young men in conversations that challenge prevailing gender norms, ideas of masculinity, and attitudes towards women and girls. The Government should also work with initial teacher training providers to include gender sensitive training as part of their offer. All training should be evidence-based.

Teaching and learning materials

46. While the introduction of the RSE curriculum is a welcome development, Tender Education and Arts told us that “schools have received little follow-up support, training or funding to implement it effectively”.⁸⁸ Although the Government has facilitated some training opportunities for teachers—such as webinars on delivering topics including pornography, abuse, and consent—most experts agreed that teaching staff lacked confidence and needed more support.⁸⁹ Jenny Barksfield informed us that most teachers qualified with little or no preparation to teach RSE, even though early career teachers were more likely to be given those responsibilities.⁹⁰ The 2021 Ofsted review found that many teachers said they did not feel prepared to teach outside their subject specialism, or lacked knowledge on topics like consent, healthy relationships and sharing of sexual images.⁹¹ Several experts called for teachers to be trained in delivering RSE and associated topics at the initial teacher training level.⁹²
47. Jonathan Baggaley told us that higher education providers he had spoken to reported that trainee teachers were interested in teaching RSHE, “up to 40% of their young students actually want to specialise in RSHE. The desire is there.”⁹³ However, he cautioned:

We have a generation who are acutely aware of issues around mental health and relationships and they want to go into schools and specialise, but there are real challenges to prioritise the continuing professional development of teachers due to the time in the ITE curriculum and the funding issues schools face across the board.⁹⁴

In 2019, the Government announced that schools would receive access to a £6 million training and support package to assist in the roll out of RSHE.⁹⁵ Freedom of Information requests have revealed that only £3.2 million out of the original £6 million was spent. The Government said that it spent less than expected because the funding for training was “demand-led” and not

88 Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#))

89 Q14 [Soma Sara]; Qq19–20 [Professor Stanley]; SafeLives, [I love it - but I wish it were taken more seriously](#) (December 2022), p 14

90 Q20; PSHE Association ([AES0002](#))

91 Ofsted, [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#), 10 June 2021

92 Q19 [Professor Stanley]; Q23 [Jenny Barksfield]; Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q93

93 Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q86

94 Oral evidence taken on [10 May 2023](#), HC 1309, Q86

95 [www.gov.uk](#), [All pupils will be taught about mental and physical wellbeing](#), 25 February 2019

compulsory, meaning that schools did not take up the offering “due to the impact of the pandemic” and that the remainder of the funding had been diverted to other priorities.⁹⁶

- 48.** Commenting on the external resources from which teachers used to help deliver RSE, Jenny Barksfield informed us that “there is an awful lot out there that is not high quality”. Both the Government and Ofsted had indicated that it was not their role to advise schools and teachers on what to teach and what materials to use but to ensure that they use the materials available effectively.⁹⁷ However, Tender Education and Arts said that schools lacked the time to seek out the highest quality training materials and would appreciate a “central hub of resources to support the delivery of RSE”, including a directory of specialist organisations.⁹⁸

49. RECOMMENDATION

Schools and teachers should have the knowledge and materials to raise awareness of what sexual harassment and sexual violence looks like, address inappropriate language and behaviour, and challenge stereotypical views of sex and masculinity. In too many cases, they lack the funding and time to deliver RSHE effectively. While it is encouraging that a significant proportion of teachers in training wish to be able to specialise in RSHE, the same concerns exist in that environment. The Government must take steps to ensure that teachers and teachers in training have the funding and time they require to learn how to deliver RSHE effectively.

96 Vice News, [UK Government Has Only Spent Half the Sex Education Training Money It Promised](#), 1 June 2022

97 HC Deb, 30 June 2022, [col 213WH](#) [Westminster Hall]; Q83 [Andrew Cook]

98 Tender Education and Arts ([AES0003](#))

Sexual misconduct at university

Prevalence

- 50.** Several groups working and campaigning within the higher education sector—such as the National Union of Students and Revolt Sexual Assault—have found that women students experience high levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence, both on and off the university campus.⁹⁹ We also know from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Crime Survey for England and Wales that sexual assault is higher among full-time students than any other occupation.¹⁰⁰ The ONS suggested that this was because men and women aged 16 to 24 (18 to 24 year olds apply to higher education more than any other age group) were more likely to experience sexual assault than older age groups.¹⁰¹ The data also revealed that women of all ages were significantly more likely to be victims of sexual assault than men.¹⁰²
- 51.** Ammaarah Faisal, a university student and research and academic lead at Our Streets Now, a campaign group committed to ending public sexual harassment in the UK, told us that female students at different institutions across the UK felt “unsafe in clubs and bars, and on public transport, as well as in university campus areas like the library”. She added that “it is definitely a problem in the night-time economy and on public transport, but it is also happening on the way to lectures and online, with online lectures and things like that as well”.¹⁰³
- 52.** Whether there should be a national prevalence survey of sexual harassment and sexual violence in universities was a dominant theme during our inquiry. Several witnesses remained sceptical about the reliability of small-

99 See National Union of Students, *Hidden Marks, A study of women students’ experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault*, (2011); The Student Room and Revolt Sexual Assault, *Students’ Experience of Sexual Violence*, (2018)

100 Office for National Statistics, ‘[Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#)’, accessed 12 December 2022

101 Ibid, for application rate by age see UCAS, ‘[UCAS undergraduate sector-level end of cycle data resources 2021](#)’, accessed 05 December 2022

102 Office for National Statistics, ‘[Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales: year ending March 2020](#)’, accessed 12 December 2022

103 Q27

scale survey data because they relied on self-reported cases.¹⁰⁴ John Edmonds, who researched and co-authored a book with Eva Tutchell—'Unsafe Spaces: Ending Sexual Abuse in Universities'—estimated that at least 50,000 students per year were subjected to sexual abuse at university. He argued that without an authoritative survey, the sector would continue to be in the dark about the scale and nature of the problem.¹⁰⁵

- 53.** Universities UK (UUK) acknowledged that sexual harassment was under-reported, including cases of staff-to-student sexual misconduct. However, Professor Cara Aitchison, Chair of UUK's advisory group on staff-to-student sexual misconduct, was confident that existing surveys—although only small-scale—provided enough data for universities to admit that they faced a sizeable problem which they needed to address.¹⁰⁶ She felt that the higher education sector had gone beyond the need for a national prevalence survey and suggested that instead of spending time and money on running such a survey, universities should continue to take action to address sexual misconduct.¹⁰⁷ However, some witnesses remained concerned that universities did not fully understand the scale of the problem and were more concerned about their reputations than for the welfare of their students, often downplaying incidents.¹⁰⁸
- 54.** Ammaarah Faisal agreed with the need for a national prevalence survey. She argued that existing surveys had not fully considered the different experiences of students from marginalised groups.¹⁰⁹ Those students—as well as boys and young men who experienced sexual harassment—were unlikely to come forward and report what had happened to them.¹¹⁰ She claimed that people with protected characteristics, such as disability, sexual orientation and gender reassignment were at greater risk of experiencing public sexual harassment and sexual violence. Such experiences were preventing many students from fully participating in university life; both academically and socially, either online or offline.¹¹¹
- 55.** The Office for Students (OfS)—the regulatory body for the higher education sector—was also unconvinced that current survey data were good enough. During its evidence to us, the OfS announced that it planned to design and deliver the first prevalence survey of sexual misconduct across

104 Q77 [Susan Lapworth]; Q32 [John Edmonds]; Eva Tutchell and John Edmonds ([AES0009](#))

105 Q28

106 Q31

107 Ibid

108 See Q55 [Dr Fenton]; Eva Tutchell and John Edmonds ([AES0009](#))

109 Q38

110 Q33

111 Qq27, Q38

higher education in England; with a pilot survey in 2023.¹¹² Most witnesses agreed that a prevalence survey would help universities to understand the nuances of sexual harassment and sexual violence: who experienced such behaviours; why they experienced them; who perpetrated them; and when and where they occurred.¹¹³ Susan Lapworth, the Office for Students' chief executive, argued that once universities had that knowledge, they could target their interventions accordingly and evaluate their efforts.¹¹⁴

56. RECOMMENDATION

We welcome the Office for Student's (OfS) commitment to a prevalence survey of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in the university sector. This would overcome the reluctance of some universities to do this work due to fears of reputational damage. The OfS should ensure that the survey captures students' experiences of sexual harassment both on and off the university campus.

Progress in tackling sexual misconduct

- 57.** Universities have made some progress in confronting the problem of sexual misconduct. The then Minister for Skills, Andrea Jenkyns, outlined some best practice examples that individual institutions had put in place, such as local partnerships to tackle spiking and sexual violence; bystander intervention training; safe spaces and safer taxi schemes; support services for students who had experienced sexual violence; consent training for incoming students; and training for staff in how to deal with disclosures and support students.¹¹⁵
- 58.** The higher education sector as a whole has also taken steps to acknowledge and tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence. Universities UK (UUK) has continued with its 'Changing the Culture' work, including publishing recent guidance on tackling staff-to-student sexual misconduct and on sharing personal data in harassment cases.¹¹⁶ It has also issued a practical guide to help universities respond to spiking.¹¹⁷ Professor Cara Aitchison, Chair of the UUK's advisory group on staff-to-student sexual misconduct, informed us that UUK's work "goes right

¹¹² Q77 [Susan Lapworth]; see also "[OfS plans consultation on new condition of registration to tackle harassment and sexual misconduct in higher education](#)", Office for Students, 12 October 2022

¹¹³ Q32 [John Edmonds]; Q33 [Ammaarah Faisal]; Q77 [Susan Lapworth]

¹¹⁴ Q77

¹¹⁵ Q103 [Andrea Jenkyns]

¹¹⁶ Universities UK, [Changing the culture: tackling staff-to-student sexual misconduct](#), (September 2022); Universities UK, [Changing the culture: sharing personal data in sexual harassment cases](#), (July 2022)

¹¹⁷ Universities UK, [Spiking: what universities can do](#), (August 2022)

through from organisational culture, strategy and leadership to the detailed pragmatics of how policies are developed, implemented and communicated”.¹¹⁸ She had noticed “a shared intent, aspiration and commitment to tackling these issues in a way that there probably wasn’t as recently as five years ago”.¹¹⁹

59. In January 2022, the then Minister for Higher and Further Education, Michelle Donelan, launched a pledge with the support of Can’t Buy My Silence—a campaign group committed to ending the misuse of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs)—for universities to commit to stop using NDAs to silence complainants.¹²⁰ In 2020, it was reported that nearly one third of universities had used non-disclosure agreements to resolve student complaints, including in relation to cases of sexual harassment and violence.¹²¹ At the time of writing, Can’t Buy My Silence had received pledges from 85 out of 132 universities in England.¹²² The former Minister for Skills told us that she “would like 100% of universities in England to sign up to not using NDAs.”¹²³ Since our oral evidence sessions came to an end, the Government has supported an amendment to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill which would prohibit universities from entering into NDAs with staff, students, and visiting speakers when there have been complaints of sexual misconduct and other forms of bullying and harassment.¹²⁴

60. RECOMMENDATION

It is disgraceful that universities in England have used non-disclosure agreements to silence victims of sexual harassment and violence. Given the number of universities still to commit to banning the use of NDAs, we are pleased to see the Government endorse legislative proposals to prevent this abhorrent practice. Universities need to improve their whistleblowing policies to end the culture of silence regarding sexual abuse and violence in higher education institutions.

118 Q34

119 Q35

120 Universities pledge to end use of non-disclosure agreements, [Department for Education press release](#), 18 January 2022

121 BBC News, [Sexual assault claims ‘gagged’ by UK universities](#), 12 February 2020 (accessed 1 February 2023)

122 Can’t Buy My Silence, [‘Universities Pledge’](#), accessed May 2022

123 Q87 [Andrea Jenkyns]

124 HL Deb, 7 December 2022, [col 187](#) [Lords Chamber]

Raising awareness in universities

61. By the time young men reach university, the challenge is to unpack existing attitudes and gender stereotypes and to foster positive attitudes in contexts which apply to them, such as online and in sports clubs and bars.¹²⁵ Richie Benson told us that most young men at university wanted to act when they witnessed inappropriate behaviour but did not know how.¹²⁶ He observed that men may avoid challenging sexist language and sexist behaviour, often from the fear of misunderstanding a situation, not knowing what to do, or alienating their peers.¹²⁷ Several witnesses argued that training, such as bystander training, and awareness raising initiatives, aimed at young men, would help to educate the student population in preventing violence against women.¹²⁸
62. We are pleased to see that the Home Secretary has backed a Private Member's Bill, which will make public sexual harassment a specific offence.¹²⁹ Our Streets Now, a campaign group which gave evidence to our inquiry, has also welcomed the Government's position on tackling this important problem. However, the group noted that a legal change would not be enough by itself and that a cultural shift was also necessary.¹³⁰ When we asked the former Minister for Skills what else the Government could do to tackle 'lad culture' and misogyny in universities, she suggested that the Department for Education needed "to look at an information campaign to reach these young people so they realise what is right and what is wrong and what they should not tolerate".¹³¹
63. **RECOMMENDATION**
The Department for Education should develop a nationwide sexual harassment and sexual violence awareness campaign that particularly targets male university students.

Bystander training

64. Dr Helen Mott and Dr Rachel Fenton, co-designers of an evidence-based bystander prevention programme for universities called the Intervention Initiative, told us how such programmes were effective at engaging

125 Q55 [Richie Benson]

126 Q57

127 Ibid

128 Beyond Equality ([AES001](#)) para 6; Q46 [Ammaarah Faisal]

129 "Government supports a new public sexual harassment offence", Home Office [news story](#), 9 December 2022

130 Our Streets Now, [PSH to be made a crime](#), accessed 16 December 2022

131 Q101 [Andrea Jenkyns]

male students.¹³² They improved men’s awareness of sexual harassment; increased their sense of responsibility and readiness to act; and reduced their negative attitudes towards women and girls, including the acceptance of rape and domestic abuse myths.¹³³

- 65.** Although influential stakeholders, such as Universities UK and the Office for Students, have recommended bystander intervention programmes, experts in bystander intervention were concerned that most universities did not invest the time and money in putting evidence-based programmes in place.¹³⁴ Many had made the training much shorter than advised, put them online, and diluted the training with other topics.¹³⁵ Dr Melanie McCarry, an academic who worked on Scotland’s Equally Safe in Higher Education project, argued that running inferior programmes let students believe they had been sufficiently trained. She argued that this was “really dangerous and in some regards worse than doing nothing, because it allows universities to say that they are doing something, while what they are doing is often inadequate”.¹³⁶
- 66.** Dr Rachel Fenton, Associate Professor in Law at Exeter University and co-designer of the Intervention Initiative, found that some bystander intervention programmes were not attracting the right participants. Following a survey and interviews with staff across 53 universities, she found that programmes implemented on an ad hoc basis, and which required only voluntary participation, attracted women, survivors, and other people who did not need the training. The people who should have attended and who would have benefitted most—i.e. men—did not come.¹³⁷
- 67.** Dr Fenton added that universities would only put proper bystander intervention programmes in place if there was a regulatory requirement for them to do so.¹³⁸ She also argued that unless training was mandatory for all students, getting men into the room would not happen.¹³⁹ The Office for Students (OfS) told us that placing a regulatory requirement on universities to provide bystander training was something it was “thinking about quite

132 Bystander interventions are based on taking people through the different stages required to move from inaction to action. For this to happen, the bystander must: notice and be aware of the event; see the event or behaviour as a problem; feel responsible and motivated to act; and have the necessary skills to be able to intervene safely and effectively.

133 Q52 [Dr Fenton]; Oral evidence taken on 28 April 2021, [HC \(2019–21\) 1335](#), Q28 [Dr Mott]

134 Q55 [Dr McCarry]; Q58 [Dr Fenton]; Oral evidence taken on 28 April 2021, [HC \(2019–21\) 1335](#), Q28 [Dr Mott]

135 Qq54, 55 [Dr McCarry]

136 Q55

137 Q58

138 Q55

139 Q58

carefully.” Susan Lapworth, chief executive, told us that the OfS would “try to frame” what it considered to be credible bystander prevention training as part of its consultation on a new condition of registration (see below).¹⁴⁰

Condition of registration

- 68.** The Office for Students (OfS) is the regulator of higher education in England and has statutory duties under the Higher Education and Regulatory Act 2017. Higher education institutions can voluntarily register with the OfS, but if they do, they receive certain benefits: funding;¹⁴¹ a licence to recruit international students; and the power to award degrees and use the title of ‘university’ in their names.¹⁴² Institutions that want to register—and remain registered—with the OfS must demonstrate that they offer a quality higher education and meet the OfS’s conditions of registration. The OfS can intervene when a condition is likely to be or is actually breached.¹⁴³ However, the OfS currently places no obligations on universities to comply with its statement of expectations, which is a series of recommendations for higher education providers to prevent and address all forms of harassment and sexual misconduct.¹⁴⁴
- 69.** A recent independent evaluation of how institutions had implemented the statement of expectations found that progress across the higher education sector was inconsistent and too slow. It concluded that further regulatory action was required.¹⁴⁵ As a result, the OfS told us it was consulting on a new condition of registration in early 2023.¹⁴⁶ Subject to that consultation, the OfS could place certain mandatory requirements on universities to take action against sexual misconduct; and would have the powers to intervene if a university failed to meet those requirements.¹⁴⁷ Although the

140 Q82

141 All registered providers can recruit students who can access student support funding through the Student Loans Company. They can also receive direct funding to support their activities, such as specific research projects through the research councils. Those providers in the Approved (fee cap) category of registration are also eligible for ‘direct grant funding’ to support the costs of teaching (through the OfS) and research activities (through Research England).

142 Office for Students, ‘[Registration with the OfS](#)’, accessed 13 November 2022

143 Ibid

144 Office for Students, ‘[Prevent and address harassment and sexual misconduct: Statement of expectations](#)’, accessed 13 November 2022

145 Office for Students, ‘[Evaluation finds universities need to make more progress tackling harassment and sexual misconduct](#)’, accessed 13 November 2022

146 Q79 [Susan Lapworth]; see also Office for Students, Evaluation finds universities need to make more progress tackling harassment and sexual misconduct, accessed 13 November 2022

147 Qq79–81 [Susan Lapworth]; Qq92–93 [Emma Davies]

Department for Education would not comment on what sanctions the OfS could use in cases of non-compliance, it confirmed that the Government would fully support the regulator in holding universities to account.¹⁴⁸

70. CONCLUSION

The higher education sector has made progress in tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, but that progress has been inconsistent and slow. The Office for Students (OfS) has committed to a new condition of registration which will place mandatory obligations on universities to tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence, which we endorse. The OfS should not miss the opportunity to strengthen its requirements of universities.

71. RECOMMENDATION

The Office for Students' condition of registration should require all universities to put in place compulsory evidence-based bystander intervention programmes for all first-year students. The Office for Students should strengthen its statement of expectations to ensure that universities provide that training.

Conclusions and recommendations

Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools and colleges

1. Sexual harassment and sexual violence continues to be a scourge in our schools, with many girls and women feeling powerless. The issues are longstanding and warnings have been frequent, including from our predecessor Committee. It is saddening that it took the public testimonies of thousands of school-aged children for Ofsted and the schools they inspect to acknowledge the seriousness of the problem. The Government must take steps to ensure that all schools, including both mainstream and special schools, recognise the seriousness of the problem of sexual harassment in educational settings of female students and staff and have the funding they require to deliver safeguarding effectively. (Paragraph 16)
2. Ofsted did not act quickly enough in undertaking its review in 2021, however we welcome it and their commitment to strengthen requirements for inspectors to assess how schools address sexual harassment and abuse. Should Ofsted inspectors find a lack of progress has been made in tackling peer-on-peer abuse in schools, Ofsted should not delay in undertaking a further thematic review of the adequacy of safeguarding policies in schools and colleges. As part of their inspections Ofsted should also investigate the level of abuse experienced by female staff, at the hands of pupils, parents and other staff. (Paragraph 17)
3. The Government has updated the statutory Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance to include tackling peer-on-peer sexual harassment and sexual violence. This is a positive step to ensure that schools better protect children and young people from harmful sexual behaviour. However, schools need the appropriate time and money to implement the guidance properly and provide effective safeguarding training. (Paragraph 18)
4. The Government should undertake an evaluation of how well schools are following the Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance and the impact that guidance is having in practice. The evaluation should include

scrutiny of any barriers preventing schools from implementing the guidance effectively. This evaluation should be completed within the next six months. (Paragraph 19)

Attitudes towards women and girls

5. The Online Safety Bill is a landmark piece of legislation with the potential to significantly tackle violence against women and girls, in part through the regulation of online pornography. It presents an opportunity to address issues such as boys cyberflashing hardcore pornographic images at girls, the Airdropping of nude images and other forms of sexual harassment. However, those responsible for the safety of girls in educational settings should not wait for the Bill to become law to tackle this behaviour. Head teachers must do more to address the harmful use of mobile devices on school and college premises. Government guidance should make clear the harmful effect such technology can have and the Department for Education and Ofsted should improve their monitoring of its impact in educational settings and the effectiveness of school leaders in tackling this corrosive problem. (Paragraph 26)
6. A lack of compulsory RSHE for young people until they are 18 leaves young people making their first steps in the adult world under-supported and less equipped to navigate potentially harmful and dangerous situations and keep themselves safe and healthy in relationships. We recommend that compulsory RSHE is extended to young people in post-16 educational settings. (Paragraph 33)
7. The Government's review of RSHE must be evidence-led. The review team should engage with children, teachers, parents and specialist VAWG organisations to ensure that any developments in policy support effectively the Government's commitment to tackling sexual harassment and violence in schools and colleges. The review should include an assessment of the reasons why some children are leaving school without having received the mandatory elements of the RSHE curriculum and whether that curriculum is meeting the needs of children. (Paragraph 37)
8. Engagement with boys and young men is crucial for tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence in educational settings. As part of the review of relationships, sex and health education (RSHE), the Department for Education and the Government Equalities Office should work together to develop a specific strategy for engaging with boys and young men in primary and secondary schools on the topics of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. The Government should lay that strategy before

Parliament by the end of 2023 alongside the review. The strategy should include the guidance and follow-up support the Department for Education will provide to primary and secondary school leaders to enable them to:

- design and deliver an RSHE curriculum that places a greater focus on boys and young men;
- access learning materials covering gender norms and gender equality. As a signatory to the Istanbul Convention, the Government has an international obligation to provide such materials. The Government should work with experts in education, academia and preventing violence against women and girls to create an online repository of evidence-based material;
- provide support for students who experience all types of harmful sexual behaviour to come forward without fear of invalidation; and a safe, non-judgmental space for students who are responsible for ‘low level’ behaviours to reflect on and talk about their behaviour;
- train all teachers how to engage with boys and young men in conversations that challenge prevailing gender norms, ideas of masculinity, and attitudes towards women and girls. The Government should also work with initial teacher training providers to include gender sensitive training as part of their offer. All training should be evidence-based. (Paragraph 45)

- 9.** Schools and teachers should have the knowledge and materials to raise awareness of what sexual harassment and sexual violence looks like, address inappropriate language and behaviour, and challenge stereotypical views of sex and masculinity. In too many cases, they lack the funding and time to deliver RSHE effectively. While it is encouraging that a significant proportion of teachers in training wish to be able to specialise in RSHE, the same concerns exist in that environment. The Government must take steps to ensure that teachers and teachers in training have the funding and time they require to learn how to deliver RSHE effectively. (Paragraph 49)

Sexual misconduct at university

- 10.** We welcome the Office for Student’s (OfS) commitment to a prevalence survey of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in the university sector. This would overcome the reluctance of some universities to do this work due to fears of reputational damage. The OfS should ensure that the survey captures students’ experiences of sexual harassment both on and off the university campus. (Paragraph 56)

- 11.** It is disgraceful that universities in England have used non-disclosure agreements to silence victims of sexual harassment and violence. Given the number of universities still to commit to banning the use of NDAs, we are pleased to see the Government endorse legislative proposals to prevent this abhorrent practice. Universities need to improve their whistleblowing policies to end the culture of silence regarding sexual abuse and violence in higher education institutions. (Paragraph 60)
- 12.** The Department for Education should develop a nationwide sexual harassment and sexual violence awareness campaign that particularly targets male university students. (Paragraph 63)
- 13.** The higher education sector has made progress in tackling sexual harassment and sexual violence, but that progress has been inconsistent and slow. The Office for Students (OfS) has committed to a new condition of registration which will place mandatory obligations on universities to tackle sexual harassment and sexual violence, which we endorse. The OfS should not miss the opportunity to strengthen its requirements of universities. (Paragraph 70)
- 14.** The Office for Students' condition of registration should require all universities to put in place compulsory evidence-based bystander intervention programmes for all first-year students. The Office for Students should strengthen its statement of expectations to ensure that universities provide that training. (Paragraph 71)

Formal minutes

Tuesday 20 June 2023

Members present:

Caroline Nokes, in the Chair

Dame Caroline Dinenage

Carolyn Harris

Kim Johnson

Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings

Draft Report (Attitudes towards women and girls in educational settings), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 71 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Fifth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

Adjournment

Adjourned until Wednesday 28 June at 2.30pm

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 28 June 2022

Susie McDonald, Chief Executive, Tender Arts & Education; **Soma Sara**, Founder and CEO, Everyone's Invited; **Keziah Featherstone**, Headteacher, Q3 Academy Tipton; **Dr Yuwei XU**, Assistant Professor in Education and Teacher Development, University of Nottingham, UK; **Professor Nicky Stanley**, Professor of Social Work, University of Central Lancashire; **Jenny Barksfield**, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Education, PSHE Association [Q1-15](#)

Dr Yuwei XU, Assistant Professor in Education and Teacher Development, University of Nottingham, UK; **Professor Nicky Stanley**, Professor of Social Work, University of Central Lancashire; **Jenny Barksfield**, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Education, PSHE Association [Q16-25](#)

Wednesday 7 September 2022

Ammaarah Faisal, Student Ambassador and Head of Research for Higher Education, Our Streets Now; **John Edmonds**, Co-author of Unsafe Spaces: Ending Sexual Abuse in Universities; **Professor Cara Aitchison**, Chair of Universities UK advisory group on 'addressing staff-to-student sexual misconduct' [Q26-48](#)

Dr Rachel Fenton, Associate Professor, University of Exeter Law School; **Dr Melanie McCarry**, Senior Lecturer of School of Social Work & Social Policy, University of Strathclyde; **Richie Benson**, Universities Project Lead, Beyond Equality [Q49-64](#)

Wednesday 12 October 2022

Yvette Stanley, National Director for Social Care, Ofsted; **Andrew Cook**, Regional Director for North West and West Midlands, Ofsted; **Susan Lapworth**, Chief Executive, Office for Students [Q65-85](#)

Andrea Jenkyns MP, Minister for Skills, Department for Education;
Kelly Tolhurst MP, Minister for Schools and Childhood, Department for
Education; **Kate Dixon**, Director of Pupil Wellbeing and Safety, Department
for Education; **Emma Davies**, Deputy Director in the Higher Education
Quality, Access and Student Experience Directorate, Department for
Education

[Q86-106](#)

EMBARGOED ADVANCE COPY: Not to be published in full, or in part,
in any form before 00.01 a.m. on Wednesday 5 July 2023

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the inquiry publications page of the Committee's website. INQ numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Beyond Equality ([AES0011](#))
- 2 John Edmonds and Eva Tutchell ([AES0010](#))
- 3 John Edmonds and Eva Tutchell ([AES0009](#))
- 4 Keziah Featherstone (Headteacher, Q3 Academy Tipton) ([AES0001](#))
- 5 PSHE Association ([AES0002](#))
- 6 Professor Nicky Stanley (Professor of Social Work Co-Director, Connect Centre for International Research on Interpersonal Violence and Harm, University of Central Lancashire) ([AES0004](#))
- 7 Tender Education & Arts ([AES0003](#))