

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

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

PPSH 19

Ymateb gan: Cymorth i Ferched Cymru

Response from: Welsh Women's Aid

Nodwch eich barn mewn perthynas â chylch gorchwyl yr ymchwiliad, sydd wedi'u

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

1. Maint | Scale
2. Effaith | Impact
3. Effeithiolrwydd ymyriadau | Effectiveness of interventions
4. Y cyd-destun ehangach | Wider context
5. Arall | Other

1. Maint | Scale

It is difficult to quantify the true extent of sexual harassment within schools, not only because of a lack of reporting and robust data collection, but also due to the fact that this is a systemic issue, impacting not just on the individual victim who is being harassed, but their peers who are bystanders to the harassment and, consequentially, the wider educational environment.

Schools act as microcosms of society and as we are aware of sexual harassment being at epidemic levels across other spaces in Wales- for example within the workplace where our No Grey Area campaign found 4 out of 5 women had experienced sexual harassment¹-we are unfortunately confident that there are similar levels occurring within schools.

Sexual harassment rarely happens in silo and will intersect with and be escalated by other forms of violence and abuse. Data gathered around bullying should be proactively seeking to recognise where there is an element of sexual harassment.

¹ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/2021/03/no-grey-area-survey-report/>



Children and young people's existence, interactions and reliance on online spaces such as social media should not be under-estimated, neither should the reality of the extent of VAWDASV including sexual harassment occurring through them. Although the form and platform through which sexual harassment may have adapted within online spaces, the intent, violation, and far-reaching negative impacts have not.

It is also important to note that children and young people often utilise online spaces as sources of support and resilience. Our *I trust them* report suggests that young people use the internet and search online for support or advice. These findings are in-keeping with other studies, which suggest that young people increasingly engage with online communities, and often find it easier to communicate via text or chat than face-to-face. Utilising and developing online spaces must be a key consideration when developing an effective response to peer-on-peer sexual harassment and a children and young people's model of Change That Lasts.²

While there may be a lack of concrete data what is explicitly researched and timelessly proven is the link between a normalisation of sexism and misogyny and the perpetration of VAWDASV. The current culture which places over-emphasis on the importance of the victim reporting their experiences rather than prioritising tackling the root cause of sexual harassment, are not only victim-blaming and misdirecting responsibility but are simply ineffective.

These priorities fail to take sufficient action to change behaviour or challenge the culture that enables the harassment to happen, making it unlikely that an appropriate response would happen.

An effective prevention approach that aims to actively stop sexual harassment from happening in the first place, would also look at empowering CYP to identify an experience of sexual harassment- either as a victim or as a bystander- and feel confident and comfortable to access support. It would also provide the effective training for school staff, information to parents to respond appropriately and compassionately to disclosures and facilitate access to support as well as effectively challenge the perpetrator of the behaviour.

² <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/change-that-lasts/>



2. Effaith | Impact

Sexual harassment in education is deeply gendered in its' nature. Findings from the Estyn Report show that sexual harassment, sexism, and misogynistic behaviour is often normalised and accepted by young people, their teachers and parents, meaning that it can remain hidden or unseen within a school and wider culture. This allows harassment to prevail. It is vital that the report exposes the true scale and intrinsic intertwining of sexual harassment, sexism and misogynistic behaviour faced by girls and young women in schools, and clearly situates this issue within the context of gender inequality.

Sexual harassment is not an inevitability. The current acceptability of it as a normal part of school culture is discriminatory, as it acknowledges that girls and young women will experience harassment in school, placing them at a distinct disadvantage as harassment can have extensive impacts on educational development, health, self-esteem and mental well-being. The emphasis should lie in a whole-school approach committed to actively preventing it. While responding better to victims when they do choose to disclose is important, first and foremost committing to establish an environment of equity, trust, and safety with a zero-tolerance outlook to violence and abuse must be established. This requires a primary prevention focus from the outset.

The experiences of Black and minoritised girls and women of sexual harassment is often racialised.³ Our *I Trust Them* report⁴ shows that overall, approximately 75% of respondents identified 'education' (teachers, support staff, tutors, lecturers, other staff) as a potential source of support for young people. Yet there was a disparity here between Black and minoritised young people and their White British counterparts, with 66% of the former and 86% of the latter selecting 'education'.

Overall rates for selecting education were lower when respondents were asked where, personally, they would be most and least likely to turn to for support: approximately half of the young people aged 13-17 identified 'education' as a source of support they were likely to turn to, while the other half stated they were unlikely to turn to education. For the 18-25s, only 29% stated that they were likely turn to education for support. The reason for these lower rates are perhaps linked to individuals' experiences of abuse and seeking support: 50% of those who reflected on their experiences stated that education professionals had been unhelpful. Despite this, education institutions appeared to be useful at signposting young people to other places/people whom the young people did find helpful.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ-gpvibpdU>

⁴ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/I-trust-them-CYP-Resilience-Survey-Report-English-1.pdf>



Further work must be carried out to effectively engage and centre the voices and experiences of girls and young women who are Black, Asian, disabled or from other minoritised communities.

3. Effeithiolrwydd ymyriadau | Effectiveness of interventions

We are eager to see the impact of RSE roll out in the new Curriculum. This must be delivered in partnership with specialist services and promise consistency across Wales.

Teachers will need additional training and support to effectively incorporate RSE into their daily activities- a whole school approach which is consistent and robust in training and monitoring is needed to ensure the entire workforce within schools is aligned and confident. This must not be tokenistic and siloed to designated staff but embedded into the fabric of education settings. It must be ensured that access to specialist support and mental health services following disclosures.

Our 'I trust them' report demonstrates CYP have a lack of confidence in disclosing to educational professionals and criminal justice and feel let down by the responses that have taken place when disclosures do happen. This is particularly reflected in experiences of Black and minoritised CYP.

An effective recommendation on primary prevention would enable pupils, teachers, and parents to understand that sexual harassment (as a form of VAWDASV) is an abuse of power and control, is rooted in gender inequality, and is exacerbated by other forms of discrimination. It should empower individuals and collectives to prevent sexual harassment through providing the knowledge and skills to recognise and safely challenge sexism, controlling behaviour, victim-blaming, and other attitudes and behaviour which condone or justify violence. This would reduce the space for perpetration, increase confidence in seeking support, and enable earlier intervention with children and young people who are both victims of sexual harassment and perpetrators of it.

The evidence from schools on good practice highlight some positive whole-education approaches, from promotion of positive cultures from leaders, through to the policy and implementation across the school community. This should focus on the implementation of the 9 principles of the [Welsh Government Good Practice Guidance](#).



As the Welsh Government new National VAWDASV Strategy and RSE Code and Guidance is to be published imminently, we would expect a recommendation and ongoing monitoring of strategic alignment and joint working to enable an effective preventative approach as well as support for CYP. This must be enabled at a local level, where we currently see a lack of joined-up working between education and VAWDASV at a strategic level, as well as little to no investment in prevention approaches.

Based on evidence and commentary from both educational professionals and pupils, we believe there should be a greater emphasis on the investment of professional development for school staff, both in the teaching of RSE and in the delivery of a WEA to ending VAWDASV. Similarly, the evidence from schools and pupils within the Estyn report seemed to clearly support a recommendation on external expert agencies providing aspects of RSE as well as supporting schools in their response to sexual harassment. Cardiff Women's Aid: Whole Education Approach is a good practice example of this, building relationships between schools and specialist sector to inform development of resources, teacher training and support, policy review as well as effective signposting for support.

We recommend that the Welsh Government commits to provide ring-fenced funding for RSE professional development –for current staff, and to be embedded into future teacher training as a compulsory, meaningful component.

We recommend that the Welsh Government commits to increasing the funding available for specialist support for children and young people who experience VAWDASV and that this funding occurs as a sustainable model. We wholeheartedly support a multi agency approach to responding to all forms of VAWDASV, and recognise that sexual harassment in schools is part of this issue. However, we do not believe that approaches which introduce or increase a police presence into schools are in line with a holistic or preventative environment.

4. Y cyd-destun ehangach | Wider context

The finding of our I Trust Them report suggests that young people use the internet and search online for support or advice. This is in keeping with other studies, which suggests that young people increasingly engage with online communities, and often find it easier to communicate via text or chat than face-to-face. This suggests that utilising / developing online spaces need to be a key consideration when developing a children and young people's model of Change That Lasts.⁵

⁵ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/change-that-lasts/>



Our [I Trust Them Report](#) also showed that children and young people, particularly Black and minoritized young people do not trust the police or see them as a source of support.

- Black and minoritized young people were nearly half as likely as their White British counterparts to identify the Police as a potential source of support (17% and 32%, respectively).
- Young people with personal experiences of abuse and seeking support, none stated that the Police had been helpful.⁶

When considering prevention and interventions there must be a mindfulness not to over-rely on reporting and police presence.

We have raised points on the new Curriculum in the previous question.

5. Arall | Other

Wales has made a clear policy commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people. The UNCRC is embedded in Welsh legislation through the Right of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011. Article 19 of the UNCRC states that Governments must do all they can to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence and abuse and Article 39 that children who have experienced neglect, abuse, exploitation, torture must receive special support to help them recover.

The Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 (VAWDASV Act) aims to improve arrangements to prevent, protect and support victims of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, including children and young people.

The impacts on mental health for those experiencing sexual harassment should not be underestimated, it is also worthy of note that the wider psychological impact of attending an environment where sexual harassment is accepted and normalised has damaging long-term societal effects. Schools are an environment where future generations learn and internalise societal norms and values. The implicit as well as explicit behaviours and attitudes of what is accepted and acceptable are the foundation, we offer our young people. If we do not address the climate of gender inequality at this point, then investment in campaigns aimed adults to 'de-normalise' oppression and abuse will continue to be needed in perpetuity.

⁶ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/I-trust-them-CYP-Resilience-Survey-Report-English-1.pdf>

