



Rape Crisis Network Ireland

submission to

**The Joint Oireachtas committee on Education Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science.**

“School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health”.

May 2021

1.0 Introduction - Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI) is a specialist resource and information centre on rape and all forms of sexual violence. The RCNI role since 1985 includes the development and coordination of national projects, working in an interagency manner with all statutory and other stakeholders, using our expertise to influence national policy and social change, and supporting and facilitating multi-agency partnerships. We are owned and governed by our member Rape Crisis Centres who provide free advice, counselling and other support services to survivors of sexual violence in Ireland. In this short submission we propose to only present unique and new RCNI data with our recommendations in the knowledge that submissions from our colleagues have already set the range of other matters before the Committee.

1.1 RCNI first disaggregated RCC data on childhood experiences of sexual violence in 2011 and found that 23% who were adolescents at the time of being abused were abused by another adolescent the same age or slightly older.¹ That figure rose to 37% in our larger 2013 study². Since then RCNI has been consistently calling for action³.

1.2 Specifically, RCNI has been calling for the Dept. of Education and Skills to put in place a national policy on sexual harassment for 2nd level schools. This would include counting sexual harassment and assault and addressing the negative social, educational and psychological harms associated with sexual bullying and violence⁴. This has not happened as laid before you by the Ombudsman for Children in oral hearing.⁵ RCNI have also strongly concluded that good curriculum content, (development of which is underway), is insufficient by itself to address this problem. We need a whole of system approach; we must move from the classroom into the corridor.

1.3 In the absence of statutory action, Dr Michelle Walsh of Rape Crisis Midwest and RCNI undertook **research** (2018 – 2021) on the issue of adolescent sexual harassment and violence experience, understanding and the factors that contribute to sexual harassment and bullying to address our knowledge gap. The report is titled *‘Storm and Stress’: An Exploration of Sexual Harassment Among Adolescents: Experience and Understanding*. Below we set out some of that new data and our recommendations.

1.4 We know from existing research that offensive banter, jokes and unwelcome sexual advances are some of the behaviours that are part of this continuum of behaviour, and that some individuals who experience these behaviours are sometimes unable to recognise them as sexual harassment. Furthermore, societal as well as individual attitudes and behaviours towards violence, women and

¹ <https://www.rcni.ie/wp-content/uploads/RCNISTatisticalReportOnCrimesOfChildSexualViolence.pdf>

² <https://www.rcni.ie/wp-content/uploads/Hearing-Child-Survivors-of-Sexual-Violence-2013.pdf>

This study of 15 RCC and CARI data found that 37% of perpetrators of sexual violence against child survivors were other children. These child perpetrators were generally the same age or slightly older than the child they abuse. They are overwhelmingly 15 to 17 years old (82%). From the age of 13 the likelihood of a sexual crime being perpetrated by a child increases such that 13 and 14 year olds account for 14% of all child perpetrators, 15 and 16 year olds account for almost 39% of child perpetrators and 17 year olds account for 43% of child perpetrators.

³ <https://www.rcni.ie/wp-content/uploads/Older-Child-Policy-Document-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ Steinberg (2019, pg. 432) states that “one of the most pernicious effects of victimization is that it undermines academic performance, school attendance, school engagement and feelings of academic competence, all of which has cascading effects well beyond adolescents”. Holmes et al. (2016) suggest that adolescent bullying can impair cognitive development, and other researchers (Cornell et al., 2013; Espinoza et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2016; Steiner et al., 2015) highlight that adolescent school bullying is associated with poorer educational outcomes, which in turn results in diminished earning capacity in adulthood.

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https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_education_research_innovation_and_science/2021-05-04/2/

the serious nature of different forms of sexual harassment can be both explicitly and implicitly condoned by social norms, thus trivialising the impact of sexual harassment. When discussing the introduction of **education and awareness** on relationship and sexual education it is important to bear in mind that our society already provides comprehensive training in sexism and gender inequality. This training starts as soon as socialisation starts and is well developed by the time children reach second level schools.

1.5 This socialisation forms the backdrop for **puberty** where the physiological and cognitive changes relating to sexual behaviour that occur during adolescence often involve working out how to address and deal with desires and learning to successfully and appropriately incorporate sex into their intimate peer relationships against our cultural backdrop.

2. The Study’s Key Findings

The study outlines the amount of sexual harassment witnessed and experienced by 600 Irish adolescents, within their peer groups, over a 12 month period⁶. Dr Walsh further analyses differences in adolescent’s exposure to sexual harassment across gender, sexual orientation and age groups. Her findings display clear patterns of sexual harassment being perpetrated against adolescents, with much of this abuse being perpetrated by their peers.

2.1 Experiences of Sexual bullying within the one year period ⁷:

- 80% of adolescents disclosed being subjected to some form of sexual harassment
- 24% of adolescents disclosed that they were subjected to physical or extreme forms of sexual harassment.
- 83% of adolescents witnessed some form of sexual harassment
- 28% of adolescents witnessed physical or extreme forms of sexual harassment
- 78% of adolescent participants said that sexual harassment occurred within their peer community.

2.2 Lifetime vulnerability to abuse and to becoming an abuser:

- Key risk factors for being subjected to sexual harassment are gender, sexuality and age, with females, adolescents who identified as gay/pansexual, and adolescents aged 16-17 being subjected to much higher levels of sexual harassment.
- Both female vulnerability to sexual violence, and acting out of harmful sexual behaviours in males manifest when the child is under the age of 13 and increases exponentially with age. Prevention and early intervention programme which do not target the younger child are too little, too late.
- Vulnerability to sexual harassment and abuse increases with age. This finding from *Storm and Stress* concurs with [SAVI](#) and RCNI annual RCC data analysis, which tells us that if sexual violence perpetrated against a child is not adequately addressed as early as possible, the child is at a much higher risk of being subjected to further and more extreme forms of sexual violence throughout their life. SAVI tells us that children who are subjected to penetrative sexual violence when under the age of 13 are at a sixteen-fold increased risk of re-victimisation in adulthood.

⁶ May 2018 – April 2019

⁷ data was collected between May 2018 and April 2019

- We can also see that children engage in progressively more serious forms of harmful sexualised behaviour and perpetration as they get older. This pattern of progression into criminality makes a strong case for early targeted intervention and perpetrator programmes directed at these children.

2.3 Key risk factors in being subjected to sexual harassment:

When the study analysed differences in gender, sexuality and age group we see some key characteristics that make children targets for sexual harassment. It is important to note that children's perceptions of vulnerability to being targeted to sexual harassment relates to two things: their lived experience and the cultural norms which have taught them how to interpret and name those experiences. We see particularly worrying indications here that for girls, all too often abuse continues to be normalised, denied and minimised. This is against the backdrop of inactivity by the Department. We also see evidence of potentially the impact of good practice where that gap between lived experience and the capacity to name it is much narrower for LGBTQ+ children, but still requires attention. This may be a positive outcome of the range of Dept. of Education & Skills guidance and policy on this matter since 2009.⁸

- **Females are 2.11 times more likely** than males to report that they **experienced** unwelcome sexual comments.
- **Girls were 1.50 times more likely** than boys to **agree that sexual harassment occurs** within their adolescent peer community.

“It's just the way it is. Like you could be standing talking to your friends and like some guy will try and grab you or whatever. Like you just have to push them off or whatever. So, it's kind of accepted, that just what boys do. Like, it is like hard because no one is going to do anything. It happens to everyone at least once.” (YP16).

- **LGBTQ adolescents were 2.95 times more likely** to report that they had **experienced** unwelcome sexual comments in comparisons to straight adolescents.
- **Adolescents who identified as LGBTQ+ were 2.73 times more likely** than respondents who identified as straight to **agree that sexual harassment occurs** within their adolescent peer community.
- **Older adolescents (16-17 years) were 1.96 times more likely** than younger adolescents (13-15 years) to **agree that sexual harassment occurred** within their peer community.

⁸ https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Post-Primary-School-Policies/school_policy_lgb_students_policies_guidelines.pdf is an early Departmental policy guidance published by the department in 2009, in 2016 four resources and guidance published by the Dept. Of Education and Skills and partners since 2009 were amalgamated and updated into one resource. This resource is led by GLEN and supported by the Dept. of Education and Skills and other partners <https://www.education.ie/en/publications/education-reports/being-lgbt-in-school.pdf> the list of previous Departmental published documents is in this bibliography.

2.4 Location of Adolescent sexual harassment

Adolescents who took part in this research disclosed that of the sexual harassment perpetrated against them in the previous twelve months:

- 42% most commonly occurred online
- 23% said it was most commonly experienced in the company of friends
- 12% reported that school was the most common location
- 10% said that sexual harassment happened in pubs and clubs
- A further 10% said it most commonly happened when socializing in towns, parks festivals or at house parties or within their own homes.

It is worth noting here that although schools are identified as the most common locations of sexual harassment in only 12% of cases, most adolescents spend a substantial part of their week in school with their friends and online which accounts for a further 65% of the most common contexts of sexual harassment.

2.5 Experiencing sexual harassment within education in one year

Adolescents reported experiencing high levels of sexual harassment within their school communities with

- 63% disclosing that they were subjected to someone making unwelcome sexual comments, jokes or gestures to or about them in the last year.
- 15% of respondents stating that they had personal experiences of peer sexual harassment while in school over the preceding year.
- 39% of participants reported witnessing incidents of sexual harassment involving their peers within school in the last year

2.6 Responding to sexual harassment within education

- 23% of adolescents felt that sexual harassment within school is common, often overlooked or not adequately disciplined by school authorities.
- 47% of adolescents stated that they would not know how to report sexual harassment within their school if they were exposed to it.
- 63% of adolescents didn't know if a sexual harassment policy was in existence within their school.
- 36% of adolescents reported receiving no formal education pertaining to sexual harassment while at school.
- 65% of adolescents referenced the need for comprehensive sexual education in schools to challenge sexual harassment.

3. RCNI Recommendations

Sexual harassment and bullying within schools cannot be viewed in isolation. It is part of a wider societal problem of sexism and gender-based violence. Its impact on a child’s education and mental health cannot be underestimated. RCNI recommends:

1. Every school community to have an explicit zero tolerance of sexual harassment and violence which proactively shapes a safe learning environment. This should be formalised and monitored in a **national policy** put in place to ensure best practice and consistency to support the children involved, to reduce instances of secondary trauma, to prevent negative impacts on their school performance and interventions to ensure the victimisation does not become a further source of bullying. Such a policy should also provide proven interventions with children exhibiting harmful sexualised behaviour.
2. Align with a **whole of Government response to societal norms and practices** that enable sexism, gender inequality, and stereotyping.
3. RCNI endorse the **NCCA report (2019) on the review of RSE** and its recommendations on how best to sustainably support the delivery of RSE.
 1. **Reform current RSE** curriculum to be more comprehensive and to include sexism, sexual violence and pornography and not just consent.
 2. Ensure that RSE addresses the experiences of both **younger and older adolescents**, in addition to experiences based upon **ability, gender and sexual orientation**.
 3. Ensure that RSE **educators, and youth workers** receive external supervision and access to counselling **support**.
 4. While respecting diversity, ensure school patronage, ethos and parental ethos cannot prevent the **child's right to sex education** and a safe learning environment.
 5. Appoint a Digital Safety Commission for Ireland and ensure children have access to the proposed and robust ‘report and take down’ mechanisms under consideration in the **Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill**.
 6. Provide **training** to agencies and organisations, in health care, community and education to understand and respond to adolescent sexual harassment.
 7. Ensure the availability of **counselling and support services** to adolescents within the schools and the community.
 8. Provide information and **support for parents and primary caregivers** regarding gender norms and their impact upon experiences of adolescent sexual harassment.
 9. Encourage **help seeking** for those who experience or perpetrate sexual harassment within interpersonal relationships.