



Focus Group Analysis – Malta

Dr. Marceline Naudi, Barbara Stemalszek & Aleksandar Dimitrijevic

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Peace Institute and Association for Nonviolent Communication and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.



Introduction

The two girls' and boys' focus groups took place in June 2017 with each group being composed of five students. The procedure to organize the focus groups began long before June 2017, however, due to the lengthy approval procedure that included submitting an application for ethical clearance with the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee and requiring permission from the State Department of Education, the focus groups could only take place at the end of the semester, during final examinations. Prior to applying for ethical clearance, a teacher at the school was contacted, who agreed to support the process, and received further permission from the head of the school. As a result, the Malta team was pleased to find a total of 10 students volunteering to take part in the focus groups.

The focus groups took place at a higher secondary school, which is a two-year educational institution preparing students for entry into universities. The students were 16 years of age and in their first year of study at the preparatory school.

The first focus group included five boys and was carried out inside the school's classroom on 16 June 2017. The session was recorded and transcribed, and followed the structure of the Bystanders Project's guide for the focus groups. The atmosphere among the boys was pleasant, although each had their arms crossed in front of them, pointing to some level of unease. While at the start of the focus group two boys gave most input, others, who seemed more quiet at first joined in with their answers, not long after.

The second focus group included five girls and was carried out inside the school's classroom on 21 June 2017. The session was recorded and transcribed, and followed the structure of the Bystanders Project's guide for the focus groups. For the girls, this was their last day of school, and they were clearly happy about this. Most of the girls knew each other well and could



introduce each other within the group. As in any group, two of the participants were more active, but still the input was more equal among them, when compared to the boys' group.

In comparison to the boys, the girls seemed more engaged and willing to speak. This could be due to the topic being perceived as being closer to their personal experiences, knowing that women and girls are more often victims of sexual harassment.

How do young people understand sexual harassment?

Girls focus group

- Aware that it can constitute many things
- The first thing that comes to mind is catcalling, focusing on appearance in an overtly sexual way

“Walking down the street sometimes, and somebody calls you, I don't know sexy or something”

- Without prompting stated that it mostly happens to women

“They focus mainly on the woman. It can happen to men. It happens more often to women”

- When it comes to discussing sexual harassment of physical nature, the girls refer to rape
- Recognize there is violence in physical sexual harassment, like touching, that it involves a lack of consent beyond force, also includes touching without the permission to be touched

“Not only, I'm thinking being touched inappropriately, for example, when you don't allow it ... I think that's also sexual harassment”

“If you agree, sort of, if you like what he’s doing, when he’s touching you inappropriately, it’s not sexual harassment, because you are agreeing”

- Can recognize sexual harassment online because of the language used that shows to be threatening
- If there is no consent, sending a naked picture would be sexual harassment
- Speaking in a forceful way online about performing sexual acts on someone is sexual harassment
- The boys are usually the harassers
- Being harassed makes you feel like an object, vulnerable, uncomfortable, weak, afraid, frustrated
- It takes away freedom, because she cannot go out and be comfortable

“I think it takes away part of her freedom because she cannot always go out and be comfortable and relaxed, you know...”

- Being the harasser gives pleasure, is done for the ego, domination, for fun

The girls had the discourse of consent, and that permission has to be granted for certain actions. The concepts that were important and showed a good awareness were freedom and domination. At the same time, the girls had to be prompted to give examples of what sexual harassment is, and they even went as far as saying rape. It appears that sexual harassment is mostly understood in strictly sexual terms and implying clear threatening or forceful behaviour, meaning that whether it is verbalized or physical, it implies threats or force that refer to or focus on a sexual part of the self. The girls did not go further to bring up certain presumably non-sexual acts of intrusion, such as commenting on someone’s appearance without invitation, as sexual harassment.



Boys focus group

- Aware that it takes many forms, but mental abuse is the first term mentioned
“Someone calling you an idiot, for example. Like, on a constant basis, so much that it affects you”
- It can be verbal and physical – catcalling mentioned It happens mostly to women, because they are perceived as weaker
“There is this idea in the society that they are a lesser species ...like they are weaker”
- Boys differentiate between levels of catcalling. It can be rude or appropriate
“It doesn’t have to be crude, but usually it’s crude”
“...you can see a girl and tell her she is beautiful, but she takes it as an offence sometimes”
- The reason why women take offence even when appropriately approached is due to feminism
“she can take it either way, but because of feminism they think that even just talking to them might actually take offence”
- For boys, verbal harassment can be worse
“(Be)cause it strikes you mentally. Physically... you can, kind of, get over it physically”
- They also recognize that it often happens online
“I’ve seen it happen lately, apps for naked pictures randomly”

Overall, all there is a no clear cut between understanding on what constitutes courting and/or sexual harassment and bullying. They recognize that there are forms of behaviour

that are unacceptable and that women are usually on the receiving end, although they feel that more benign approaches can be misconstrued as offensive. It is interesting that they mentioned feminism as being the culprit, which allows them to assume the role of the misunderstood victim.

Sexual harassment in schools – experiences of young people

Girls focus group

- The schools are not doing enough to prevent sexual harassment
- Sexual harassment is not taken seriously in the schools
- One school not handling sexual harassment sends a message to students from other schools, or creates anxiety in students who are supposed to go to that school in the future
- Girls want to feel safe, they want to be taken seriously, they want the school to be a place where protection is possible, school is supposed to be a place students look forward to

“To be safe”

“To be taken seriously”

- Zero tolerance of harassers = keep them away from victims, they will do it again
“I don't believe that they should have any other chance to be able to have any contact with the person. If they do it once, they will do it again”
- They need to clearly explain why they do it, maybe they have other problems

- Some teachers respond with concern, others dismiss it as a joke, “it’s normal in today’s life”

“Some teachers actually notice and are concerned ... but others they might not notice or they just let it go, might think it’s a joke”

- The teachers should individually address harassers, but also make it known to the whole class that such behaviour is not acceptable
- Address sexual harassment immediately and make it public as a warning to others
- Parents are not the best helpers in these situations because they overreact, worry, and make it worse for the child by putting them in the spotlight

“On the victim, and it won’t be very helpful, it’s not always the case but sometimes the victim doesn’t like the limelight”

- Girls also seem to worry about worrying their own parents about their problems

“...the parents would be extremely worried. The children must go to school obviously, they must go to school, the parents cannot be next to the children at school so I think they would be very worried”

- But the parents should still be supportive and non-judgmental and have interest in their children’s lives, parents should also teach the right behaviour and give them awareness

“First educators are your parents so they should set some barriers ... for example, you shouldn’t say that, if you say that there are some circumstances that make other people feel uncomfortable they should tell them not just don’t say those words they should tell them why they shouldn’t say certain words”

- Also need awareness in public spaces (e.g. posters)

- There are special subjects in school during which information about sexual harassment could be given, especially what to do when we encounter it

“We did discuss [sexual harassment] but we weren’t given like ideas on how to help others when we are encountering it ... how to stop it”

“You were given ideas about what is appropriate and what is not, but not what to do to help others if something like that is happening”

The girls were aware that inaction or inappropriate handling sends a message that it’s okay to continue doing it. Sexual harassment creates anxiety not only on an individual level, but on a collective level as well. They are aware that sexual harassment is normalized and ignored, especially by teachers. They want protection that is immediate and also public accountability. And while, in the previous section, the girls described that perpetration comes from desire to dominate, here they state that the perpetrator should provide a full explanation of why he does it, as perhaps it’s a symptom of other problems. When they disclose sexual harassment, they want to be taken seriously. The girls believe that awareness starts with parents as the first educators and continues into the public space. This shows a certain move away from victim blaming attitudes, where children of previous generations might not have had the discourse that the fault sits with the perpetrator, here, when they talk about teaching appropriate behaviour, they steer away from victim blaming. Although when it comes to supporting their children if they become victims of sexual harassment, parents are the worst helpers because they might actually inadvertently put the victim in the spotlight, if they become what can be perceived by the girls as over reactive. At the same time, the girls seem to imply that parents are not the first go-to-support anyway. Even in cases where they might be subject to sexual harassment, they would still aim to protect their parents first, in order to shield them from having to worry about their child’s negative experiences. The girls brought up the idea that the majority of schools have lessons dedicated to personal development, and in their case, the lessons included information about sexual harassment, and what is appropriate and what is not, yet they were not given ideas



on how to prevent sexual harassment, how to deal with it, or how to support others, or stop it from happening.

Boys focus group

- They are aware of or have witnessed sexual harassment
- It's usually men sending pictures in order to provoke reaction
 - "Just sending pictures of themselves, provoking something"*
- They also know of cases of boys asking girls for nude photos
- One particular school and harassment that happened there is mentioned as the main case
- They again draw the line that some girls might take some of the behaviours as a compliment
 - "It depends (be)cause some people take it as a compliment"*
 - "if it's nicely done"*
- They mention objectification of women
- The feelings in the girl that is a subject of harassment are described as fear and insecurity
- Women are aware of the dangers and that's why often they seek male company, as a deterrent
- Perpetrators get "satisfaction" out of catcalling – the purpose is to approach the girl, with expectations of getting further
 - "I mean; words lead to something else. They always lead to something"*
- But they also recognize that there is something wrong in that approach



- They are aware that sexual harassment is a problem, but not locally

"I mean, not Maltese, it's not that bad"

"I think in other countries, it's much worse"

Boys are continuously drawing the line between more benign kinds of behaviour and rude or violent behaviour. They see that reasons exist for women to fear men's behaviour, but still think that at the root of inappropriate behaviour is a quest for love and sexual intimacy. So, some sort of objectification of women can be perceived by women/girls as a compliment which is what the perpetrators are actually trying to achieve.

Boys also link inappropriate behaviour to maturity and education. Inappropriate behaviour is part of growing up and it happens more at ages younger than theirs. So, accordingly, they did see it in their secondary schools but not in the school they are currently in.

Most of the conversation revolved around a case that recently reached local newspapers, where a teacher with a group of boys harassed a number of girls in the school. Again, even in this really bad case, they mentioned that although it escalated to a really serious incident, it probably started with boys having expectations, which are gendered. The gendered origins of these expectations are assumed and not questioned.

How to act? How to be a bystander?

Girls focus group

- Tell the teachers, but teachers often ignore it or victim blame

"...leave it, nothing happened. Exactly, a lot of teachers say this on everything, not just sexual harassment"

"...how does she expect the boys to not tease her if she is wearing that?"

- Victim's friends should stick up for the victim and tell the teacher



“For example, the victim’s friends. The victim’s friends if they are comfortable? The victim probably wouldn’t tell others, the victim might feel uncomfortable speaking to the teacher about it. I think it has to be the friends to make the teacher aware of it”

- Be able to report to somewhere (e.g. cyber police)
- Block the person (social media)
- Catfishing – there are different methods people try to trick others

“You wouldn’t know who it is. I wouldn’t accept a request from someone I don’t know”

- Always good to have someone to disclose to, when experiencing sexual harassment, whether friend or even a professional like a psychologist
- Parents are not the people to go to, because the girls are protective of their parents’ feelings of worries

“...when I was younger I was bullied so even for simple reasons I couldn’t tell my parents. I have a very open relationship with them, but I wouldn’t tell them so if it was sexual harassment I wouldn’t have told them at that age...”

- Boys may find it more difficult to disclose because of stereotypes that they have to be strong
- There is a certain shame and weakness when it happens to you, like you were not strong enough



*“...they would feel weak that they got harassed and that they could do nothing about it..
If it's a boy if a boy stands up and says I've been sexually harassed then like you're a boy
how could you be... like he was vulnerable...”*

The girls feel it important to be able to report it immediately, and to have a safe place where to report it, along with a need for confidentiality. Authority figures should be people to handle sexual harassment, but victim's friends also play an important role. Parents are usually the last people the girls would go to because they are protective of their parents. Since sexual harassment can happen in the virtual space, girls need to have awareness about methods of blocking sexual harassment, for example, online, and to be aware of different methods people use to get to you fraudulently using technology. There is shame and weakness associated with experiencing sexual harassment and hence with disclosing when it happens, especially for boys, because of the perception that something must be wrong with them if it happened to them and they were not able to stop it.

Boys focus group

- People don't interfere when witnessing harassment because of fear for their own safety
“I don't want to get beat up.”
- Also, people are not concerned what happens to others
“I mean, usually you don't get involved, because if it doesn't happen to me, it's not important.”
- For third party to be get involved, there has to be a personal relationship between a victim and a bystander
- Not involving yourself is socially acceptable response



“Usually you don’t stop them, because you go with the rules of the society and you just move on”

“Just ignore it”

- Teachers are not of much help, but they could help
- Parents involvement only makes things worse because of their own emotional relation to their kids

There is an understanding that one is not supposed to interfere in harassment of others. It is seen as something that society is expecting you to ignore. Boys recognize that the right thing to do is to take action, although of some “rescue” kind, but admit that they and most others wouldn’t. Pure self-interest and one’s own personal safety is one of the main barriers, but the societal rules of not involving yourself in the affairs of others also plays an important role. Peer pressure is seen as working in the same, do not interfere, direction.

Young people participation in policy and changing culture in schools?

Girls focus group

- Workshops and trainings
- Each group separately (e.g. teachers, parents) and then join together

“First word is ‘teachers’ ... separately but then maybe join them for certain topic to discuss”

- Record a session of students and show it to parents

“Instead of for example joining parents together with others, some people, for example children may hold back, they might feel, I don’t know feel judged ... I don’t know maybe record the session ... and then they can show it to parents and teachers”



"I don't know think you can mix the parents necessarily, because some of them are harassed by their own parents, some children. It happens"

- Awareness, communication, change of attitude, support
- Start from a young age – make education of it fun

Generally, it sounds like the girls want information about sexual harassment to be out there. They want their voices heard, and it has to be done carefully by introducing people gradually, or by different methods, like first making a recording and showing parents what the children think, a sort of mediation in a way. At the same time, the girls see more benefit if each concerned group (i.e. teachers, parents) are introduced separately to the topic and later have joint sessions. One girl pointed out however that in some cases, the parents themselves may be the source of sexual harassment. Providing information and starting as soon as possible, at a young age is important. Information about sexual harassment does not have to be seriously presented, information can be given in a fun and engaging way.

Boys focus group

- Education at home is lacking

"Mostly happens in home, they are never taught respect to each other and toward women, in my personal opinion"

- Teachers should try to make up for lack of parental education

"Respect. Mostly happens in home, they are never taught respect to each other and toward women, in my personal opinion. I think actually teachers should take over, so...like, what parents have missed...to fill in"

- Personal and Social Development (PSD) classes are seen as a good vehicle for prevention

“They should make PSD classes about rape and how it’s bad and everything”

- Parents could help by being more open with their children and issues related to sex

“My parents immediately told me what, I mean how the sex is made. Because of education, when you are young, you just know. Some children, they don’t know what is going to happen. So education, from a younger leads to being wiser enough and you know what happened”

- The training should involve some sort of self-defence lessons, not necessarily physical, but how to deal with different situations

“It does not have to be physical, you just...cause some people don’t know what to do in a situation they just don’t do anything. If someone is trained, like firefighter, if someone is trained to go in building that’s on fire, then it doesn’t happen”

- Education is the key and should start from a young age

“Some children, they don’t know what is going to happen. So education, from a younger leads to being wiser enough and you know what happened”

There are key words mentioned and the general feeling is that school policies as such cannot prevent harassment from happening. The schools are usually slow to react and take action, and even when they do it is too little, too late.

The general opinion is that a change in school policy is doomed to failure. The prevention programme might work, if it is long term based and might have an effect in the distant future, but it will not work in the short term.