



Focus group analysis – UK

BYSTANDERS project was funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme (2014-2020). The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of Team of the Bystanders' Project and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission





1. Background

The focus groups were conducted in a state secondary school located in a diverse borough in North London. The school has Academy status and is attended by 11-16 year olds. It is a mixed sex school and is attended by almost 1,000 students. The school received a rating of ‘good’ in its most recent Ofsted inspection.

The researchers liaised with the Pastoral Engagement Officer to set up the focus groups. Students in years 9 and 10 were selected to take part, aged between 13 and 15. Consent forms were signed by the parents of the young people. Twenty students participated in total: ten young women and ten young men. Most of the young people in both groups came from ethnic minorities. The focus groups took place in a classroom around a large table. It was a non-uniform day which was said by the Pastoral Engagement Officer to impact the dynamic within the school. The researchers brought biscuits and sweets for students to enjoy.

2. Analysis of focus group discussions

The first focus group was with the young women, followed by the young men. The analysis follows the structure of the questions asked within the groups. It presents the experience/views of young women and boys for each.

Question 1: What do you understand by the term sexual harassment?

Both the young women and young men understood sexual harassment to involve unwanted verbal comments and touching.

It could be that someone's inappropriately touching you in places that you don't want them to (YW).¹

My understanding is saying something that may be inappropriate or sexual, or touch someone in a way that they don't want you to (YM).²

Interestingly social media was very quickly identified as a mechanism for harassment, either through being sent unwanted messages and pictures or being pressured into sharing pictures.

It could also be via, like social media, someone sexually sending messages towards you that you don't want to receive (YW).

But there are some people that send nudes to other people, mostly Young women, and stuff like that (YM).

¹Young woman

²Young man



In both groups the word ‘consent’ was used. Its use by the young women suggested that the boundaries between sexual harassment and sexual violence were blurred. One even suggested that sexual harassment includes rape.

So like someone harasses you, which means you don't want to have sex with someone and they are forcing you to have it without you approving (YW).

Like touching someone or touching a young woman without their consent (YM).

Revealingly, young women were more likely to link sexual harassment to other forms of violence against women in which power and control is exerted, including stalking.

I see it [harassment] as like as if they are trying to like victimise someone – they'll just try to control you (YW).

Like following, you know, following you around... that can be sexual harassment (YW).

Their conversation reflects the continuum of violence: that experientially ‘categories’ of violence shade into and out of another.

The discussion among the young men focused more on how young women ‘signal’ that they do not like ‘that stuff’. Body language was identified, as well as being told to stop.

Being like your body is saying stop. I don't want to do this. Don't mess with me (YM).

Turning away from you, trying to pull away (YM).

Maybe through their facial expressions – they like frown (YM).

Or if they don't respond...that may be another signal (YM).

At this early point, young men were very clear that they had a range of ways of ‘knowing’ that their behaviour was unwelcome.

Question 2: Who does sexual harassment happen to?

Young women initially responded that sexual harassment can happen to anyone, followed by a more gendered perspective.

I think, it's the same, but we mostly see it as like it is more girls. But it could be the same (YW).

A further distinction was made about age with young women perceived as more likely to



experience sexual harassment.

And it's mainly like... older boys pressuring younger girls because they can like put words into your head and get you like thinking things and – something like that just because they're older than you (YW).

This age difference did not work in the same way for young men:

Even if an older woman tries to do it to young boys they still have more power to - because, they can get rid of the girls easier I think... men are stronger than young girls (YW).

The young men saw sexual harassment as predominantly gendered:

It doesn't really happen to boys as much as it does to girls (YM).

Mostly girls... but not all the time, because I think there's some females out there that may harass males (YM).

There was a sense that harassment would be experienced the same, but the examples young men gave were of sexual 'teasing' and how they find it difficult to 'resist' attractive young women.

Boys really like attractive girls they REALLY like attractive girls... you're not interested but yet she keeps on provoking you using her body... and she's trying to make you like her even more and maybe take it to another level (YM).

This exchange questions the suggestion that young people do not know where the 'line' is between 'normal' behaviour and harassment:

I think sometimes young people our age just don't know where the line is, or they may cross it, but they don't feel that they've done anything wrong (YM).

So from an earlier position that young men knew/would read when their behaviour was unwelcome moved to the 'line' being different for different people, so responsibility should be placed on the victim to indicate when it has been crossed:

The line could be anywhere. It's different for different persons and what their limit is, and some people might react earlier than some other people (YM).

Boys and girls need to like understand where the line is and they need to open up to the person and tell them that that's not what they want (YM).

This led to a conversation in which young women were expected to tell the young man



before reporting harassment to a teacher. This sat alongside recognition that the harasser may ‘become violent or angry’ if confronted and that by failing to tell a teacher he may not know he is ‘in the wrong’.

I think it's better to actually tell the person than to go and tell someone else, because they might have a different interpretation of what the situation actually is. So I think if the female tells the male beforehand, before they go and tell anyone else, the person may stop talking to them in that way (YM).

To make the situation even more unclear, it was suggested that even when young women indicate that behaviour is not acceptable, they may not mean it because they are playing ‘hard to get’.

They're saying for the person to stop because – they may feel attracted to the person but they play hard to get, so they are still showing signals that they may like the person, instead of like telling them that they are not attracted to them. So I think that may be two different things (YM).

The way in which young men moved from having clarity about knowing to a position of not knowing reveals some of the gendered ways in which sexual harassment is understood and experienced. The young men drew on available discourses, especially the ‘miscommunication’ theory to cover over the fact that they had a range of ways through which to assess whether their attention was welcome or not.

Question 3: Who are the harassers?

In answer to a question about ‘who’ does the harassing, both groups agreed that it was mostly young men.

I would say the majority of it is boys, yeah. It's not equal... (YM).

Whilst agreeing overall, young women did refer to harassment from other females.

It can happen to girls as well. Like girls on girls (YW).

It might just be a bit touchy. They might like slap your bum or something. And then you might take it as a joke cos it's your friend (YW).

Question 4: What does it feel like for targets and harassers?

The young women named emotions that a victim of sexual harassment might feel, mostly in the form of one word responses including: stressed, scared, under pressure and isolated.

When probed, one described that feeling ‘stressed’ meant that thinking about harassment takes up lots of ‘head space’.



You're just gonna be thinking loads of things, so it's all gonna be on your mind, then you're gonna get stressed (YW).

This was not so much about having to factor personal safety into one's actions, but more a social safety – how would this would be read by others in the school community, what impact would it have on relationships and reputation?

The young men also recognised that sexual harassment leads to a situation in which the person who experiences it has lots 'going on'. Their discussion focused on the 'actual moment in time' – when the harassment is taking place. One suggested that if the person being harassed does not know what to do, they might 'just let it go'.

The conversation then returned to the earlier theme, despite feeling afraid, the person being harassed should take responsibility by letting the harasser know their behaviour is unacceptable, rather than tell a teacher.

I think that girls mainly need to realise that it may be the better option for them to tell the person beforehand, before they go and tell anyone else (YM).

In this way:

Nothing escalates... no-one gets into any trouble or anything (YM).

When asked about how the person being harassed might feel inside, suggestions included uncomfortable and annoyed.

Once again, the conversation turned to 'mixed signals'. The following quote reveals how the young men moved between 'knowing' yet justifying harassment through 'not knowing'.

Sometimes you may be playing round with a girl and like touch her maybe inappropriately, but she tells you to stop, but it's like, she may say it in a way that she's telling you to stop but she don't want you to stop, so you don't know whether to stop or – the tone of voice she's saying it in if you should carry on, so I think it's hard to tell what they're actually trying to say, to tell you (YM).

When asked what the 'safety first' position would be the young men acknowledged that stopping would prevent a mistake being made, but still maintained:

You can be uncertain can't you? You can be uncertain in those situations - you can feel two things (YM).

Question 5: What do harassers get out of it?

The young women suggested that the harasser feels 'powerful' and 'like a man'. These derive from being able to show off and boast to their friends, for example, through sharing a



picture:

They might like show it [picture] to their friends, and be like, 'oh look this girl's sent me this'. That happens a lot in school... they boast about it with their friends, which makes them popular (YW).

Whilst the status and popularity of the harasser increases, the young woman gets a reputation and is called names:

When boys pressure girls into doing things... people start talking – 'oh you did this and that'. And then when it turns back onto the girl, and when people find out about her, you get a bad reputation (YW).

This led to an interesting discussion which highlighted that there is not always one harasser; it can be groups of harassers, particularly when it takes place via social media. Images are shared with lots of different people which had a particular meaning in the context of a school.

I've seen it happen to a few people at school like, you'll come to school and everyone will be talking about it, and it's not nice, cos that's basically like bullying...you also feel like, exposed – because people have seen you (YW).

Another viewpoint was that the harasser does not always realise that they are 'doing it'. Following this logic, one of the young women suggested that they 'wouldn't feel anything in particular'.

The young men suggested something similar; that the harasser might be confused.

Sometimes the person that's harassing, they don't know that they're hurting them... they're just trying to be nice (YM).

Furthermore, the harasser might blame the victim for not telling them that their behaviour was unwanted.

It's unfair on him because he wasn't aware of what he was doing and, yeah, if the female never told him to, like to stop or anything (YM).

When asked why a young man might carry on harassing a young woman when she has said no or her body language suggests she is not happy, the notions of male pride and 'being a man' came into play.

I think it may be like pride in that boy, like they feel confident, they think like they may be better than the female, and like because she's not attractive to him, that he wants to like show her that he may be a man to her (YM).



Maybe they think they're superior to girls and it doesn't really matter (YM).

Say if a boy is harassing a girl, like in front of them, they might be showing their friends about what they can do. Like... instead of them noticing what harm it is actually doing to the person who's being harassed – I think their friends would be like cheering them on. And they know that it's going to get their friends excited or whatever. But in their mind they actually know what they actually did (YM).

Victim blame emerged again with the suggestion that if young women put up pictures of themselves on social media that they are 'asking for it'.

It's not fair. Because they're profiling themselves on social media...it's inevitable for a person to go and they talk to them, but they may not want to be spoken to in that way (YM).

One young man suggested that a harasser might think it is ok to act in that way because he had previously experienced harassment himself. Another indicated the harasser might continue to harass someone because they are drunk and unable to read body language.

If you're really drunk, you probably won't notice if that person pushes you away, in cases like that, if she pushes you away, you know (YM).

Sexual harassment in schools

The young women and men were asked to discuss in small groups examples of sexual harassment that they have seen in school and then to report one example back to the wider group. The young women enjoyed animated conversations within their groups and came up with a number of examples. In contrast the young men's conversation was less animated and fewer examples were shared.

Question 6: What do you think about the experiences you have heard about?

One young woman described how an older boy kept asking her to 'do things' with him. She said 'yes' because she never saw him outside of school and knew that it would not happen. He sent her a picture of himself and asked for one back:

And then I kept saying no, and then he kept getting angry with me (YW).

This led her to download a picture from Google. He then put her name on it and shared it.

So everyone kept on messaging me and that. And then when I got to school, everyone was just talking about it for like a year. Then there was another rumour how apparently I gave him a blow job, which isn't true. So I basically got bullied for a year. And I was actually sad (YW).



The young women in another group shared how young men touch them in school – their ‘bum’ or ‘boobs’. They explored how when one young woman is victimised in this way and other young women are left alone then she may feel ‘picked on’. She may also feel that the harassment could escalate:

And then like after school time she might feel pressured because she's got to be looking over her shoulder to make sure he's not there, because she doesn't know what steps he could take, like what it could lead on to. Like he's touched her, maybe he might start doing like other things that are much worse. And things like that(YW).

One young man spoke about how he was annoyed by a young woman who would not stop touching his penis, despite him asking her to do so.

I didn't really have any emotions...I just felt – it was annoying me, so I felt I needed to express myself in a way that she knew that I wasn't impressed with her (YM).

Question 7: How do pupils respond when they see/hear it?

The young women thought that other pupils respond to sexual harassment by laughing and making a joke of it. They also noted that other young men encourage the harasser to carry on.

Say the girl's getting touched up, and a boy sees - they say, oh, I rate that, and things like that (YW).

The person being harassed might get talked about or even questioned about it, but not in a way that seeks to ascertain whether it was wanted or not.

They see a boy touch your bum and the first thing that they do is go and tell everyone else. They wouldn't even bother coming up to you and being like, are you OK? (YW).

The discussion moved to how the individual being harassed might respond. Some of the discussion here chimed with the victim-blaming displayed by the young men, with suggestions that some young women do not know how to say stop ‘with meaning’ and that girls might laugh ‘as if it’s a joke’. When asked why young women might laugh, however, there was recognition that this might be because they did not know how else to react.

Some young women voiced that pupils might like the attention they get from being touched or may get into situations where they are touched to make other young men jealous. The quote below is interesting in that it reveals how one young man knew that the young woman was uncomfortable about being touched but did not do anything.

I hung out with some boys in front of him. And then the boys started touching me. I didn't like it at all, but I didn't show it because I wanted him to get jealous. And then at the end of that day I told him, and he was like ‘oh, I saw how uncomfortable you



were. It's just like why would you put yourself in that situation?' I was like, 'just to get you jealous, innit?' but I didn't like it, and he knew I didn't like it (YW).

Despite insisting that young women needed to know how to say no to sexual harassment in a really 'strong way' none of the participants had seen someone do this. One reported that she had seen a young woman punch a young man. When she spoke to a teacher about harassment he indicated this was an appropriate response.

None of the young men could think of an example of when someone had intervened in an incident of sexual harassment.

Question 8: What would the victims want as a response?

The young woman who provided the example of feeling uncomfortable said she would have liked someone to intervene.

I: Aside from the being jealous bit, would you like him to stand up for you, do something?

YW: Yeah. But he wanted to show me that he didn't care. But he obviously did.

There are a set of complexities here about relationships within school settings and how these may complicate issues of harassment. The young women more generally thought that there were young men who cared about and stood up for young women, but there were others who did not and would not get involved.

If they see you, like you feel uncomfortable, they will probably go up to them and be like, OK, stop doing that. Something like that – stand up for you (YW)

There was broad agreement that it would be better for young people not to worry about being judged but to help, to challenge rather than support the harasser.

I think it would be better if people actually went up to the person and said 'you know what you're doing, right?' And then they would stop, instead of actually supporting them (YW).

Stop the harassment. If you see someone harassing someone, you should help them, help the girl, help someone... Not worry if people judge you (YW).

When asked what might stop pupils doing this, responses included not wanting to interfere in other people's business fear that it might escalate and that one young man harassing a young woman gave other young men 'permission' to do the same.

Sometimes boys just – they will see a boy touching a girl, and then they will want to do it as well. It's kind of like they're – how do you say it – I don't know how to say it, but like they, they think that it's right for them to do it as well... so it's like maybe the



person has given them permission to do the same thing (YW).

Revealingly, by sticking up for a young woman, it might be assumed that a young man liked her.

If a boy just randomly sticks up for a girl people might assume that he likes her and things like that, and then he's gonna get like pressured and questioned at break and lunchtime and things like that (YW).

The discussion around whether it was appropriate for someone to interfere in situations where the young woman and man are going out together was interesting. Here it was assumed that consent was always present.

If you're going out with someone, and you're touching each other all the time, what's the big deal? (YW).

If someone is in a relationship you would just think oh well they're both kind of have consent to each other (YW).

Discussion then focused on whether the couple looked happy. One of the young women suggested a 'safety first' position in relation to this.

I think that the relationship business is an out-of-school thing... because in school you've technically come here to learn, not to be touching each other up in the break times (YW).

The discussion about barriers among the young men had less depth. They focused on the issue of what the person being harassed might mean to a bystander. They thought that the closer the relationship i.e. friend or family member, the more likely a decision would be made to intervene.

So if they are like really close to you, you would tell that person to stop (YM).

They too noted barriers to taking action, including not being brave enough.

Question 9: How should harassers be responded to?

The young women initially responded by joking that harassers should be treated in the same way so that they understood how it felt.

Do the same thing to them! (YW).

This was followed by suggestions of how this could be achieved in other ways: for example, highlighting the consequences of being harassed as a way of getting young men to appreciate how it feels.



- *I think probably people would stop doing these things if they actually understand what....*
- *Yeah, the reason why – what.....how things. ... cos if they actually understand why it's not good, then they'll probably stop.*
- *It's kind of, part of what you've got to do is to enable people to realise that they're doing something that actually other people don't like (YW).*

Whilst young men also thought it was important for the harasser to understand how it feels to be harassed, they struggled to suggest anything other than physical violence as a means of achieving this.

Beat the harasser up – make him hurt so he understands how it feels (YM).

However one young man suggested that there might be other ways of developing empathy with the victim, perhaps via the experience of a female relative.

And then like if it's his little sister or something... once he's heard that he stops harassing the girl (YM).

Question 10: How do teachers respond?

Discussion turned to the importance of teachers (including child protection officers) also acting to protect pupils. The young women wanted teachers to take sexual harassment very seriously. At the same time they expressed concern that teachers might not understand what it is like to be harassed and the importance of them doing so. They indicated that it is important that pupils feel at ease talking to teachers about this issue.

If I am going to tell the teacher about it, probably they won't understand... probably they didn't go through the same thing, so how would you know what I've been through... I'm not saying like you have to talk to a person that's been through it, but that really understands so they can actually help you, then go ahead. But I think here are certain teachers that you don't feel comfortable talking to (YW).

There was also concern that involving teachers could make things worse if they failed to tackle the problem in the 'right way'. This could lead to unwelcome escalation.

If you tell them the problem they probably make the issue worse; like there's some teachers that [if] you tell them this one's touching me and then we have a meeting, or something, and then... say for example after school, the boy goes following you about and stuff, and then he would probably do something to you most likely (YW).

There's also like if the teacher's spoken to the boy, things like that, and has left it and not fully sorted it out, the Young man would go back up to the girl and say 'oh why have you talked to the teacher?' and then make things worse for the girl because



they've obviously told on him (YW).

Despite some further discussion, young women were not sure what the 'right way' of responding would be but were clear it should reflect what pupils want to happen.

The young men also thought it important for teachers to intervene. However they too discussed the importance of responding appropriately. For the young women the main concern was escalating harm for the victim. Yet the main concern for the young men was the perpetrator being punished too severely.

Sometimes people don't tell the teachers because teachers take it too far. Like the teachers might exclude them, but they were just messing around (YM).

This led immediately to a complaint that young women are believed over young men.

What I see is that girls get more backed up than males do (YM).

It's like the girl has a story, let's just say the girl's got dumped, and she's done whatever she's done with the male. And then when they finished the girl she didn't want it, so then she would call it harassment or whatever.... The man like somehow get blamed for all of it. The lady, like nothing really happens to her (YM).

The view that intervention might depend on relationship status was echoed.

I think there should be a [thing] so that girls or boys who sexually harass their partners should not be as bad as other cases (YM).

Question 11: Is there anyone else in school who should respond to these situations?

The young women suggested that parents could help protect pupils by taking them to school and picking them up. Another suggestion was for pupils to make sure they are always around others. Ongoing surveillance was identified as the only thing that keeps people safe. None of the young people saw other school staff as relevant to the issue of interrupting harassment.

How to act

Question 12: What could pupils do in relation to victims?

The group of young women suggested that other pupils could create a distraction when sexual harassment is taking place, thereby interrupting it.

So if you see it happening... distract the person, meaning – if you see someone, say for example the person that's doing it or the victim, then like you could kind of distract them by like going up to them and saying, 'oh, I need to talk to you'...so you're sort of stopping something (YW).



Like if you see that your friend is uncomfortable, even if they're like laughing, just try and distract them 'cos that means it will kind of stop it from happening. Or at least it will just prevent it from happening at that moment or that day (YW).

Conversation here focused on the importance of pupils being alert to sexual harassment and being able to recognise signs that it is taking place e.g. facial expressions. Another key point was having the confidence to intervene, that it would be useful to learn how to talk to the person who has been harassed to check that they are ok.

The young men agreed that pupils should learn how to recognise signs of harassment. They also reiterated their view that young women should be clear with young men when they are being harassed in order to invite intervention. A third suggestion was for there to be mediation when incidents were reported through which a teacher or peer would bring both parties together and explore how each felt.

They should be able to talk – with the teacher there – just to say how it is (YM).

Question 13: What should be included in a training program that encourages bystanders to intervene?

The young women believed that a training program should empower bystanders to 'know what to do'. They thought things should be included which enabled other pupils to 'stand up' to harassers such as confidence.

It would be nice to build up confidence and to not be afraid (YW)

A long piece of paper was laid across the table and the young people were asked to write their ideas of what training should cover.

Young women	Young men
Boys should keep their hands to themselves	How boys and girls see it x 2
SH makes girls uncomfortable	What it feels like for girls x 3
Be straight up and safe	Boundaries x 3
Touching is not a joke	Both should be sanctioned similarly x 3
Stop asking for pictures	How to prevent it x 3
Tell someone for help	What is sexual harassment?
	Punishment



	<p>Consequences</p> <p>Why are girls trusted when they say they have been harassed?</p> <p>Girls with different personalities will see SH differently i.e. some might not think it is harassment</p> <p>How boys feel about it</p> <p>How the harassers see it vs. someone on the outside</p> <p>Teachers should handle it more sensitively</p>
--	---

Question 14: How should young people be involved in creating policies and changing the culture in schools?

The young women were clear that any action to address sexual harassment should sit within a school-wide policy in which teachers would investigate incidents. All pupils should be made aware of the processes that would sit behind such a policy. They discussed an incident involving a teacher who was under investigation but who then carried on/resumed teaching with no explanation given.

There's been a situation here where someone was getting harassed by a teacher, but the teacher didn't get sacked...the teacher should investigate the situation deeper and more seriously because it's like – they say to you, oh, we're going to investigate, but that's all you get told - what does that even mean? (YW).

The most important words from the session

The young people were given post-it notes to place on another long piece of paper and asked to note the words that had stuck with them from the focus group.

Young women	Young men
Safety x 4	Equality x 6
Confident x 3	Changes x 3
Stand up x 2	Voice x 2
Selfishness	Scared
Honesty	Fear



Carefulness	Boundaries/limits
Investigate deeper	Think
Don't harass	Empathy
	Emotion
	Solution
	Consequences
	Understanding
	Unfairness
	Communication
	Care

Conceptual map developed after the focus groups

Following the focus group discussions, the researchers immediately captured the concepts that emerged from the session.

Boundaries
Sexual harassment and sexual violence
Between young women and young men
Young men knowing and then saying they don't
Understanding
Confusion
Banter as sexism
Laughter as consent
Sexual teasing as harassment for young men
Find it 'annoying'
Young women link sexual harassment to safety
Solidarity between young women is fragile



Confidence in self and others

Social media as collective harassment
Shared across school, ongoing

Escalation
Dangerous, ineffective,

Young men jumping to violence and prosecution in response to harassment
Spaces in between

3. Implications for intervention

Analysis of the focus group discussions reveals a number of implications for our intervention.

The most striking is that young women and men start from very different places. Although both groups shared a common understanding of what sexual harassment is, the young women are concerned about stopping escalating harm to the victim whereas the young men are concerned about perpetrators being punished too severely. Preparatory work with young people will need to address this, perhaps by situating sexual harassment within the continuum of violence against women so that young men have a greater understanding of how different forms of violence can shade into another and the importance of intervening early.

Linked to this is the need to create empathy for victims through highlighting the consequences of sexual harassment. Again, this is more relevant to the young men but, at the same time, the researchers observed that solidarity between young women was fragile. Empathy also needs to underpin how teachers respond to sexual harassment so that it is not dismissed as banter. The intervention will need to explore what kinds of policy would enable effective responses and support bystanders action.

The issue of solidarity also highlights how individual young people see their own individual efforts to challenge sexual harassment as futile. Without the support of others and lacking any tools to respond to situations they tend to 'laugh it off'. This is then available to young men as an excuse or justification.



With respect to young men and their capacity to shift between knowing and not knowing we need to establish 'safety first' positions and address the contested space of 'crossing lines'. This will also need to include consent and relationship status.

Bystander interventions need to include members of school staff as well as students. Skills and confidence are required for intervention. This should include recognising sexual harassment and knowing how to speak to those who experience it.

The use of social media leading to groups of harassers is a particular issue for us here in the UK, which we will need to address; it may not be as strong a focus for other partners.