Resisting the invisible

How do we resist the gendered social norms that help sexual harassment exist in our schools?

Lucy Russell

Abstract

Guidance for schools now includes policy to address sexual harassment and statutory requirements to deliver relationships and sex education, yet recent evidence shows that sexual harassment, in schools and online, remains a pernicious problem. Why does educating for gender equality feel like resistance, and what are educators actually resisting? This paper explores the gendered social norms that lead to sexual harassment and proposes some of the key elements of education – a whole-school approach to tackling sexual harassment, relationships and sex education, working with boys and young men, hearing and including the student voice, and making sure that resistance is intersectional – that both deliver the curriculum and can act as tools for resistance.

Key words: relationships and sex education; sexual harassment; sexism; gender equality; student voice

What are we resisting?

In 2017, the National Education Union launched a report *It's just everywhere: a study on sexism in schools and how we tackle it*.[1] The title said it all, sexual harassment, it found, was rife in schools. The research identified that over a third (37 per cent) of female students at mixed-sex schools have personally experienced some form of sexual harassment at school and almost a quarter (24 per cent) have been subjected to unwanted physical touching of a sexual nature while at school

In fact it was so extensive, it had become accepted as part of school life by many of the students. Few incidents were reported and students did not expect a response:

- Only 14 per cent of students who have experienced sexual harassment reported it to a teacher.
- Just 6 per cent of students who have experienced or witnessed the use of sexist language in school reported it to a teacher.[2]

Although anyone can experience sexual harassment and violence, research indicates that girls are disproportionately affected. For example, Ofsted noted that: '90% of recorded offences of rape in 2018-19 of 13- to 15-year-olds were committed against girls. In the past year, girls aged between 15 and 17 reported the highest annual rates of sexual

abuse for young people and children aged 25 and younger'.[3]

Ofsted's 2021 research with girls found that: [4]

- 79 per cent of girls said that sexual assault of any kind happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes'
- 68 per cent said the same of feeling pressured to do sexual things that they did not want to
- 64 per cent said unwanted touching happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes'
- 92 per cent said sexist name-calling happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes'.

Online or on social media:

- 88 per cent said being sent pictures or videos they did not want to see happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes'
- 80 per cent said the same of being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves
- 73 per cent said having pictures or videos that they sent being shared more widely without their knowledge or consent happened a lot or sometimes.

Why invisible?

Sexual harassment is based on gendered social norms, the beliefs that a person's sex should attach them to certain behaviours, roles in society and the ability to do, or not do, certain things. These behaviours are best understood as being the rules of behaviour at the level of society and institutions, reinforced by socialisation in the family, the media and the beliefs that we hold in our own minds about ourselves and others.[5] Such ideas are always also influenced by other identity factors like our race and religion, where we live, our sexuality, disabilities and more. As Cislaghi and Heise explain, 'social norms are rules of action shared by people in a given society or group; they define what is considered normal and acceptable behaviour for the members of that group'.[6] What has been documented by a number of investigations into sexual harassment in schools is that it has become a social norm in many schools:

- sexual bullying, sexism and harassment are normalised, everyday occurrences, often positioned as 'a joke' and therefore not reported[7]
- girls are increasingly experiencing cyberflashing on platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram, and this form of image-based sexual harassment is becoming widely accepted as a new norm.[8]

In the case of schools, such norms include the idea that girls are sexual objects, they are available for boys and men's pleasure and should accept the taking of such pleasure – through, for example, comments about their bodies or unwanted sexual touching –

as a normal part of their gendered social role. The behaviour of boys and young men as sexual harassers can also be normalised by statements such as 'boys will be boys'.[9] Ringrose, Regehr and Milne's research into image-based sexual harassment and abuse noted that: 'Girls are also much more likely to have their sexual image shared without their consent ... and following circulation, girls face far greater negative consequences ... In particular, girls commonly face slut shaming ... and victim blaming ... from their peers when their sexual images are shared'.[10] Contrastingly, boys face reduced social consequences if their image is shared beyond the intended recipient.

Why do we need to resist?

The facts speak for themselves about how often sexual harassment happens and how deeply it has become ingrained in school behaviour, but what can get overlooked is the impact on those experiencing sexual harassment. Gendered social norms can also create ideas that girls are in some way responsible for their own sexual harassment. This can lead to a culture of victim blaming where the girl experiences greater blame for the harassment (she shouldn't have taken a nude photo of herself) and she experiences the greater punishment, for example being shamed and bullied by fellow pupils, having to study alone outside the classroom or in some cases having to relocate to a new school.

Examples of the impact of harassment are on the Everyone's Invited testimonials:[11]

Weeks after I [told a teacher I had been assaulted] I was getting asked in corridors why I 'snitched' on him, it stings and hurts still years later. I don't understand how young women aren't believed when bravely coming out with these stories, I had just turned 12 I never should've gone through it at that age.

It took me years to come to peace with life, it's hard especially with all scars left.

I broke down and practically locked myself into my form tutor's classroom.

Moving from acceptance to resistance; the shift in discourse

Feminism and the various and diverse campaigns for gender equality have always been deeply rooted in ideas of resistance. Whether that is resistance to patriarchal power, breaking the silence over sexual assault within structures of power, like the #MeToo movement, or resistance to the multiple layers of oppression, like racism and colonial power, that mean the experience of gender inequality is very different for different women and girls.

In 2015-16, the Women and Equalities Committee held an inquiry asking for evidence about sexual harassment in schools. The response was overwhelming. A wide range of organisations gave evidence, stating that sexual harassment in schools was extensive, pernicious and needed prevention work, a shift of culture in schools and clear leadership

from government about student behaviour to enable change. More recently, the website Everyone's Invited began to release testimonial from students who had experienced harassment in school.[12] In 2021, it released the names of every school where a student had described an incident. One key message that emerged from that information release was that sexual harassment remained a serious problem in schools and was not being effectively addressed across the UK school system. In 2022, the Department for Education is looking at how to tackle the problem. This demonstrates a significant conversation shift over eight years, but things are taking a long time to change.

Similarly, youth voice has for decades been a rumble in the background of many policy decisions, but with the power of social media, that rumble has become an earthquake – or youthquake – where climate strikes and UN addresses have been led by a 15-16-year-old girl, and the No More Page 3 and period poverty movements were driven forward by activists still in their school uniforms. The voices of students are increasing in impact, and students certainly want gender equality in their schools.

How we resist: change within the system

Across England and Wales, there are many educators who are driving resistance through their everyday practices and the way they deliver the curriculum and support their students. Below I feature just a few examples of such work. Inclusion does not intend to imply that the work has been evaluated, but it instead highlights promising practice.

A whole-school approach

A whole-school approach has been called for by many teaching unions and activist groups.[13] They emphasise that one-off lessons will not make the changes needed to social norms that are deeply embedded in both pupil and staff behaviour. Such approaches also explicitly link the gendered social norms that lead to sexual harassment with other social norms, like gendered stereotypes about what subjects girls should and should not study, what toys they are given to play with and the language we use for boys and girls.

In its research into sexual harassment, the National Education Union recommended that schools should adopt a 'whole-school approach' to tackling sexism.[14] It defines a 'whole-school approach' as one where: 'action to promote equality between girls and boys is supported by an overarching framework involving all members of the school community. This enables a consistent approach and long-term change'.

A whole-school approach can take many different forms. One such approach I would suggest involves looking at five key elements:

Leadership: Senior leadership and governors need to be willing to drive this change and openly support it. Change must be seen to be happening at the 'top.'

Staff: Staff will be the ones who make so much change happen and they must be supported, not just with encouragement but with time, skills and capacity to achieve change. They also need policies in place for their own rights, like behaviour policies for staff and how to report harassment for staff.

Students: As discussed below, listening to and acting upon the student voice is essential.

Curriculum: As we explore below with relationships and sex education, there are points within the curriculum where it is essential to address consent, respectful relationships and healthy relationships, as well as the law regarding rape, consent and online activity. But the most successful delivery uses a much wider curriculum to deliver the message. That can be through drama, literature or science for example.

Community: Good-quality communication with parents, families and the wider community helps schools to bring those around the students along on the journey. Supporting families to see the vision and inviting them to be part of the change will, in turn, help the change become embedded.

Such elements should each address four themes at every stage:

Internal: a young person's internal dialogue or, as discussed earlier, the gendered social norms they have grown up around. This may range from empowerment and role model work with girls to considering personal beliefs about masculinity for boys.

Infrastructure: whether it's school uniform, periods at school policy or access to non-stereotypical careers advice, the building blocks of a school need to be part of the change. Most importantly, sexual harassment and acts to address it must sit in the wider context of quality infrastructure around safeguarding, reporting incidents, clear gender-sensitive behaviour policy and more.

Inclusion and intersectional: gender never exists in a vacuum and all other aspects of a young person's identity should be taken into account. When addressing sexual harassment in particular, the fact that it can take on racist, ableist or homophobic attitudes as part of the way it is enacted is essential to achieving change

Imagery: no matter how good a policy, or a discussion, as Anne Marie Imafidon says, 'You need to see it to be it'.[15] This means every level, from clear statements from the school that sexual harassment is unacceptable to diverse role models in science, what every part of the school body sees every day tells them about the values and beliefs of the school, and any changes must be reflected there.

Relationships and sex education as resistance

Relationships and sex education (RSE), or relationships and sexuality education in Welsh guidance, is now statutory for schools, and in that guidance there are requirements

to learn about consent, the law and healthy relationships.[16] So, if it is required by government, is delivering RSE resistance? Perhaps the key element here is the drive for change. A quick assembly on consent may fulfil the requirements technically, but it is unlikely to change things. Real change comes from the messages, like consent, like respectful relationships, being built in from an early age, and being gradually built up over years.

Learning about consent and respectful relationships is essential at primary level. For example, can you hit someone or take their things without consent? By revisiting and reinforcing these messages over the years, educators can build strong foundations for students and develop their critical thinking so they can understand and decide for themselves about the relationships they want in life. The Sex Education Forum principles for quality RSE set out an approach that will educate and enable change.[17] The principles include training for staff, creating a safe space for students, lessons that foster gender equality and challenge discrimination and it: 'gives pupils opportunities to reflect on values and influences (such as from peers, media, faith and culture) that may shape their attitudes to relationships and sex, and nurtures respect for different views'.

Really importantly, although RSE has the power to resist harmful social norms, it is not an act of resistance against parents and communities. A very high majority of parents and carers want good-quality, age-appropriate RSE for their children.[18]

Working with boys and addressing masculinity

One of the most concerning social norms around sexual violence against women and girls is the idea that those experiencing the abuse are the ones that should take action to stop it. An example of this came after the murder of Sarah Everard in 2021, when police encouraged women to carry rape alarms and the home secretary backed a scheme that came under strong criticism, for women to be tracked if they felt in danger.[19] Over the last few decades, the conversation has shifted to look at the behaviour of men and boys. Studies have described masculinity as something young men can be trapped in, for example Heilman, Barker and Harrison's 'man box'.[20] These studies have shown that boys and young men are also subject to gendered social norms, and these must also be resisted to achieve change. Such thinking is slowly coming into public understanding, for example the London Mayor's latest campaign to tackle violence against women and girls explicitly targets men, their attitudes and the voices that play out in their minds, making decisions about their behaviour.[21] It calls on men to 'have a word' with themselves, and then their friends in order to tackle violence against women and girls.

In schools, practitioners have been working with boys to help them develop the critical thinking skills they need to unpack gendered stereotypes about what kind of man they 'should' be, and instead to identify the kind of men they want to

be. One example is Beyond Equality, which describes its approach as: 'Rethinking Masculinities [and] working with men and boys towards gender equality, inclusive communities, and healthier relationships ... Letting boys choose how to be boys [and holding] conversations about "being a man" so boys can do better by women and girls, non binary folk and each other'.[22]

The charity's managing director, Daniel Guinness, explained that: 'the message coming from women is so strong: we need men involved in this. It's not an attack on men, it's just a desperate plea for men to take this seriously and to reflect on ways they've been part of the problem and can now be part of the solution'.[23]

Beyond Equality's methodology involves workshops, for KS3 and KS4 assemblies and training for teachers. Its approach to resistance involves disrupting expectations, stereotypes and pressures on boys to fit in. Its methodology aims to create space for boys outside of peer pressures and expectations so that they can explore the sort of impact that they want to have on their communities. The approach acknowledges that boys' and young men's behaviours and attitudes 'are not just individual, but also formed through their relationships with their family and peers, and shaped in the context of a school culture'.[24] Boys are encouraged to discuss among themselves and let them challenge or be challenged by their peers on each other's opinions. The workshops then work to dispel misconceptions, for instance on the true rates of sexual assaults of women.[25]

Hearing and including student voice and supporting student activism

As discussed above, within its recommendation for a whole-school approach to tackling sexual harassment, the National Education Union identifies a key element to this as empowering students and enabling students 'to discuss and learn about sexism, to report incidents, and to take action for equality'.[26] Similarly, the sex education forum identifies that good-quality RSE: 'Seeks pupils' views about RSE so that teaching can be made relevant to their real lives and assessed and adapted as their needs change'.[27]

To hear and include students meaningfully, some factors that need to be considered are:

- Create a safe space for students to participate.
- Be honest with students about what is possible.
- Be willing to make the changes students ask for.
- Make it fun! Arts, drama and creativity are great ways to gather student feedback and empower them. AGENDA have a wide range of very creative tools for educators to use.[28]
- How are you listening to vulnerable groups? Do girls need a specific space to speak

up? Do Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, non-binary and others who identify as part of this group in society, often referred to as LGBT+ students, need space? Are the spaces safe for students of colour to speak about racism? Are the spaces accessible if a student is special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or has a disability?

- How are you accountable? How are you feeding back to students? Have a clear 'You said, we did' communication approach.

Resistance is intersectional

Throughout all of this work, it cannot be emphasised enough that any work for change must be intersectional in its approach. There are some elements of sexual harassment that have been evidenced and are reasonably well understood. For example: 7 per cent of LGBT+ young people say they have experienced unwanted sexual touching over the last 12 months; bisexual young people are more likely to have experienced sexual harassment, with 10 per cent of bisexual young people reporting unwanted sexual touching in the last 12 months; for bisexual girls, this figure increases to 12 per cent.[29] Sexual harassment often has a racial, homophobic or ablest element, and Ringrose, Regehr and Milne note that socio-economic and cultural factors can have an impact as well.[30] But there are many other vulnerable groups, for example young people in care, for whom such identity factors may be used as part of an abusive attack. Whether the approach is for whole-school change (where intersectional analysis should be a thread run throughout), via RSE or a particular group of students, ensuring that they are listened to, and that the various identity and social factors that impact them are considered, is essential to the success of any movement for change.

Conclusion

Although much of the work for gender equality has been about resisting the gendered power structures in society, the need for structures, laws, policy etc. to change is being better recognised and it is changing. The government's latest violence against women strategy explicitly discusses RSE education as a prevention tool for all forms of violence against women and girls.[31] But that doesn't mean the gendered social norms that make up our society have gone away. Without question they are still present, but often invisible.

The phrase 'invisible' is used very consciously because it is so hard to describe what resistance feels like. When we are delivering in line with government guidance, why does educating for an end to sexual harassment still feel like resistance? Put simply, it is perhaps because there is still a long way to go and the work is hard. And it is hard because it is about resisting centuries of ingrained inequality – that's going to take time

to undo. But every day things are changing for the better and educators are in an ideal situation to resist gender inequality, within guidance, within the law, but with a vision for a better future for their students.

Lucy Russell is a freelance consultant specialising in girls' education and girls' activism. She has previously worked on campaigns for UK girls' rights, ending period poverty, relationships and sex education, and teenage pregnancy for organisations including the Malala Fund, Education Cannot Wait, National Education Union, Plan International, Women's Aid and the Young Women's Trust.

Lucy4girls.rights@gmail.com

Notes

1. National Education Union (NEU) and UK Feminista, 'It's just everywhere: A study on sexism in schools and how we tackle it', 2017, National Education Union https://neu.org.uk/advice/its-just-everywhere-sexism-schools

2. *Ibid.*

3. Ofsted, 'Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges: Ofsted's findings and recommendations on sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online sexual abuse', 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges

4. *Ibid.*

5. B. Cislaghi, L. Heise, 'Gender norms and social norms: differences, similarities and why they matter in prevention science', *Sociology of Health & Illness* Volume 42, Issue 2, 2019, pp 407-422, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-9566.13008

6. *Ibid.*, p409.

7. Children and Young People's Health Team, Written submission from the Children and Young People's Health Team, Public Health, Bristol City Council (SVS0044), Bristol City Council in Women and Equalities Committee 'Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools', 2016, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/91/91.pdf

8. J. Ringrose, K. Regehr and B. Milne, *Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse,* London, Department of Education, Practice and Society, UCL Institute of Education, 2021, p7.

9. Everyone's Invited Testimonials, 2021, https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/read

10. Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021, *op.cit*, p11.

11. Everyone's Invited Testimonials, 2021, *op.cit.*

12. Everyone's Invited Schools List, 2021, https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/

everyones-invited-challenge

13. For example, NEU and UK Feminista, 2017, *op.cit*.; End Violence Against Women Coalition, 'Women's groups call on secretary of state for education to create "whole schools approach" taskforce', 2021, https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/womens-groups-call-on-secretary-of-state-for-education-to-create-whole-schools-approach-taskforce/; End Violence Against Women Coalition and 15 signatories, 'Letter to Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP from specialist women's organisations responding to the Ofsted report on sexual harassment in schools', 2021b, https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/DFE-Ofsted-Review-letter-July-2161.pdf

14. NEU and UK Feminista, 2017, *op. cit.*

15. National Education Union, 'Breaking down stereotypes – role models for girls in STEM: Launch event in challenging gender stereotypes', National Education Union, 2022, https://neu.org.uk/challenging-gender-stereotypes-stem

16. Department for Education, 'Statutory guidance: Relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education', 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education; Welsh Government, 'The curriculum for Wales – Relationships and Sexuality Education Code', 2022, https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-01/curriculum-for-wales-relationships-sexuality-education-code.pdf

17. Sex Education Forum, 'Principles of good RSE', 2017, https://www.sexeducationforum.org.uk/resources/advice-guidance/principles-good-rse, p1.

18. See: Plan International UK, 'Public back education for children about consent, "sexting" and pornography – survey', 24 February 2017, https://plan-uk.org/media-centre/public-backs-education-for-children-about-consent-%E2%80%98sexting%E2%80%99-and-pornography-%E2%80%93-survey; National Children's Bureau, 'Parents and SRE – a Sex Education Forum evidence briefing', 2011, https://healtheducationresources.unesco.org/library/documents/parents-and-sre-sex-education-forum-evidence-briefing

19. See: R. Moss, 'The Sarah Everard vigil is needed. Women say they've "had enough". Thousands expected at evening event as campaigners warn women "won't stay silent" ', Huffington Post Online, 11 March 2021, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/sarah-everard-vigil-women-voices_uk_6049e179c5b672fce4ea9312; L. James, 'Plan for 888 phone tracking number "putting a plaster" on male violence problem, campaigners say', The Independent online, 9 October 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/888-emergency-number-priti-patel-b1935408.html

20. B. Heilman, G. Barker, A. Harrison, 'A study on being a young man in the US, UK, and Mexico', Promundo, Axe and Unilever, 2017, https://promundoglobal.org/resources/man-box-study-young-man-us-uk-mexico/?lang=english

21. Mayor of London, 'Press release: Mayor launches new campaign to tackle

violence against women and girls', 13 March 2022, https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/landmark-campaign-launched-today

22. Beyond Equality, 2022, https://www.beyondequality.org/

23. A. Allegretti, 'Beyond Equality charity works with teenage boys to "create safer streets". Workshops dispel misconceptions on sexual assaults and encourage boys to challenge gender stereotypes', The Guardian online, 16 March 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/16/beyond-equality-charity-works-with-teenage-boys-to-create-safer-streets?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

24. Beyond Equality, 2022, Beyond Schools Project, p2, https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/5fe38f96354a9a59b3a05cd1/61bc7b8ff8002d7e8b9ae305_Schools%20Brochure%20September%202021%20Small%20size.pdf

25. *Ibid.*

26. NEU and UK Feminista, 2017, *op cit.*, p26.

27. Sex Education Forum, 2017, *op. cit.*, p1.

28. AGENDA online resources, https://agendaonline.co.uk/

29. See: Just Like Us, 'Growing Up LGBT+: The impact of school, home and coronavirus on LGBT+ young people; Just Like Us; Cibyl, UK, 2021, https://www.justlikeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Just-Like-Us-2021-report-Growing-Up-LGBT.pdf

30. Women and Equalities Committee, 'Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools', 2016, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/826/826.pdf; Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021, *op.cit*, p11.

31. Home Office, 'Tackling violence against women and girls strategy', 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-violence-against-women-and-girls-strategy