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Focus group analysis Slovenia¹

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of the two focus groups that took place as a part of the project Bystanders' approach to sexual harassment. The focus groups were carried out one high school in Ljubljana on 13 February 2017. They consisted of 6 girls in one group and 6 boys in the other group. They were led by Katja Zabukovec Kerin, president of Association for Nonviolent Communication, with assistance of Anita Jerina, counsellor in the field of violence in Association for Nonviolent Communication, and Maja Ladić, researcher at the Peace Institute.

The first session (with girls / young women) lasted exactly 1 hour and 30 minutes. The facilitators however reported that they could continue talking with girls for much longer as they were very talkative, they were all eager to express their opinions, their views, and also to share their personal experiences.

The second session (with boys / young men) was a bit shorter, and lasted around 1 hour and 5 minutes. The boys were much more reserved and kept their thoughts back. One of the facilitators thought that there were more reasons for that and that one of them was perhaps that the session took place at very end of their school day and some of the boys had to stay longer in school just for the focus group. Although it seemed that the boys were interested in the topic (and they also had some questions), they didn't think they have much to say, they said they didn't have much or any personal experiences and also their views were very different from those of girls.

Even though there was a suggestion in the guidelines that we should make »posters« with the participants we did not make them in Slovenia. With the girls there was simply not enough time to do that as they were very talkative and the convenors didn't think that was necessary. With the boys posters were also not made as it was more appropriate to let them talk and develop their ideas about the topic (they seemed very eager to participate in

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the focus group, they however struggled to formulate their ideas and opinions). No smaller groups were formed for the discussion, as both groups were already quite small, and all participants seemed to be very comfortable talking in one group.

2. Understanding of the term sexual harassment (SH)

While asked about what they understand as sexual harassment both groups came to the similar conclusions. The boy's and the girl's group mentioned rape as the worst form of sexual violence. »I mean that story when you are a child and someone lures you into his car with candies, and then...« (YW²). The girls also mentioned date rape drugs, the situation when the person becomes non-reactive, and does not remember anything, or unwanted deeds, for example if your peer asks you for your nude photos, or forces you into something that you don't want to do.

Boys mentioned touching/groping, violence in the most intimate sphere of human life, rape, stalking, blackmailing – to get the nude photos, to make inappropriate (intimate) remarks, especially if they take place for a longer period of time and in spite of the victim's disapproval. Both girls and boys in fact put harassment on the continuum of violence whereby the most of them saw harassment as a milder form of sexual violence.

While boys spent a lot of time in ranking SH vis a vis other forms of sexual violence, girls immediately stated that harassment among peers – »these pictures and so« - happens every day, unlike rape (»one gets caught in such case in Slovenia as it is a small country, not like in US or Germany or France« - YW). They agreed that there SH is very common and often (there is »full of that« (harassment, YW) in the vicinity of the girls. One often thinks and »one has got the feeling that this isn't something that will happen to you, but then it can happen to everyone« (YW).

SH is by both girls and boys considered to be less a physical than sexual violence, and is, especially from the boy's perspective, seen as less harmful, verbal, and not as real deeds.

From the girl's viewpoint, harassment is seen as more subtle and long lasting, and the girls pointed to the complexity of gendered power and continuum of violence. Some of them said that harassment is in fact more forceful, and that violence is not only physical, but can also be psychological. Especially in case of pressure to share their nude pictures and therefore in the space of social media, everything starts with words and psychologically. In fact, it was pointed out, it is more difficult to resist SH than physical violence where »you can more easily refuse him« (YW). You can just say no, there is no doubt that something is wrong with it and you block such harassment. (Yet there was also disagreement about this among the

² Young woman



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girls, as there was remark in-between: »I don't know, hm«, YW). If someone misuses pictures and this goes further (online) then it is more difficult to oppose it. One of the girls considered that there is less consequences of harassment than of the case of sexual violence (more horrifying), where someone is physically in contact with you. However, other girls thought that psychological violence - like harassment – can be equally bad, as »one can have traumas and so« (YW). It leaves behind similar consequences as if someone rapes you, as »they all see those pictures and they start to push you out of society, they all blame the victim, why did she send the photos, but they don't know how much and what kinds of pressure were put on her to send them« (YW). They also don't know in what kind of relationship she was with the boy and it is in this relationship where »there came the moment when she could not say no« (YW). The surrounding punishes her and even if they don't judge her »they all look away and she willingly-nillingly gets attention she probably did not want to have« (YW). And this has long term consequences: even when applying for a job this will accompany the person in question.

Boys spent lots of time in trying to objectively categorize what counts as »real« harassment and to define what sort of deeds are problematic (especially touching of which intimate parts). Sexual abuse is seen as repetitive harmful physical sexual violence, while SH is seen as less, in fact the least harmful. They made clear differentiation between physical (problematic real violence) and psychological (not so problematic). While sexual violence is the worst on the continuum and verbal remarks are on the other side, touching/groping is something in-between. Not every touching is SH, the question is where it takes place, touching breasts or buttocks is not equally bad (there was no agreement among the boys about this, some of them thought that it is equally bad), and that it makes quite a difference if one touches someone's arm or breast. All of course depends on the context, and touching an arm is of course not a problem if someone says »watch out for the car« but if he takes one's hand and says »what you could do to me!« then that is a problem (YM³). This has shown that some boys are well aware that verbal, psychological and physical violence are connected. Also, some of them pointed out that, when talking about intimate parts, that any body part can be considered as intimate and one does not want that someone else touches it just like that. Even though the boys (when facilitator suggested this) considered SH as a form of violence which is the least harmful/bad (*hudo* in Slovenian) they considered it unacceptable.

2.1. Perpetrators and victims of sexual harassment

Both groups thought that anyone can be victim of SH, yet both thought that girls are more affected. Of course »you first think about the girls, as it is a bigger possibility that a boy will put pressure on us than we on a boy...« (YW). Boys said that victims of sexual harassment

³ Young man



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are »usually women, probably«, that »statistically speaking« women are more often victims, but »technically anyone can be the victim«. Usually »the boys commit 'it' against girls« (YM). But this also depends on the »composition of a company one keeps, so that the boy can put a pressure on a boy or girl on a boy as well... or among girls, but in a different way« (YW). Both girls and boys thought that men more often harass women and they also mentioned children being harassed (YW). In the most of these cases the perpetrators are parents or close acquaintances (YM). Girls mentioned that they've heard at the sociology course that the most of sexual harassment takes place in the family as the youngest are »tabula rasa« and do not know anything about it and therefore do not speak about it. Boys thought that victims of SH can also be younger boys, who are exposed to touching or to SH on the internet.

Both groups agreed that those who are particularly vulnerable to SH are the girls who are more provocatively dressed or behave in a certain way. Boys spoke about the girls who show off with low cut dresses, and constantly take selfies, show their bosom: »Since they are more exposed more of such lunatics notice them« (YM). They (the girls) »are sending wrong signals, are too trustful to someone whom they don't know well enough, and they send their photos or whatever you want« (YM).

The girls pointed out that those who are standing out are more vulnerable, for example, if wearing low cut dress, as boys usually think that they will get something from them more easily: »boys would say 'she asked for it, didn't she?', already with her clothes and behaviour', but in fact this is not so... that is only an excuse« (YW). The girl might in fact want to send a different message.

The issue of misinterpretation or misunderstanding of girl's behaviour/intentions and of »exaggeration« regarding SH was a continuous topic among the boys. They said that people would definitely look disapprovingly on someone who harasses, and that other young people would condemn him. But this also »depends on the circle one belongs to« (YM). Others remarked that rapists are probably usually judged badly by everybody, while this would not necessarily be so with those who would touch/grope – there would not be such a bad judgement in these cases. There was some laughing among the boys around the issue of touching and the remark after laughter was: »But of course we concentrate on more extreme cases, otherwise almost every second person could be considered paedophile« (YM), and also: »Yes, one can very much exaggerate, as far as "this" (SH) is concerned« (YM). While talking about »exaggeration« one of the participants again talked about the circumstances and about »depending on how bad was what someone did« (YM), while on the other side it was said: »My moral standards condemn sexual harassment and it is difficult to say what exactly would be exaggeration. If a person says no it means no...« (YM). They finally – with the help of facilitator – explicitly agreed that it might be that it only looks like some girls want to disclose more and then someone is taking this wrong.



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The girls pointed to the structural position of the victim within the system of power and continuum of violence and said that one gets especially vulnerable if someone puts pressure on you for a longer period of time, or if one drinks alcohol, or is already »'full' in« and then just wants to try it out without thinking of the after-effect. Also, if someone says »you are a coward, you don't dare« ... If there is the peer pressure, you have to »fit in with your peers« and you say »fuck it«, you don't think and just do it.

The girls thought that the boys who are not willing to take a stand against somebody are also vulnerable, for example if they do not dare to say no. They are treated differently if they don't stand out or don't want to play the top dog or keep company with girls. Those who are »fejmiči« (the expression comes from »famous« peers, who are very much liked on Facebook) can also get into troubles.

Girls identified peer pressure that is experienced by boys who either do not have girlfriends or haven't had sexual experience yet: »everybody else already did it and he didn't. And someone finds him a girl, or he is in a relationship and all the time wants pictures from a girl whom he really loves, but then he all the time gropes/touches her and does not realise that what he is doing is sexual violence« (YW).

Girl's friends can also be perpetrators if they share such pictures with others as well if they get into quarrel with the girlfriend; they sometimes take revenge in this way. One of the boys said that the girls could also be perpetrators but only if they are »some nymphomaniac« (YM).

Girls described in a very straight forward way what happens to a vulnerable person: the most common thing that can happen is groping, touching (»šlatanje«), text messages with specific content, rape drugs (either girls get it in their drinks without knowing or they are being dared to take the drugs and show they are "brave"), public bullying, or making whispering comments when one passes. The girls first said that groping/touching is not so much wide spread in the girls surrounding, but then they remarked that often the perpetrator is "not aware" that it is not welcome to pinch someone's buttock and does not take it seriously even if he is told several times to stop doing it. There is a lot of such punching going on. When asked about it, girls said that they are still brought up traditionally so that they usually first say »no« even if they in fact do want to take part in certain sexual activities.

Girls also pointed to the non-sexual, power-connected character of "sexual" harassment: perpetrators cause harassment because it satisfies them, not necessarily sexually, but they might have a certain mental pleasure, pleasure in ruining one's life, or just pleasure to sexually harass someone. Boys thought perpetrators to do »it« because of the pleasure -



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increase of endorphins, adrenalin, and psychological impulse« (YM.) One of the boys said that the person who maybe »grabs her ass was only kidding but the other (rapist) is probably sick« (YM), and thus opposed the idea of continuum of violence, while making the distinction between »normal« (grabing) and »sick« (raping). It all depends on person's character, as »the one who just gropes probably won't directly go on to rape her« (YM). On the other hand, one participant rather stressed: »One starts with groping and then worse things come« (YM).

Normalization and underplaying: Girls also voiced the opinion that boys of their age who harass are particularly sexually very needy and want to get sexual experience, are sometimes drunk, or want a sexual experience at any case, regardless of anything else. Meanwhile boys minimized the problem with the motives behind harassment as a consequence different psychological impulses in different people who feel needs in different ways. There are »three main animal instincts: sexuality, food and movement«, so that it is understandable why »there is so much exaggeration regarding this« (YM).

There also came up (in both groups) the stereotypic picture of elderly men as typical perpetrators who are harassing and are either "very *lonely* (English expression in Slovenian) or don't get satisfied by their wives" (YW). Boys gave examples of adult women as perpetrators from US where women teachers were fired because they had relationships with the pupils. Boys never heard of peer girls harassing boys, while one of them described an experience with one girl who cached his buttocks but he thought that there was »nothing wrong with that« (»*nič takega*« in Slovenian = not a big deal). He took it »as a compliment«, although he did not expect it to happen, and was taken by surprise (YM). The boys also paid attention to the masculinity aspect of gendering the typical victim of SH and to stigma: boys might experience SH as stigma and would have difficulties to talk about it as they would be considered weak. But in fact, the stigma is general: eventhough anyone can experience SH, the society would still look oddly on someone who experienced it, both girls and boys. One of the boys said: »We can discuss about what the society thinks, but I think that we [boys in the focus group] don't have an exact standpoint« (YM).

While girls immediately identified with experiences of victims, the boys had obvious difficulties while trying to step into victim's shoes. They said it was difficult for them to imagine how the victims of SH feel, but the experience probably isn't too pleasant: »Someone is doing something to me that I don't want«, and »I have no control over the situation.« (YM) They think that the issue of SH is some kind of taboo, they don't talk about it in school, they have seen some statistics about SH but this was all rather impersonal. The boys thought that the victims experience SH differently, depending on who they are and how far violence has gone. At the end, after the facilitator's insistence that the boys don't think too abstract about hypothetical situations but should attempt to put themselves into



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the victim's shoes, they said that SH can result in trauma, and that »one cannot judge it only superficially«.

Among the boys the issue of education occurred early in the sense that maybe the education (sexual education) is too weak: therefore, »if others do it, and they say that it is not wrong, you might think 'I might do it as well'« (YM). There was disagreement among the boys about the importance of sexual education: some thought that it was very important as preventive measure and the others that it was not – as those who rape have different moral standards (and they are in fact sick). Education could only help in those cases where someone has »misinterpreted« signals and has unwillingly done something that has harmed the other's space. One of the boys also said the majority of people know what is right and what is wrong and thus there is no education needed.

Sexual education could only help if generally integrated into education, not only for certain years but permanently. One should start it as early as possible – as sex is so much present everywhere, in movies etc. Primary socialization was mentioned as something important and this includes attitudes to violence and gender relations in the family. If parents teach you to hit back twice as much as you were hit by someone else then »you will probably use this imperative in other areas of life later as well« (YM).

3. Sexual harassment in school (experiences of young people)

Cases of harassment the girls knew: harassment of a friend via internet, seeing a man who masturbates in public – or in the car (so called exhibitionism), videotaping porn movie on the toilet and showing it to the third class pupils on the internet, drunken man on the street who starts touching the girl, cat-calling (whistling, making noises or calling when the girl passes by) which happens all over Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. In the summer one almost cannot escape this if wearing shorts or a short dress or so – girls would face remarks both by older guys and also by peers. At parties there is a lot of harassing, especially when alcohol is involved. Girls pointed out that all this already starts much earlier, in the primary school: "one pulls the girl's bra or the trousers down and they think it is funny and that you're cool with it" (YW). And the game »truth or dare« that they were playing when they were younger: one had to lay on someone or give a French kiss (»zalizati se«, to lick someone, in a slang in Slovenia) and you were not cool if you didn't do it.

Girls avoid SH so that they go out with someone, not alone, and with the boys in the larger company. There is usually some kind of neutralization of things in such circumstances, especially if these are close friends (»those that you know that are 'real' friends and not just friends of friends«, YW) they will defend you. At the parties it is very important if the »guy« (boy) knows what is moral: "if he understands that he is doing something wrong he will just



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go away” (YW). If you know what is right and what not then you can »set limits« easier (the expression was suggested in the question by the facilitator). In this regard the boys from gymnasium are better educated than those in vocational schools – from those girls expect “insults or additional pressure if you did not give them something they wanted” (YW).

The boys first had a problem to relate to concrete cases they knew from their experiences. They mentioned the Austrian case of Fritzl. Then one of them shared a story where »it ran riot a little bit« (*je malo šlo to iz vajeti*), »it started with some more innocent things, little bit of groping and so, and then more and more«. He in fact knew that things were going wrong as the girl who experienced SH told him about that but has asked him not to tell anyone. Then »it was too much« so her girl-friends told the social worker and things were »somehow settled« (*so nekaj zrihtali*) and »it« (violence) stopped (YM). Another boy described a case about the company of boys who went out to a bar. At one of the tables there was a group of friends and one of them was obviously drunk. He was tightly holding his girlfriend who resisted him. Then this boy’s cousin and one more friend walked over to that table and told him to stop but she said »he is my boyfriend, everything is fine«. He even hit her several times later... as she was resisting too much and »we were all watching« (YM). At the end she run away and this guy got into a physical fight with the boy’s friend. The storyteller thought that it was all right that the harasser stopped with his behaviour but it was not good that it ended up in a fight. (The facilitator explained how and why girls often say »no problem, this is my boyfriend«)

When asked about their concrete everyday situation with the company of girls the boys said that the girls don't complain about someone giving them hard time. Sexual harassment in their concrete lives is to the large extent seen as something that is a reaction to girls appearances and action. One of the boys voiced the opinion that »they even feel pleasure if they get a little bit touched« (*jim paše*, YM). The other said: »Maybe it was different in other times, but in my case, if I look at them, they almost wait to..., and (ex)pose (themselves) (*nastavljajo se*). The difference between those who (ex)pose themselves and those who don't is seen as immense: some of the girls take their photo in a bra for example, and put in on social networks, and »the others would not even show their ankles« (YM). The first ones want attention and they are looking for a boyfriend and »usually they come across someone who will only take advantage of them and move on« (YM). When the facilitator provoked the thought that the girl might not want anything else than a »kind attention« and not that someone harasses her, one boy said: »I think that her goal is not that someone harasses her but this is the consequence anyway«. Thus, lots of »objective« circumstances to minimize boy's responsibility were mentioned (like already before, excessive sexuality). The boy who harassed the girl in the story above is by one or two participants from the focus group seen as »not being quite conscious, one could see it on him«, and »under influence of alcohol« (YM) etc.



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3.1. Response of peers in cases of sexual harassment

Both the girls and the boys agreed that the right reaction to the harassment would be if someone spoke on behalf of a girl who is harassed, and if she had someone nearby who would protect her. Yet they took a look at this from different (and gendered) perspectives. The girls immediately spoke from the perspective of the one who is harassed: one is under a great pressure in such a situation and if someone stands up for you then it is much easier to react on your own as well, since »you are not alone in there« (YW). Also, for someone who's looking from the outside it is easier to help. And then "you realize that you can say no and that you don't have to say o.k. And the one who harasses won't have such great feeling of power and especially so if someone says to him explicitly, 'look, she does not want this, leave her'" (YW).

It is easier to react if there are more people who let the harasser know that what he is doing is wrong. The girls pointed out that even though everyone is responsible himself and should have checked for himself what is right and what is wrong it is usually so that the harasser thinks that a girl is strange and that she is »playing something« (not being serious about her »no«) if she stands for herself alone (YW).

The boys mainly spoke from the perspective of one who should protect. They said that the person who would be groping girls in school's corridors and would catch one, two or three, would be seen as weird and bad. Yet one of the boys sarcastically exclaimed »boss!« (*car!* In Slovenian) and then, when others laughed, he immediately said »joke, joke!« (YM). There was an obvious disagreement in the group as there came a critical remark of someone else: »so all who are violent are so (namely »boss«), no?« (YM). The discussion has shown that the harassers might be appreciated and seen as cool by a certain peers, and that there might be others who would disagree with such behaviour. Some of the boys would directly intervene into the situation of harassment, and some not, as one can get into trouble: »You can get fucked« (*lahko najebeš*, YM). There was disagreement on how to react, one of them said »if things go absolutely too far, there is no choice, you have to intervene, but be aware that it might go even worse as you might interpret things wrongly«.

When asked to put themselves into the shoes of girls, the boys said that they don't see the difference regarding gender, they would think the same way if they were girls. After that facilitator tried to attract their attention to the fact that there might be different social reality for boys and girls, and that the girls could be under pressure to accept the view that sexual harassment is something that you don't take too seriously, otherwise everybody would think that you exaggerate. The boys then remarked that it would therefore be very important to interfere if something is going on and to make things clear before it comes to »misinterpretation« (meaning boys misunderstanding girls' messages).



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3.2. Response of the professors

Girls said that some of the professors (or even most) might pretend that they didn't see harassment. In primary school the teachers reacted appropriately and achieved that the person who was harassing pupils on the way to school was punished/removed. Yet the teachers in high school are "not interested in this part of pupils' lives" (YW), and this is sad. One girl thought that pupils might fear they would do/cause something wrong if they spoke about harassment to their professors.

The male teachers who have a greater bodily strength should practise their authority in favour of the harassed much more, especially sports teachers. A good experience with a male history teacher who stopped violence in primary school was mentioned. In high school, teachers are much more likely to blame the girls, if they are more provocatively dressed, for example. And the girls know very well to which male teachers they would never speak about sexual harassment, as they do not feel safe and the teacher clearly shows his preference to male pupils. For example, by saying to the boys (when pupils were filling out the teacher's evaluations), that »the girls will probably write into the questionnaire that there is something wrong with the teacher if he tries to gaze behind the girl's t-shirt« (YW) or making remarks about their physical looks etc. They are clearly not comfortable with those remarks (an example they gave was »you are so pretty that I would rather keep you for five minutes more after others will leave«, YW), and do not consider it as a compliment but as an insult. The half of the class that likes his jokes is all boys, and he will influence their attitudes, so that they will find such behaviour acceptable. That is a wrong kind of authority. Girls also said that even if they are not too close to him they can smell alcohol and cigarettes.

Girls have a much more positive experience with their class teacher (*razredničarka*) but she does not realise that they are not small children any more, and is not capable of confidentiality – she shares information about their complaints with those/or friends of those/ who are the problem for girls – and is not capable of looking at things from other's perspective. In spite of these remarks the girls said that they could in any case trust a woman teacher much easier than a man.

The girls said that everyone who is a bystander of sexual harassment at school (cleaners, janitor, and cooks as well) should contribute to reducing it. The most responsible person however is the head teacher (school director), who should give everybody guidance and take measures. The social worker should play a major role as well when it comes to reduction or prevention of sexual harassment. As to the teacher's reactions the boys first thought that they would not look away and would stop SH if it took place. Yet, when they said all the employees at school should get involved if SH was in question, »from cooks to cleaners«, they were more to the ground and said that »this is a question«, as »they in reality won't..., ... some people would just close their eyes and go: 'Not my business'« (YM).



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The girls would first trust and tell about the harassment to their best friends and then the parents, probably to their mother. But the concern is that the parents might also immediately raise alarm when this is not so important for the survivor.

It would be important that the professors tell the person who is harassing to stop, or, if there was something wrong going on, ask the girl about it or at least put the »standard question, what is going on here?« (YM). (Someone else thought that this is obvious and that you don't have to ask when obviously there is no consent). And if the victim replies that "unwanted groping is taking place" then... the boys sarcastically uttered: »You contact the counselling service...« (YM), which shows that the situation with contacting counselling or social service at school is difficult to imagine. However the boys thought that the teachers too would call the counselling service as they don't have competences to solve such problems. They should stop the act of violence and send the perpetrator to the counselling service.

Teachers are supposed to have a clear notion of what SH is but they might not necessarily have it. The boys said »did not see any disrespectful behaviour of teachers in school« (YM) and they were again sarcastic about this observation (»this is a very diplomatic saying«, YM) which shows that they knew that things were going on which were not all right.

4. How to respond?

The girls said that the first thing would be to address harassment as a serious issue, as "something that happens all the time and can happen to anyone and is not taking place 'over there'" (YW) to a nameless girl. When someone teaches about SH as much examples as possible should be given so that one sees that this is taking place here and now and finds her/his own example that he/she knows about. Clear explanation is needed of what are the (various) negative consequences of sexual harassment for a person. As much information as possible should be given about who is to be addressed (police etc.). The issue of trust was underlined and that the victims should never be held responsible (one girl spoke about the video on the internet she has seen and stopped watching as harassed women were blaming themselves). Information on sexual harassment should be filtered, edited, and not just send as information from peer to peer via internet, as there is a lot of bad stuff coming with this sometimes, not truth but invented and harmful things, girls said.

Particularly, one should not teach the victims that the solution to the problem is changing their behaviour. The girls mentioned that there is a lot of antifeminism among their school colleagues, in the sense of thinking that "women in Slovenia are liberated and that somewhere there, among Arabs, there is a problem-but not here, so no feminism is needed"



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(YW). But at the same time everybody knows that the boys are constantly harassing / touching girls.

Parents should do much more. Girls should be taught to be careful with the drugs which can be mixed into drinks. And almost no one hears anything about the danger of rape neither from parents nor at school where this is still a taboo topic. Girls would like to be thought about how to defend themselves and not how to behave. Every boy who harasses has parents or someone who brought him up and it's up to them to tell the boy what is right and what is wrong so that he becomes aware of it while growing up. Parents should be educated about SH as well. Everyone who has influence should be educated and should give a clear message, and »drum into someone's head« that harassment is not acceptable (YW). The problem is that if parents get the information that their child is harassing someone they often protect him and say »my child is an angel« (YW).

Girls said that they would need to know self-defence grips and how to find safe places if they have to escape. They would need to feel more confident and powerful in all regards. Bystanders should definitely get involved in helping victims.

Lectures out of curriculum and out of class do not help a lot since no one wants to stay longer in school. They are usually boring and not interactive enough. Workshops in small groups are much better, said the girls. If this talk (focus group) would not be separated by gender, the girls would talk much less and there would be quarrels with boys about who is a bigger victim. Yet at certain point workshops should be organized together - in order to "develop empathy to each other's positions" (YW), said the girls humorously.

There was a bit of hesitance among the boys when thinking about »to go and to sneak to the social service« (YM), but if you were a victim, »then you just go and tell what happened« (YM), and maybe before that you talk to a friend. Yet the boys repeated again that they don't think there is a lot of SH going on at school, at least not »anything serious«. On the other hand they tended to underline retributive justice: they would punish the perpetrators by »putting them into a subordinate position and show them how it is when someone forces you into something« (YM), although that would not really be suitable measure or method to educate them.

For education about SH the boys see the importance in presenting statistics about SH, as something impersonal to which no one feels directly connected to, »so that you see the situation without feeling involved« (YM). Boys were curious also about the legal situation, what does the law say about it and what are legal consequences of such acts. "People still don't see any harsh consequences and they still allow themselves a lot" (YM, again emphasis on retribution). They would like to hear personal experiences, something that directly speaks to the person, which might give much stronger message, like someone who's got



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experiences in working with victims to share them. They said information on what »not to do« in a situation when one is a bystander to harassment would be useful, so that one does not »mess it up« or make it worse. One boy said: »rhetorical package has to be there: logos, ethos, pathos...« (YM). Raising the consciousness about what is right and what is wrong and why it is wrong. What are the consequences for victims, how to prevent SH in advance not to try to “repair it” later. This education/training should not be too invasive (interventive), rather preventive, consider quality not quantity: “better one workshop than ten, so that it touches you and you want to do something, not just lecturing on and on and you are fed up with it« (YM). And the title must be »click bait«! Not too long, short and clear, two words (YM).

The boys explicitly admitted that the topic of SH is an important issue and that it should also be discussed in a mixed group, boys and girls together, because they would like to hear what girls have to say. In contrast to the girls they thought focus groups separated by sex were not very constructive, because girls usually don't harass other girls, and now they know their views within each group; however in reality they function together – boys and girls.

Girls suggested that girls could raise awareness, for example among younger girls. If one would make an educational programme on SH, there should be some slogan involved which would really tell something and be attractive – like »Witnesses« which sounds like an excellent title of detective movie with lots of suspense. Maybe there is someone (preferably who is still young) and has experiences with harassment and is willing to share her/his own story while participating in the talking or in the workshop (living library method). If someone provokes thinking with telling a real story then students would cooperate. It would be good if such workshops take place in the time of school lessons not after school. The whole thing should be some kind of reward for those who participate, interesting and so that one would really listen, think and talk and not only formally sit there. These are real issues in life, while complex numbers in math are not, said the girls.

5. Summary and conclusions:

Regarding what is seen as sexual harassment

Both girls and boys in fact put harassment on the continuum of violence whereby the most of them saw harassment as a milder form of sexual violence.

SH is by both girls and boys considered to be less a physical than sexual violence, and is, especially from the boy's perspective, seen as less harmful, verbal, and not as real deeds. The boys also made clear differentiation between physical (problematic real violence) and psychological (not so problematic). While sexual violence is the worst on the continuum and verbal remarks are on the other side, touching/groping is something in-between.



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Boys spent a lot of time in ranking SH vis a vis other forms of sexual violence, in trying to objectively categorize what counts as »real« harassment and to define what sort of deeds are problematic (especially touching of which intimate parts), while girls immediately stated that harassment among peers – »these pictures and so« - happens every day. From the girl's viewpoint, harassment is seen as more subtle and long lasting, and the girls pointed to the complexity of gendered power and continuum of violence in which it is not so easy to resist harassment. Yet some boys are also well aware that verbal, psychological and physical violence are connected.

Regarding victims and perpetrators of sexual harassment

Both groups thought that anyone can be victim of SH, yet both thought that girls are more affected. Both groups agreed that those who are particularly vulnerable to SH are the girls who are more provocatively dressed or behave in a certain way, yet they see this from different perspective: the girls oppose the blaming of the victim, the boys insist on some kind of »misunderstanding« of the girl's intentions. The girls also mentioned others who stand out in a certain way as vulnerable, for example the boys who are not willing to take a stand against somebody: if they do not dare to say no.

The girls pointed to the structural position of the victim within the system of power and continuum of violence and said that one gets especially vulnerable if someone puts pressure on you for a longer period of time. Peer pressure on the victim was pointed out by the girls: you have to »fit in with your peers« and you say »fuck it« and just do it. Girls also identified peer pressure to harass that is experienced by boys who either do not have girlfriends or haven't had sexual experience yet: »everybody else already did it and he didn't.

Girls described in a very straight forward way what happens to a vulnerable person: the most common thing that can happen is groping, touching (»šlatanje«), text messages with specific content, rape drugs, public bullying, or making whispering comments when one passes.

Girls also pointed to the non-sexual, power-connected character of "sexual" harassment: perpetrators cause harassment because it satisfies them, not necessarily sexually, but they might have a certain mental pleasure, pleasure in ruining one's life, or just pleasure to sexually harass someone.

The issue of misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the girl's behaviour/intentions and of »exaggeration« regarding SH was a continuous topic among the boys. While some boys thought about the continuum of violence (»One starts with groping and then worse things come«), others opposed this idea, while making a sharp distinction between »normal«



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(grabbing) and »sick« behaviour (raping). It all depends on person's character, as »the one who just gropes probably won't directly go on to rape her«.

Normalization and underplaying of perpetrator's deeds occurred in both groups: the boys minimized the problem with the motives behind harassment not only with blaming the victim (misinterpretation) but also with different psychological impulses in different people who feel needs in different ways. There are »three main animal instincts: sexuality, food and movement«, so that it is understandable why »there is so much exaggeration regarding this«. Girls also voiced the opinion that boys of their age who harass are particularly sexually needy and want to get sexual experience, are sometimes drunk, or want a sexual experience at any case, regardless of anything else.«.

In both groups came out stereotypic picture of elderly men as typical perpetrators who are harassing and are either "very *lonely* or don't get satisfied by their wives" (YW).

The boys paid attention to the masculinity aspect in gendering the typical victim of SH and related it to stigma: boys might experience SH as stigma and would have difficulties to talk if they had this experience as they would be considered weak.

While girls immediately identified with experiences of victims, the boys had obvious difficulties while trying to step into victim's shoes. They said it was difficult for them to imagine how the victims of SH feel, but the experience probably isn't too pleasant: »Someone is doing something to me that I don't want«, and »I have no control over the situation.«

Girls pointed out that peer's SH already starts much earlier, in the primary school: "one pulls the girl's bra or the trousers down and they think it is funny and that you're cool with it".

The boys first had a problem to relate to concrete cases they knew from their experiences. They did not see that as their problem. Sexual harassment in their concrete lives is to the large extent seen as something that is just a reaction to girls' appearances and actions: »I think that her goal is not that someone harasses her but this is the consequence anyway«.

Both the girls and the boys agreed that the right reaction to the harassment would be if someone spoke on behalf of a girl who is harassed, and if she had someone nearby who would protect her.

The boys mainly spoke from the perspective of one who should protect.



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The discussion among the boys has shown that the harassers might be appreciated and seen as cool by a certain peers, and that there might be others who would disagree with such behaviour.

Regarding response of the professors

The responses of teachers are not appropriate in most of the focus group participant's eyes. Girls said that some of the professors (or even most) might pretend that they didn't see harassment. In primary school the teachers reacted appropriately while the teachers in high school are "not interested in this part of pupils' lives" or they are much more likely to blame the girls, if they are more provocatively dressed, for example. The girls also described cases of harassment by a teacher. The boys said »did not see any disrespectful behaviour of teachers in school« but this was meant sarcastically.

The girls and the boys said that everyone who is a bystander of sexual harassment at school (cleaners, janitor, and cooks as well) should contribute to reducing it. The most responsible person for the girls however is the head teacher (school director), who should give everybody guidance and take measures. The social worker should play a major role as well when it comes to reduction or prevention of sexual harassment.

The boys are sceptical whether all the employees at school would get involved if SH was in question, some people would just close their eyes and go: 'Not my business'« (YM).

It would be important that the professors tell the person who is harassing to stop, or, if there was something wrong going on, ask the girl about it or at least put the »standard question, what is going on here?« (YM).

For the boys the situation with contacting counselling or social service at school is difficult to imagine. They also think that teachers are supposed to have a clear notion of what SH is but they might not necessarily have it.

How to respond?

Bystanders should definitely get involved in helping victims.

The issue of trust was underlined by the girls and that the victims should never be held responsible

Parents should do much more. Girls should be taught about the issue of rape and to be careful with the drugs which can be mixed into drinks.



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Parents should be educated about SH as well. Everyone who has influence should be educated and should give a clear message, and »drum into someone's head« that harassment is not acceptable (YW).

Girls said that they would need to know self-defence grips and how to find safe places if they have to escape. They also suggested that girls could raise awareness, for example among younger girls.

Boys tended to underline retributive justice: they would punish the perpetrators by »putting them into a subordinate position and show them how it is when someone forces you into something«.

Training program issues to be covered

In any training, as much examples as possible should be given so that one sees that this is taking place here and now and finds her/his own example that he/she knows about.

Clear explanation is needed of what are the (various) negative consequences of sexual harassment for a person. As much information as possible should be given about who is to be addressed (police etc.).

Lectures out of curriculum and out of class do not work, but workshops in small groups are much better, they can be partly sex separated but also mixed (more appreciated by the boys). The boys see the importance in presenting statistics about SH, as something impersonal to which no one feels directly connected to and getting to know the legal situation: what does the law say about it and what are legal consequences of such acts, and to hear personal experiences, something that directly speaks to the person, which might give much stronger message, information on what »not to do« in a situation when one is a bystander to harassment: »rhetorical package has to be there: logos, ethos, pathos...« (YM). Raising the consciousness about what is right and what is wrong and why it is wrong. What are the consequences for victims, how to prevent SH in advance not to try to "repair it" later. Education/training should not be too invasive (interventive), rather preventive, consider quality not quantity: "better one workshop than ten, so that it touches you and you want to do something, not just lecturing on and on and you are fed up with it« (YM). And the title must be »click bait«! Not too long, short and clear, two words, the slogan which would really tell something and be attractive. The girls also thought that there should be some slogan involved which would really tell something and be attractive – and that experiences with harassment should be shared (living library method). If someone provokes thinking with telling a real story then students would cooperate. Workshops should take place in the time of school lessons not after school. They should be interesting like are real issues in life, said the girls.



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6. Conceptual map:

Sexual violence, abuse and harassment
Normal and sick behaviour
Peer pressure (through social media)
Physical and psychological violence
Misinterpretation of behaviour
Exaggeration of the issue (SH)
SH happening here and now
Clear sanctions/rules
Difference between what is right and what is wrong
Victims not to be blamed
Serious issue of SH (topic)
Trust
Where for help?
If men victims – weak
Real solutions
Not a taboo

7. The issues/challenges that the facilitators identified from the focus group

How to prepare INTERESTING workshop/lecture for students?
Topics in smaller groups or separated by sex?
Finding concrete examples
Explain the SH in a way that students will understand

8. Sources

Transcripts of focus groups with girls and boys conducted at high school in Ljubljana on 13 February 2017.