

Summary of research conducted in Bristol: Young people's experiences and understanding of sexual bullying, harassment and sexism

Background

According to the NSPCC definition, sexual bullying is: "Any bullying behaviour, whether physical or non-physical, that is based on a person's sexuality or gender. It is when sexuality or gender is used as a weapon by boys or girls towards other boys or girls – although it is more commonly directed at girls. It can be carried out to a person's face, behind their back or through the use of technology."ⁱ

- **Saying 'gay' when you mean bad**
- **Homophobic bullying**
- **Calling someone a 'slut', 'bitch' or 'frigid'**
- **Teasing someone for their sex life (true or not)**
- **Bullying around size of breasts/ bum/ muscles**
- **Threats or jokes of rape**
- **Unwanted touching**
- **Pressurising someone into sex acts**

Sexual harassment and sexual bullying is an everyday occurrence for young people^{ii iii iv v}. In the UK, 70% of girls, 13-21, have experienced sexual harassment at school or collegeⁱⁱ and 55% of gay people had experienced homophobic bullying at school^{vi}. In the biggest and most cited US survey on the subject, 1 in 2 students reported having experienced sexual harassment with females experiencing it more than boys^{vii}.

Bullying can have impacts on young people's physical and emotional health^{vii}. In turn, this can affect young people's educational experiences^{viii}, attainment^{ix} and attendance^x at school.

The study

During 2013-14, research was undertaken with young people in school years 9-11 in Bristol looking at sexual bullying, harassment and sexism:

- A 10 minute paper survey^{xi} was undertaken by 188 male (41%) and female students (52%) across 8 different schools. This was commissioned to a research agency by The Bristol Ideal project.
- 4 x 1 hour focus groups^{xii} (2 male-only/ 2 female-only) at 2 secondary schools. On average there were 6 students in each group. This was completed as part of an MSc in Public Health by a professional working in Bristol's Young People's Public Health Team.

The research looked at prevalence, impact, normalisation and acceptance of sexual harassment and bullying while the four, single-sex focus groups sought to delve deeper into young people's understandings of sexual bullying, focussing on types of bullying, normalisation, why they thought it happened and what made someone a non-bully.

Giving young people a voice

The study sought to give young people a voice on what is a controversial and tricky topic area. What is reported is very much about their views, experiences and understandings of the issue. That does not mean to say that everything reported has been experienced or perpetrated by them, but what they believe to be happening in their schools and social lives and the influences on them. Importantly, much of what was found resonated with national and international research on the same topic area.

The young people were incredibly open and willing to share with researchers, and many were tired of sexual bullying and sexism. It is therefore hugely important that local practitioners take on some of the recommendations in this study and try and stop the problem completely.

Key findings

Prevalence and types of bullying

Sexual bullying happens and happens a lot: Much like the national evidence, a large proportion of young people state that particular sexual bullying behaviours happen a lot in their schools (see appendix 1). 1 in 3 state that posting rude pictures online is happening between peers and 1 in 10 young people say rape threats happen in their school a lot.

Personal experiences are high: Alarming proportions of young people claim they or a friend have had direct experience of all the sexual bullying behaviours ranging from 29% who have had threats of rape up to 74% reporting 'getting eyed up'.

But they know that it is wrong: Young people seem to have a fairly well defined moral code when it comes to sexual bullying / harassment with girls slightly more so than boys. Only two of the sixteen sexual bullying / harassment behaviours (see appendix 1) in the survey were considered in anyway 'ok' in the school environment; wolf-whistling and eyeing people up. Making threats of rape is the only behaviour unanimously deemed wholly inappropriate and 'posting rude pictures online' is considered the second-most inappropriate behaviour with just 1% of young people saying this is 'ok'. This suggests there is a very strong moral code at play, including in the digital environment.

Young people most commonly believe that sexual bullying affects the victims confidence / self-esteem and mental health.

Sexual harassment / bullying can start early. Over 1 in 2 young people said calling people names (slut/bitch/gay), pestering people to go out with you and shouting things about someone's appearance happened in their primary schools.

It happens more to girls: As national literature in the area also suggests, sexual bullying is believed to happen more to girls than boys with the majority of young people surveyed stating this to be the case too. However a significant 1 in 4 still believe it happens equally to both sexes.

It happens mainly online, as well as face to face: One in two young people state sexual bullying happens equally online and face-to-face but a further 27% state it actually happens mostly online, suggesting cyber sexual bullying much more prominent than face-to-face bullying. This was not replicated in the focus groups where young people talked almost entirely about face to face bullying.

Seeking help and a school's role

Seeking help: Just over half of young people surveyed would feel comfortable seeking help about a sexual bullying issue and would most popularly seek help from a friend or their parents. One in five would be comfortable seeking help from a teacher, youth worker/key worker, learning mentor or school nurse. One in three young people would not feel comfortable seeking help at all with embarrassment, a fear of the consequence and pride the most common themes affecting this.

School awareness: Those surveyed thought that very few schools were accepting of sexual bullying with the largest proportion of young people stating they were quite unaccepting. However, views are very split on the ability of staff to deal with sexual bullying.

What might work to stop sexual bullying? The most popular interventions were lessons on respect/relationships/sex and a zero tolerance approach to bullying at school. A slightly smaller proportion stated more support from teachers for victims would help.

Why it happens

Gender rules: Sexual bullying must be seen within the context of gender and sexuality – and the ‘rules’ that surround them. This is because young people are under constant pressure to act up to traditional, heterosexual ideals of masculinity and femininity – despite what might seem like great strides forward in gender equality.

Sexism and sexual bullying appear to be used to enforce these rules and highlight when someone has stepped out of place with some girls reporting being told to “know your place” and “get in the kitchen” on a regular basis.

Pressure on boys to prove masculinity: An important part of boys' acting out their stereotypical role includes sexual bullying, sexism and harassment. This is because young people report the key rules around being a young man include having multiple sexual partners, putting sex before emotional attachment, actively objectify and teasing girls and publically deriding and joking about homosexuality.

Male sexuality is rewarded, female sexuality is monitored: Young people talked about reward systems that act as an incentive for males too, helping to maintain this problem. Male students talked about winning "guy points" for "getting girls", plus generally receiving kudos from peers and having friends joke along to support one another.

Conversely, female sexuality is criticised and heavily monitored. On the one hand, students talked of girls being positioned as sex objects, while on the other having to maintain a sense of chastity. The 'slut' vs 'stud' dichotomy continues.

Coercive sexual practices: As a result of these pressures, it appears that some boys are turning to coercive sexual practices in order to prove their sexual prowess. For example, the first male focus group talked about "beat and delete" – the practice of having sex with a girl and then deleting them from their phones and having a "side mat", a girl on the side in addition to a girlfriend. Furthermore, the young men interviewed talked about how some boys will manipulate a girl to have sex with them by saying they loved them or lying about their age, for example.

Sexual bullying is therefore just part of a continuum of experience spanning from sexism through to sexual violence.

Its normal and 'just a joke': Sexual bullying, sexism and harassment are normalised, everyday occurrences that some students see as part and parcel of growing up. Furthermore, because these issues are so often positioned as 'just a joke' it lessens the severity of the problem and calls out any detractors as having no sense of humour.

Influences on sexual bullying

The media, gaming, music and porn: The media particularly was cited as offering extreme and sexualised representations of males and females through, for example, violent

computer games - where you win points for buying and beating up prostitutes –rap music and pornography. This seemed to be having a detrimental impact on males and females, fuelling sexual bullying. Students felt that the representation of women was negative and “demeaning”, not just to women but “insulting to men” too. In turn, they said it put a pressure on them to behave in a certain way.

Challenging sexual bullying

Young people are fighting against sexual bullying and gender rules: Despite the pressure to adhere to rules around what it means to be a male or female, there were boys interviewed who openly and confidently disagreed with their peers’ light-hearted take on sexual bullying. The female students that challenged the rules were greater in number and talked about confidently standing up to bullying though some felt it was a losing battle.

What makes a young person challenge sexual bullying? Generally speaking, young people felt that what made these young people, and other resisters, different was a combination of some of the following: an understanding of and demand for respect, confidence in their beliefs, ability to recognise that sexual bullying was wrong, they were deemed as being mature and that they had some empathy for victims.

Recommendations

For local policy

- Given that gender norms are at the heart of young people’s identity, their relationships and sexual experiences, it would benefit all those working with young people to consider how they challenge those norms as part of their work and how they might ensure they don’t unconsciously promote unhelpful stereotypes.
- Bristol’s domestic and sexual abuse strategy must include more proactive work around tackling sexual harassment, sexual bullying and sexism.
- Local, relevant training programmes could consider integrating the issue within current training programmes (e.g. 4YP Healthy Relationships and Teen Abuse training).

For schools and youth settings

- A zero tolerance approach to all forms of sexism, sexual harassment and sexual bullying (including homophobia). This is particularly important because, if the school environment is perceived to be accepting, or ignoring sexual bullying and harassment, pupils will think that sexual bullying, sexism and harassment are acceptable^{xiii}.
 - Young people suggested that this could include banning books, music, social media that is sexist or homophobic on school/ youth premises. However, this shouldn't be done in isolation.
 - Young people need to understand both why you are taking a zero tolerance approach and be given the opportunity in class or a workshop to explore the issue and the influence of the media and discuss and critique themselves.
- Consider campaigns as a way to challenge values and attitudes (the Stonewall 'Some People are Gay, Get over it' campaign was mentioned by some students as successful). Engage students in developing their own as a way of having a peer-to-peer influence.
- Mainstream gender equality work into all aspects of your organisations life – from English lessons in school to sporting events arranged by youth services. It might also be useful to undertake some of this in small groups to avoid boys feeling under pressure to 'act up' in class. (See appendix 2 for suggested resources.)

As part of the above:

- Help young people understand that gender is on a continuum
 - Help young people explore the 'rules' and start to challenge them
 - Explore the influences and external factors that create or support these rules ranging from toys for girls/ toys for boys, male and female characters in books/ films, music and music videos and more. This will need to be done in an age-appropriate way.
- Explore gender within Relationships and Sex Education at school. Young people are ready and willing to talk. This needs to begin in primary school, if not even earlier.

- Show diversity and difference to change the stereotypical norms. You could do this around your setting by doing an audit of what you do and don't already show. What images and materials or activities do you have in your setting that might be supporting rigid gender roles or sexism?
- Consider having champions for gender equality – staff and young people.
- Ensure you have a policy and protocol and how to deal with disclosures. Don't just ignore the problem or assume it is 'just a joke' or 'just part of growing up'.
- Try and get to know the specific issues in your school or setting. Ask students for their (anonymous) views to inform your work.
- Schools, youth agencies and public health teams working with young people around this topic tend to focus on work with girls. This needs to shift to include more proactive work with boys.
- Educate parents on sexism, sexual bullying and harassment, explaining the wider context of the media's influence on young people.
- Mothers were mentioned a number of times in the focus groups as being one of the main role models in boys' and girls' lives. They play a particularly large role in instilling positive values in those who campaign against sexual bullying and so could be a good group to work with to further counter the issue.
- Challenge staff sexist attitudes as and where possible – training and policies will help but it does need to be done as a whole-setting approach, not just those staff that are interested.

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Appendix 1: Types of sexual bullying listed in survey:

- Eyeing people up
- Wolf-whistling
- Pestering someone to go out with you
- Shouting something about someone's appearance
- Calling someone a slut, a bitch or gay
- Spreading rumours about someone's sex life
- Making jokes about someone's sex life (e.g. because they haven't had sex or they have had lots of sex)
- Making jokes about someone because they're lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans
- Making jokes about bits of someone's body (e.g. the size of their boobs, bum, penis, muscles etc)
- Making jokes about raping someone
- Making threats about raping someone
- Writing rude or obscene graffiti about someone
- Touching parts of someone's body without asking (e.g. pinching someone's bum / groping someone's boobs)
- Posting rude pictures of people online
- Stalking someone
- Putting pressure on someone to have sex or oral sex

Appendix 2: Resources for schools and youth settings

Expect Respect (lessons plans/ workshop plans): Excellent resource full of lesson/ workshop plans for 5-18 year olds that look at gender roles and rules, abuse and violence, conflict resolution, the influence of the media and sexualisation:

<http://www.womensaid.org.uk/page.asp?section=00010001001400100004§ionTitle=Education+Toolkit>

A call to men (You Tube film and activity): Tony Porter talks about 'the man box' and the narrow definition of what it means to be a boy/ man, gender stereotyping and the links with domestic and sexual violence. Practitioners will need to watch the film and decide if it is age appropriate but the 'Man box' 'Women box' activity can be used with teenagers.

Online film: http://www.ted.com/talks/tony_porter_a_call_to_men?language=en

Activity: [See below for lesson plan](#)

Miss-representation Project (film and schools resources): Explores and challenges female gender stereotyping in the media and advertising:

<http://therepresentationproject.org/films/miss-representation/>

The Mask you live in (film and schools resources): The Mask You Live In follows boys and young men as they struggle to stay true to themselves while negotiating the narrow definition of masculinity: <http://therepresentationproject.org/films/the-mask-you-live-in/>

4YP Activity: Rules around gender roles

The women/girls box

1. Draw a box on flipchart paper
Ask the group to come up with anything they typically associate with being a woman or girl in to the box (e.g quiet, sex object, carer, cook, cleaner, pretty, slim, demure etc).
2. In another colour pen, write around the outside the things/ names a female might be called if she 'steps outside the box' (e.g lesbian/ ball breaker/ emotionless/ frigid/ slut etc)
3. In a new colour pen, ask them to think about all the influences on that set of 'rules' (e.g media, religion, family values etc)

The man/boys box

1. Draw a box on flipchart paper
Ask the group to come up with anything they typically associate with being a woman or girl in to the box (e.g strong, no emotions, jokey, sexual, muscly, into football, heterosexual).
2. In another colour pen, write around the outside the things/ names a female might be called if she 'steps outside the box' (e.g a girl/ gay/ weak etc)
3. In a new colour pen, ask them to think about all the influences on that set of 'rules' (e.g media, religion, family values etc)

Conclusion: Compare the two boxes. Do we think young people and children are being stereotyped into these gender roles and where from (e.g toys, pink for girls, blue for boys, sexualisation of children etc) and does this have an impact on sexual bullying, sexual violence, domestic abuse?