



Ollscoil Chathair  
Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University

# Young People's Experiences of Sexual and Gender-based Harassment and Abuse During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ireland: Incidence, Intervention and Recommendations.

DCU Anti-Bullying Centre,  
Dublin City University

Dr Debbie Ging and Dr Ricardo  
Castellini da Silva

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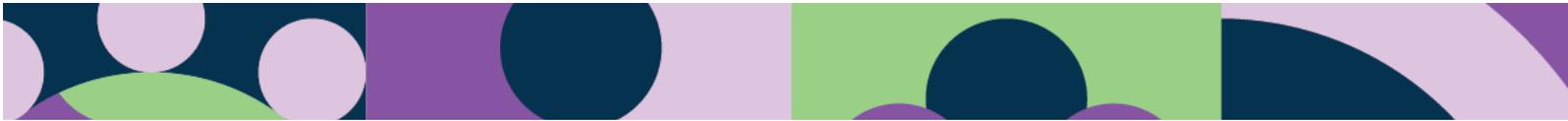


## Acknowledgements

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In the larger project, of which this study is a component, we have been privileged to work with a team of inspiring international feminist collaborators, who are shifting the paradigms in relation to how schools tackle sexual and gender-based harassment and abuse.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this report is to investigate young peoples' experiences of sexual and gender-based abuse and harassment during the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland, and to explore the benefits and challenges of delivering two workshops to educate about and tackle sexual and gender-based abuse. The report presents the findings from 185 surveys and 10 focus groups conducted with 60 young people aged 15-17 in 2021. Our findings show that social media use increased significantly during the pandemic. They also indicate an increase in levels of online harassment and abuse, especially for girls and LGBTQ+ students. Feedback from the workshops points to significant gaps in young people's knowledge about gender-based and sexual harassment and abuse, and in the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum's provision of education on these issues, as well as on digital rights, ethics and consent. The success of the workshops, measured by post-workshop surveys and focus-group feedback, demonstrates that inclusive and interactive educational formats based on young people's lived experiences can go a long way to address these gaps. It is hoped that this report will help to inform future improvements to RSE and digital safety education in Ireland by providing new data on the extent and nature of sexual and gender-based harassment and abuse, by reporting on which types of classroom interventions worked best, by presenting the perspectives and experiences of young people themselves, and by making concrete recommendations on what students need to navigate these issues.

## Key Findings

**Social media use increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic.** YouTube was the most widely used platform during the pandemic overall (89.2%) and for boys (93%). For girls it was Instagram (93.3%). Use of TikTok increased hugely during this period, with 86.2% of girls and 61.5% of boys saying they spent more time on it since the pandemic started.

**The Covid-19 pandemic had a greater negative impact on girls and LGBTQ+ students.** 57.8% of girls and 63.6% LGBTQ+ students said that social distancing measures had significantly impacted on their mental health, compared with 30.2% of boys and 39% of heterosexual students. The mental health of non-binary and transgender students (55%) was also more negatively impacted than those identifying as male or female (31.8%).

**Girls experienced more online harms than boys, and LGBTQ+ students experienced more online harms than heterosexual students.** The majority of online harms increased more for girls than boys during the Covid-19 pandemic. Girls were also more upset than boys by these experiences, and more likely to discuss them with someone else.

**Girls experienced more digital harassment of a sexual nature than boys by a significant difference, including heightened experiences since COVID-19.** Roughly twice as many girls (33.3%) as boys (17.4%) received unwanted sexual photos from friends, adult strangers, and people they know only online. 15.1% of boys and 32.2% of girls were asked to send sexual photos or videos of themselves online, and 36.7% of girls and 20% of boys said this increased since Covid-19 started.

**Receiving unsolicited 'dick pics', pressure to send nudes and being judged or rated on one's appearance have become almost entirely normalised.** Students were grateful that the workshops 'denormalized' these behaviours.

**100% of girls and 90% of boys said the workshops had improved their knowledge of what sexual violence is and the different forms it takes.** 100% of girls and 90.9% of boys said they would apply the content of the workshop to their relations with others.



**The workshops gave students a vocabulary and definitions with which to understand sexual and gender-based violence**, particularly in the context of inadequate Relationships and Sexuality Education, which had deteriorated during the pandemic.

**A minority of boys felt there was too much emphasis on women as victims and males as perpetrators.** We need to develop a greater awareness of boys' experiences as victims, and to create more spaces in which they can talk about their own victimization and vulnerabilities.

**Many students expressed dissatisfaction with both the content and delivery of RSE.** Participants reported that the current provision of RSE does not adequately address the realities of mediated intimacy, digital abuse or gender inequality, nor is it sufficiently inclusive of LGBTQ+ perspectives.

## Introduction and Background

Recent research shows that sexual and gender-based abuse are a growing problem in schools, occurring across a range of interrelated online and offline contexts (Ringrose Regehr, and Milne, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021). This project was developed as part of a two-country study involving Ireland (DCU Anti-Bullying Centre) and England (Institute of Education, University College London), conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021. It was inspired by growing rates of sexual and gender-based abuse among youth, as well as by reports indicating that these forms of abuse became significantly more acute during the Covid-19 pandemic (Women's Aid Ireland, Glitch UK)<sup>1</sup>. This report outlines the findings of the Irish component of the study, and is one of the first pieces of research in Ireland to pilot and document responses to a classroom intervention on sexual and gender-based abuse among youth<sup>2</sup>.

In Ireland, Michelle Walsh's (2021) report 'Storm and Stress: An Exploration of Sexual Harassment Amongst Adolescents' has shed important new light on adolescents' understanding of sexual harassment within their peer communities, and outlines responses required to address it. Based on the experiences of 600 Irish adolescents over 12 months, it revealed that 80% of adolescents disclosed being subjected to some form of sexual harassment, 24% of adolescents disclosed that they were subjected to physical or extreme forms of sexual harassment and 47% of adolescents did not know how to report sexual harassment within their school. Significantly, Wash's study shows that girls were 1.92 times more likely to have experienced online sexual harassment than boys.

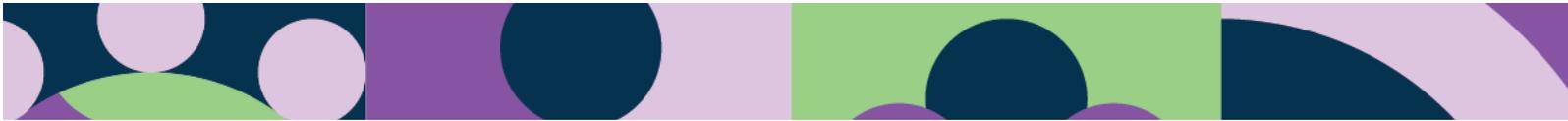
In the UK, 9 out of 10 girls and young women in schools have experienced or witnessed sexist name-calling and being sent unwanted 'dick pics' or other images of a sexual nature<sup>3</sup>. In 2021, the Everyone's Invited website collected almost 8,400 testimonies, prompting the government to ask Ofsted to carry out a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges (Topping, 2021). The Ofsted review (2021), based on over 800 surveys with children aged 13-18, revealed that girls were disproportionately affected by this issue. Girls reported that a range of harmful sexual behaviours happened 'a lot' or 'sometimes' between people their age, from sexist name-calling (92%), rumours about their sexual activity (81%), and unwanted sexual comments (80%) to being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves (80%), having images shared non-consensually (73%), feeling pressured to do sexual things that they did not

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Glitch-and-EVAW-The-Ripple-Effect-Online-abuse-during-COVID-19-Sept-2020.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See also the Gender Equality Matters project, aimed at primary schools - <https://genderequalitymatters.eu/consortium/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/statistics-sexual-violence/>



want to (68%) and unwanted touching (64%). Boys were less likely than girls to think these things happened, particularly contact forms of harmful sexual behaviour.

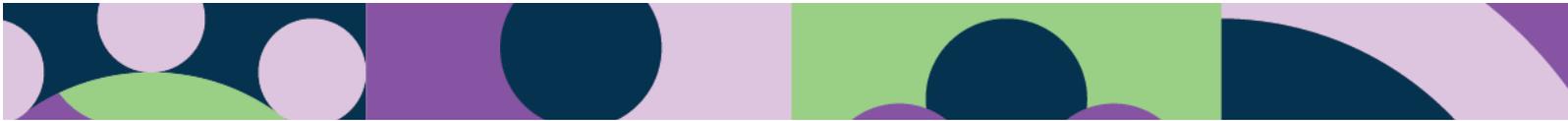
According to a Plan International report (Southgate and Russell, 2018), 66% of girls in the UK have experienced sexual attention or physical contact in a public space, 38% of girls experience verbal harassment at least once a month and 15% of girls are touched, groped or grabbed every month. A recent report on Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse among youth (Ringrose, Regehr, and Milne, 2021), also shows that image-based sexual harassment overwhelmingly impacts girls, and calls for more effective and age-appropriate digital sex education.

In Ireland, increasing rates of sexual and gender-based violence have prompted a number of legal, educational and policy responses. In 2021, the Minister for Education established a Steering Committee to review the 2013 Action Plan on Bullying and to publish a new Action Plan. The new Action Plan and related Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools are due to be launched in early December 2022. It is hoped that the new Plan and Procedures will involve collecting data on sexual harassment in schools.

The most recent and significant contribution from the Irish Government in relation to online sexual harassment and abuse is the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020 (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2020). Also known as Coco's Law, this legislation extends the scope of harassment under Irish law, and criminalises the non-consensual recording, distribution and publishing of 'intimate images' by way of new criminal offences.

In 2019 a campaign called 'No Excuses' was launched by the Department of Justice. It aimed to increase public awareness of sexual harassment and violence via mobile phones and the sending or posting of explicit images without permission (Department of Justice, 2019). The campaign ran advertisements on TV, radio, cinema and social media, and was part of a broader strategy to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

With regard to education, there is no specific topic in the curriculum that currently addresses (online) sexual harassment and abuse, but there is room for discussion of this issue in the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme. In recent years, there have been some important developments in both SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) and RSE, with the introduction of a new short course for Junior Cycle students and a new curriculum framework for the Senior Cycle (Keating et al., 2018). Irish students in primary education have also benefited from the 'Stay Safe', a programme launched in 2011 – and revised in 2015 – which covers topics related to SPHE/RSE, with a special



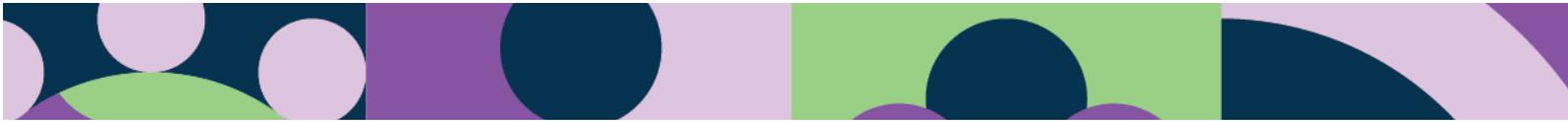
focus on personal safety, online bullying and homophobia. The DCU Anti-Bullying Centre offers a programme called FUSE, which provides lesson plans for both primary and post-primary teachers who want to discuss online harassment with their students in the classroom.

Despite these developments, there is still little data available on how SPHE/RSE teachers deal with (online) sexual and gender-based harassment and abuse in the classroom. RSE delivery in schools relies heavily on teachers' own interest and experience, and the religious ethos of many Irish schools plays a significant role in decisions about the appropriateness of resources (Keating et al., 2018). In 2018, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) put together a development group to review and propose changes to the RSE curriculum. The first step was a comprehensive review of RSE in both primary and post-primary schools, which was published in 2019 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2019). The review proposes the consideration of important aspects related to sexuality education, such as sexual consent, safe use of the internet, LGBTQ+ issues and the effects of social media use. It also presents perspectives from Irish students regarding the limitations of RSE education and pointers for future improvement.

Based on this review, a Senior Cycle toolkit has already been published with new guidelines for delivery of SPHE in the classroom. From 2021 to 2023, the SPHE/RSE curriculum is being redeveloped on the basis of public consultation with key stakeholders, with a view to developing an integrated curriculum for SPHE/RSE covering both primary and post-primary education.

We hope that the current report will help to inform this process:

- by providing new data on the extent and nature of sexual and gender-based harassment and abuse in Ireland
- by reporting on which types of classroom interventions worked best
- by presenting the perspectives and experiences of young people themselves
- by making concrete recommendations on what students need to navigate this issue



## The Study

The study had four key components:

1. An anonymous survey with 185 Transition Year students on gender and sexual online risks and harms
2. Observation of the delivery of 2 workshops (one on sexual violence and one on activism strategies to challenge this) in 2 Dublin schools to 59 Transition Year students.
3. Pre- and post-workshop short surveys
4. 10 focus groups with the 59 TY students to explore their experiences of the workshops.



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# **Anonymous Survey**

## 1. Anonymous Survey

The survey was distributed to 185 Transition Year students (15-17 years of age) in 2 co-educational Dublin schools. The gender breakdown was 86 boys, 90 girls, 3 students identifying as non-binary, 2 as transgender and 4 as other. As the numbers in the latter categories are so low, the percentages are not statistically meaningful when broken down into subcategories. We therefore include them as numbers rather than percentages. This group is referred to as TGNB+ (transgender, non-binary and other) as opposed to LGBTQ+, which refers to sexual orientation.

1 participant identified as gay and 5 as lesbian, 9.7% identified as bisexual and 10.8% identified as questioning, asexual, queer, pansexual or don't know. In other words, 20% of participants identified as non-heterosexual or questioning their sexuality. This category is referred to as LGBTQ+.

### Survey Findings

#### Mental health

Firstly, the pandemic had a greater negative impact on girls and LGBTQ+ students: 57.8% of girls and 63.6% LGBTQ+ students said that social distancing measures had significantly impacted on their mental health, compared with 30.2% of boys and 39% of heterosexual students. The mental health of transgender and non-binary students (55%) was also more negatively impacted than those identifying as male or female (31.8%).

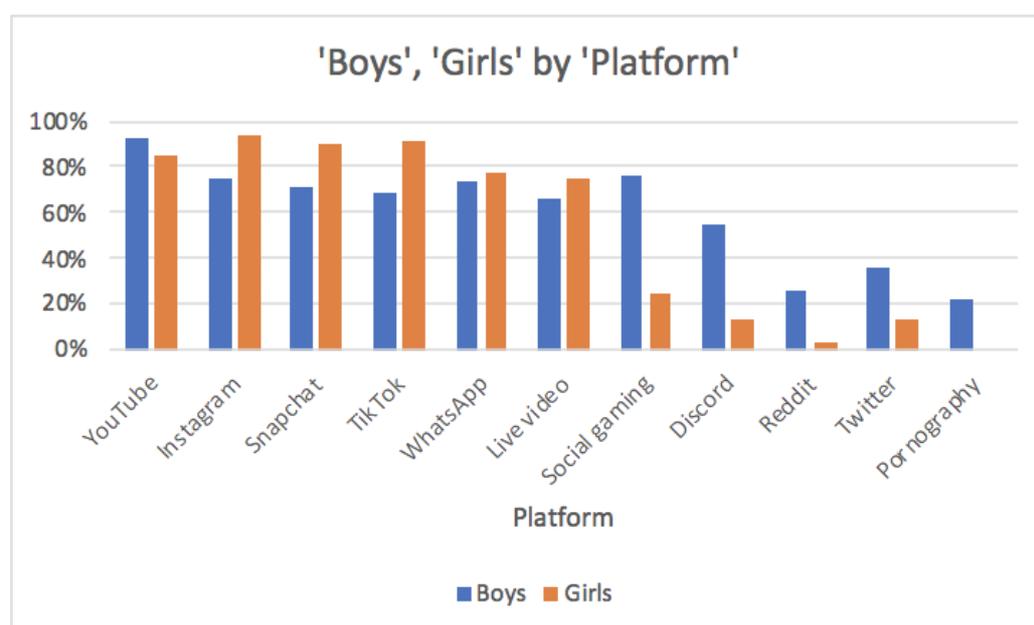
26.7% of girls said that loneliness and isolation had the greatest negative impact on their mental health, whereas for boys (30.7%) it was not being able to do things they normally would do.

LGBTQ+ students (24.7%) also cited not being able to do things they normally would do as having the greatest negative impact on their mental health, whereas equal percentages of non-binary, trans and other-gendered students (29.4%) cited loneliness and isolation and not being able to do things they normally would do as the most significant factors.

## Social Media Use

Participants were asked what platforms they had used since the start of the pandemic (March 2020). The most widely used platforms overall were YouTube (89.2%), Instagram (84.3%), Snapchat (80.5%), TikTok (80%), WhatsApp (75.7%), Live video (70.3%) and social gaming (49.2%).

There were significant gender-specific differences in relation to the most popular platforms. For girls, the most popular platforms were Instagram (93.3%), TikTok (91.1%) and Snapchat (90%); for boys, they were YouTube (93%), social gaming platforms (76.7%) and Instagram (74.4%). LGBTQ+ students favoured YouTube (90.9%), Instagram (86.4%) and WhatsApp (81.8%), while transgender and non-binary participants named YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok and SnapChat<sup>4</sup>. It is also worth noting that girls were significantly less likely than boys to use Discord (13.3%:54.6%), Reddit (3.3%:25.6%), Twitter (13.3%:36%), social gaming platforms (24.4%:76.7%) or pornography platforms (0%:22%):



Most participants reported that, since the pandemic started, their social media use rose significantly. This was most evident in the case of TikTok,

<sup>4</sup> The numbers in this category (9 students in total) are too small to be reported statistically

with 68.6% saying that they spent more time on it (86.2% of girls and 61.5% of boys), followed by live video platforms (61.7% of boys, 73.1% of girls), YouTube (65.5% of boys, 52.3% of girls), Instagram (45.1% of boys, 60.2% of girls) and Snapchat (50% of boys, 60.9% of girls). Among LGBTQ+ students, TikTok also saw the most significant increase in use (73.8%), followed by live video platforms (69.2%) and YouTube (61%).

In terms of platform security, girls were considerably more aware than boys of Snapchat, Instagram and TikTok security, privacy and reporting functions (i.e. how to set account to private, unfollow a user, allow or block comments, filter comments, mute a user from your feed, choose Close Friends settings, restrict a user, or report posts or profiles). Security and privacy awareness overall is lower on TikTok but girls are still considerably more aware than boys of TikTok security/privacy and reporting functions, especially reporting and blocking.

### Participant experiences of abuse and harassment online

Survey participants were asked about their online experiences since Covid-19 began and whether the frequency of these had changed since the pandemic started. These experiences were categorised in four sets of questions, which are reported in four tables below (one for boys / girls, one for LGBTQ+ / heterosexual students = a total of 8 tables).

Category 1: Boys / Girls (*Table continues on the next page*)

Experience	Boys	Girls	Experienced more since covid - Boys	Experienced more since covid - Girls
Cyberstalking	9.3%	11.1%	5.8%	18.9%
Offensive or mean comments/messages	23.3%	17.8%	12.8%	24.4%
Being made fun of or humiliated (e.g. 'lad banter')	32.5%	15.5%	16.3%	25.5%
Receiving threats of physical harm	13.9%	3.3%	5.8%	12.2%

Had embarrassing details shared about you	9.3%	15.5%	7%	7.8%
Being cancelled	4.6%	4.4%	3.5%	4.4%
Being ganged up on (swarming, organised trolling or flaming)	13.9%	7.8%	4.6%	10%
Gaslighting (being made to question your experiences and emotions)	13.9%	14.4%	11.6%	23.3%
Having an account hacked	13.9%	20%	10.5%	24.4%
Doxing (leaking of personal details such as addresses)	3.5%	1.1%	1.2%	3.3%
None of the above	46.5%	56.7%	-	-

The above table shows that girls were more likely than boys to experience cyberstalking, have embarrassing details shared about them, be gaslit or have an account hacked. Boys were more likely to receive offensive or mean comments/messages, be made fun of or humiliated, receive threats of physical harm, be cancelled, be ganged up on or be doxed.

However, the frequency of all these experiences increased significantly more for girls than for boys during Covid, in most cases by twice as much. For example, while 12.8% of boys said that offensive or mean comments/messages had increased since the pandemic, 24.4% of girls reported an increase in this. Similarly, 11.6% of boys reported an increase in gaslighting, compared with 23.3% of girls.

Most of these negative experiences happened on Snapchat (33.3% of participants), Instagram (16%) and social gaming platforms (12.3%). For the girls, most of these negative experiences took place on Snapchat (41.7%) and Instagram (33.3%). For the boys, it was Snapchat (25%), social gaming platforms (22.7%) and Discord (20.4%).

When asked if the experience upset them, only 28.3% of the boys said yes, compared with 61.1% of the girls. Girls were much more likely to discuss the incident with a parent (20% compared to 5.9% of boys) or a

friend (35.6% compared to 25.5% of boys). Reasons for not reporting to an adult were more or less the same: 20% of boys and 24.1% % of girls didn't think it would help, while 41.4% of girls and 45.7% of boys said they would prefer to sort it out themselves.

#### Category 1: LGBTQ+ / heterosexual students

Experience	LGBTQ+	Heterosexual	Experienced more since covid – LGBTQ+	Experienced more since covid - Heterosexual
Cyberstalking	11%	9.2%	13.6%	7.8%
Offensive or mean comments/messages	27.7%	19.1%	9%	12.7%
Being made fun of or humiliated (e.g. 'lad banter')	13.6%	25.5%	6.8%	14.2%
Receiving threats of physical harm	4.5%	9.2%	9%	5%
Had embarrassing details shared about you	13.6%	11.3%	2.3%	4.3%
Being cancelled	4.5%	4.2%	0	2.8%
Being ganged up on (swarming, organised trolling or flaming)	6.8%	11.3%	2.3%	5.7%
Gaslighting (being made to question your experiences and emotions)	25%	10.6%	18.2%	9.2%
Having an account hacked	20.0%	14.9%	18.2%	9.9%
Doxing (leaking of personal details such as addresses)	4.5%	1.4%	2.3%	1.4%
None of the above	54.5%	53.2%	-	-

LGBQ+ students experienced higher levels of all of the above issues than their heterosexual peers, with the exception of being made fun of or humiliated, receiving threats of physical harm and being ganged up on. They were significantly more likely to be gaslit, doxed or receive offensive or mean comments/messages. 1 TGNB+ student received offensive or mean comments and 1 was subjected to gaslighting. For LGBQ+ students, the frequency of cyberstalking, receiving threats of physical harm, gaslighting, having an account hacked and doxing increased more since Covid-19 began than for their heterosexual peers.

For LGBQ+ students, most of these experiences happened on Instagram (44.4%) and TikTok (22.2%). 57.9% said they were upset by them, compared to 39% of heterosexual students.

#### Category 2: Boys / Girls

Experience	Boys	Girls	Experienced more since covid - Boys	Experienced more since covid - Girls
Sexual shaming (e.g. being called a 'slut' or 'player')	2.3%	12.2%	3.5%	8.9%
Body shaming or mean comments online about the way you look	6.9%	10%	8.2%	8.9%
Rumours, gossip or lies spread online about your sexual behaviour (e.g. 'bait out' pages)	3.4%	10%	7%	12.2%
Having your masculinity challenged (e.g. being called a 'pussy' or not 'man enough')	15.1%	1.1%	10.5%	2.2%
Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or 'jokes' about your gender	2.3%	7.8%	5.8%	6.7%
Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or 'jokes' about your sexual orientation (e.g. being called 'gay' or 'fag' as an insult)	11.6%	5.5%	9.3%	3.3%
Being 'outed' (having your sexual orientation or gender identity disclosed without your permission)	1.5%	4.4%	2.3%	3.3%
None of the above	72%	76.7%	-	-

With the exception of ‘Having your masculinity challenged’ and receiving ‘offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or ‘jokes’ about your sexual orientation’, girls were significantly more likely to be subjected to all of these experiences. In particular, girls were 5 times more likely than boys to be sexually shamed, and 3 times more likely to have rumours, gossip or lies spread online about their sexual behaviour or to be at the receiving end of offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or ‘jokes’ about their gender.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, all of these experiences increased more for girls than boys, with the exception of ‘Having your masculinity challenged’ and receiving ‘offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or ‘jokes’ about your sexual orientation’.

For most people (46.5%) these experiences occurred on Snapchat, followed by TikTok (16.3%) and Instagram (11.6%). 25% of boys said these experiences occurred on Snapchat compared with 63.6% of girls.

52.4% of girls said the experience(s) upset them compared with only 19% of boys. Only 19% of boys said they discussed the experience with a friend or parent (4.7%) compared with 47.8% of girls (4.3%). 52.9% of girls and 25% of boys said they didn’t think reporting to a platform would help.

#### Category 2: LGBTQ+ / Heterosexual students

(Table continues on the next page)

Experience	LGBQ+	Heterosexual	Experienced more since covid – LGBQ+	Experienced more since covid - Heterosexual
Sexual shaming (e.g. being called a ‘slut’ or ‘player’)	6.8%	7.8%	4.5%	6.4%
Body shaming or mean comments online about the way you look	4.5%	9.9%	11.4%	7%
Rumours, gossip or lies spread online about your sexual behaviour (e.g. ‘bait out’ pages)	9%	5.7%	11.4%	8.5%

Having your masculinity challenged (e.g. being called a 'pussy' or not 'man enough')	9%	7.8%	13.6%	4.2%
Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or 'jokes' about your gender	6.8%	4.9%	15.9%	3.5%
Offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or 'jokes' about your sexual orientation (e.g. being called 'gay' or 'fag' as an insult)	22.7%	4.9%	13.6%	3.5%
Being 'outed' (having your sexual orientation or gender identity disclosed without your permission)	15.9%	0%	9%	0.7%
None of the above	63.6%	84.4%	-	-

In the TGNB+ category, 1 person received offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or 'jokes' about their gender, 1 person received offensive and/or degrading messages, comments or 'jokes' about their sexual orientation and 2 people were 'outed'.

LGBQ+ students were significantly more likely to be subjected to these experiences than their heterosexual peers, and they had also increased much more for LGBQ+ students since Covid-19 began. Indeed, with the exception of sexual shaming, all of the above experiences had increased much more for LGBQ+ than for heterosexual students since the pandemic began.

For LGBQ+ students, these experiences took place mostly on Instagram (28.6%), Snapchat (35.7%) and TikTok (14.3%). For heterosexual students, they occurred mostly on Snapchat (50%), TikTok (16.7%) and online games consoles (10%).

42.9% of LGBQ+ students said they were upset by the experience(s), compared with 33.3% of heterosexual students.

### Category 3: Boys / Girls

Experience	Boys	Girls	Experienced more since covid - Boys	Experienced more since covid - Girls
Online threats of a sexual nature (e.g. rape threats)	4.6%	2.2%	7.2%	8.6%
Being pressured to send sexually explicit photos/videos of yourself	1.2%	18.8%	7.1%	40%
Being blackmailed/coerced into engaging in online/offline sexual acts (sextortion)	0%	3.3%	0%	11.4%
Someone attempting to lure you to give money or details to be sextorted (honey trapping)	2.3%	3.3%	14.3%	11.4%
Being sent flattering messages (e.g. about your looks, maturity, sexuality) by an adult stranger	5.8%	28.9%	21.4%	48.6%
Manipulation or deception by an adult stranger (e.g. catfishing)	3.5%	3.3%	21.4%	2.9%
Being prompted to move platforms to buy sexual subscriptions (e.g. gamer girl)	5.8%	8.9%	28.6%	11.4%
None of the above	82.5%	58.9%	-	-

With the exception of 'Online threats of a sexual nature' and 'Manipulation or deception by an adult stranger', proportionally more girls than boys experienced all of these issues.

Significantly more girls (18.8%) than boys (1.2%) said they were pressured to send sexually explicit photos/videos of themselves, and significantly more girls (28.9%) than boys (5.8%) were sent flattering messages (e.g. about their looks, maturity, sexuality) by an adult stranger. Both of these experiences had also increased massively for girls since Covid-19 started; by 40% in the case of being pressured to send sexually explicit

photos/videos of themselves, and by 48.6% in the case of being sent flattering messages by an adult stranger. 40% of these incidents took place on Snapchat, and 33.3% on Instagram.

The increasing frequency of sextortion, catfishing and being prompted to buy sexual subscriptions for both boys and girls since the pandemic began is an issue of concern, and calls for more research into the specific nature of these experiences.

### Category 3: LGBTQ+ / Heterosexual students

Experience	LGBTQ+	Heterosexual	Experienced more since covid – LGBTQ+	Experienced more since covid - Heterosexual
Online threats of a sexual nature (e.g. rape threats)	0%	4.2%	4.5%	1.4%
Being pressured to send sexually explicit photos/videos of yourself	13.6%	9.2%	13.6%	7.8%
Being blackmailed / coerced into engaging in online / offline sexual acts (sextortion)	4.5%	0.7%	2.3%	2.1%
Someone attempting to lure you to give money or details to be sextorted (honey trapping)	2.3%	3.5%	6.8%	2.8%
Being sent flattering messages (e.g. about your looks, maturity, sexuality) by an adult stranger	25%	14.9%	22.7%	7.8%
Manipulation or deception by an adult stranger (e.g. catfishing)	2.3%	4.2%	2.3%	2.1%
Being prompted to move platforms to buy sexual subscriptions (e.g. gamergirl)	15.9%	4.2%	13.6%	1.4%
None of the above	54.5%	75.2%	-	-

LGBQ+ students experienced ‘Being sent flattering messages’, ‘Being prompted to move platforms to buy sexual subscriptions’, ‘Being pressured to send sexually explicit photos/videos of themselves’ and ‘Being blackmailed/coerced into engaging in online/offline sexual acts’ significantly more than their heterosexual peers. Heterosexual students were more likely than LGBQ+ students to experience ‘Online threats of a sexual nature’, ‘Someone attempting to lure you to give money or details to be sextorted’ and ‘Manipulation or deception by an adult stranger’.

For LGBQ+ students, the frequency of all of the above experiences had increased more than it did for their heterosexual counterparts since the pandemic started. For most of them, these experiences happened on Instagram (38.9%), Snapchat (27.8%) and TikTok (16.7%). For heterosexual students, these experiences occurred mostly on Snapchat (46.7%) and Instagram (30%).

It is worth noting that at least one TGNB+ student had experienced all of these issues, with the exception of online threats of a sexual nature and Being prompted to move platforms to buy sexual subscriptions. 2 TGNB+ students reported that the frequency of being pressured to send sexually explicit photos/videos of themselves had increased since the pandemic started.

30% of heterosexual students said they were upset by the experience(s), compared with 44.4% of LGBQ+ students.

Category 4: Boys / Girls (*Table continues on the next page*)

Experience	Boys	Girls	Experienced more since covid - Boys	Experienced more since covid - Girls
Sexualised comments on social media posts (e.g. Instagram photos, TikTok videos)	6.6%	14.4%	18.1%	21.9%
Unwanted sexual messages online (e.g. Instagram DMs, Snapchat messages)	13.9%	35.5%	31.8%	41.5%
Unwanted sexual photos or videos online	18.5%	35.3%	31.2%	28.1%

Sexual 'jokes' about you or to you (e.g. lad banter)	11.6%	20.9%	22.7%	24.4%
Being rated on attractiveness/sexual activity	10.4%	14.4%	22.7%	27.5%
Someone altering an image of you to make it sexual	2.3%	1.1%	13.6%	5.1%
Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against you	1.2%	5.5%	4.5%	7.5%
Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against your avatar or game character	4.6%	0	4.5%	5%
None of the above	68.6%	51.1%		

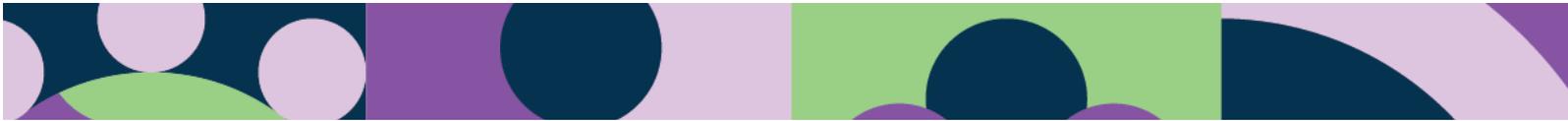
Girls experienced all of these issues more than boys, with the exception of 'Someone altering an image of you to make it sexual'. Girls were twice as likely to receive sexualised comments on social media posts, to receive unwanted sexual messages online and to be the target of sexual jokes. The frequency of all of these experiences increased more for girls than boys, with the exception of 'Someone altering an image of you to make it sexual' and 'Unwanted sexual photos or videos online.'

Again, most of the experiences happened on Snapchat (40.3% of girls and 31.6% of boys), followed by Instagram. For boys, Discord and online game consoles were also mentioned. 35.1% of girls were upset by these experiences, compared with 21% of boys.

#### Category 4: LGBTQ+ / Heterosexual students

Experience	LGBTQ+	Heterosexual	Experienced more since covid – LGBTQ+	Experienced more since covid - Heterosexual
Sexualised comments on social media posts (e.g. Instagram photos, TikTok videos)	13.6%	9.2%	6.8%	0%
Unwanted sexual messages online (e.g. Instagram DMs, Snapchat messages)	38.6%	20.6%	20.4%	0.7%
Unwanted sexual photos or videos online	35.3%	25.9%	33.3%	30.5%
Sexual ‘jokes’ about you or to you (e.g. lad banter)	22.7%	13.5%	13.6%	0.7%
Being rated on attractiveness/sexual activity	18.2%	9.9%	13.6%	0.7%
Someone altering an image of you to make it sexual	0%	2.1%	2.3%	0%
Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against you	2.3%	3.5%	0%	0%
Someone describing or visually representing an unwanted sexual act against your avatar or game character	2.3%	2.1%	0%	0%
None of the above	45.4%	65.2%	-	-

With the exception of the last 3 experiences, LGBTQ+ students experienced all of the above issues in significantly higher numbers than their heterosexual peers. With the exception of the last 2 experiences, the frequency of these issues had also increased far more for LGBTQ+ students since the pandemic started.



2 TGNB+ students experienced 'unwanted sexual messages online' and one said the frequency of this had increased since the pandemic began. 1 TGNB+ student experienced sexual 'jokes' about them, and also said this had increased since Covid-19.

For heterosexual students most of these experiences took place on Snapchat (48.7%) and Instagram (30.8%), whereas for LGBTQ+ students they occurred mostly on Instagram (42.1%), Snapchat (21%) and Discord (15.8%).

36.8% of LGBTQ+ students were upset by the experience(s), compared to 28.9% of heterosexual students.



2

**The  
Workshops**

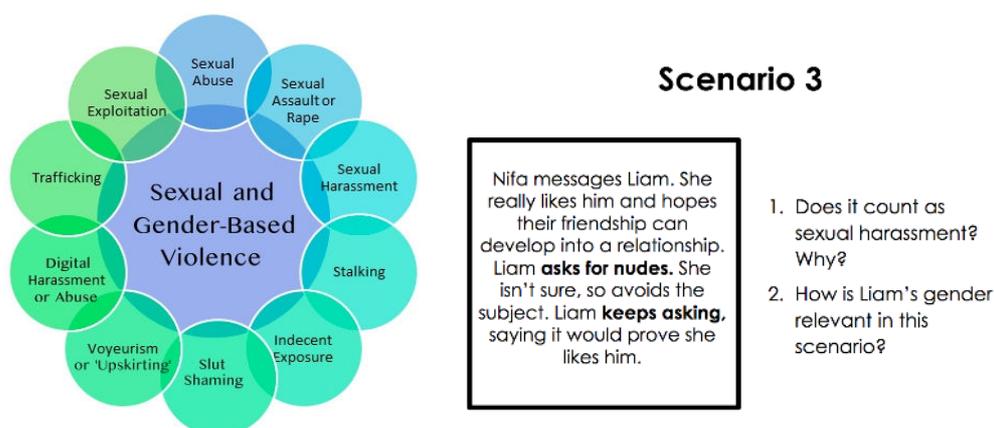
## 2. The Workshops

### Methodology

The Workshops were co-produced by our UK project partners and the Institute of Sex Education in London. Workshop one covered Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and workshop two was about Activating for Change. These resources are available on the ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) website<sup>5</sup>.

Pedagogically, the workshops use relatable scenarios, post-it note activities, break-out discussions and debates, as well as art activism. The 3 participating SPHE teachers were trained by the Institute of Sex Education on delivery of the 2 workshops. The teachers delivered them in their respective schools with groups of approximately 28 students. The researchers observed the workshops but did not participate.

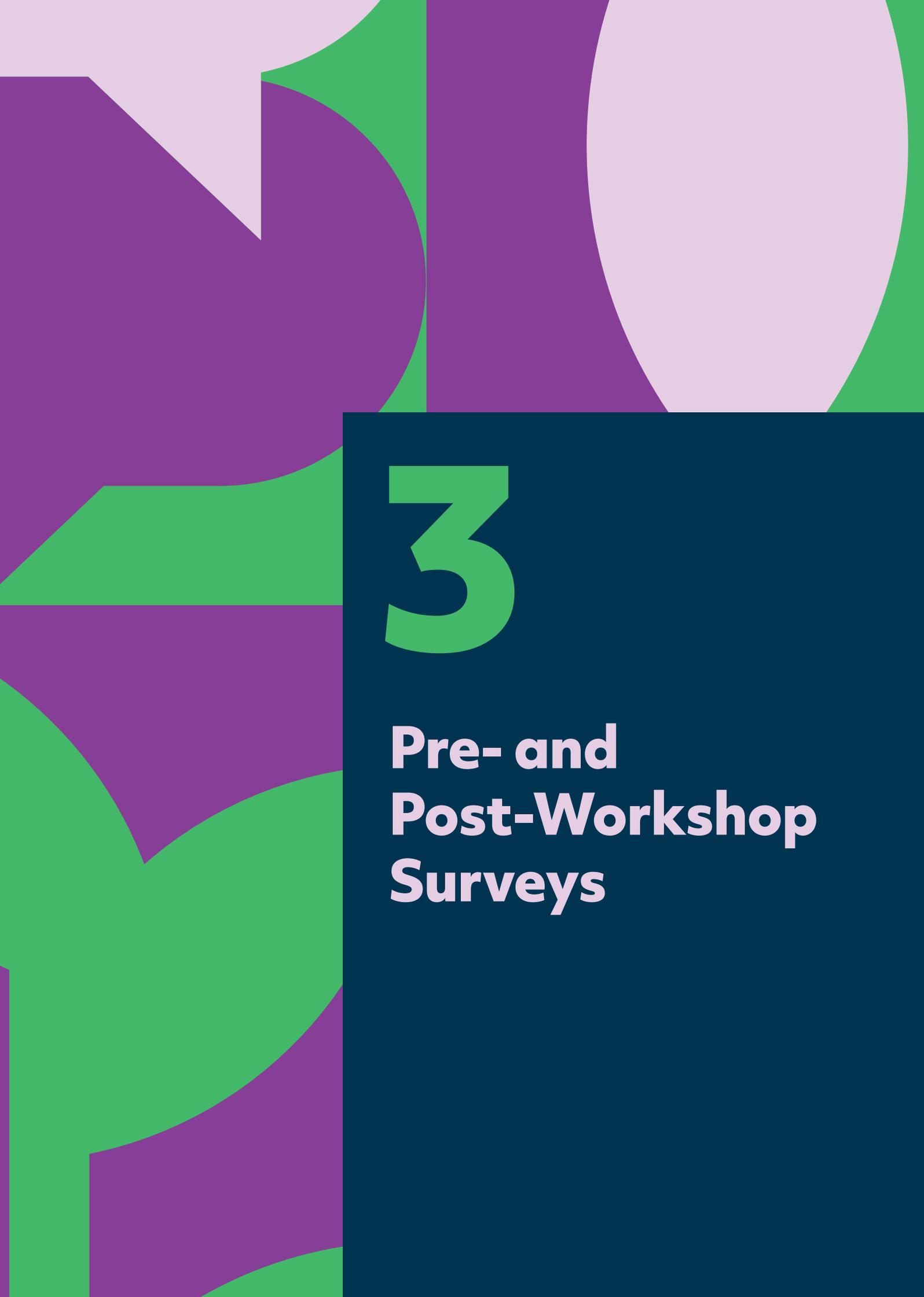
Fig. 1: Sample materials from Workshop 1



<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ascl.org.uk/Microsites/IBSHA/Resources>

Fig. 2: Templates for art-based activism from Workshop 2





# 3

## **Pre- and Post-Workshop Surveys**

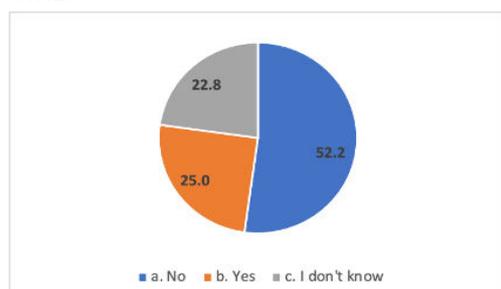
### 3. Pre- and Post-Workshop Surveys

Short surveys before and after the workshops were used to gather information on participants' experiences of educational initiatives on sexual violence, to assess their level of knowledge, and to evaluate the impact of the workshops on their understanding of the topic and future actions.

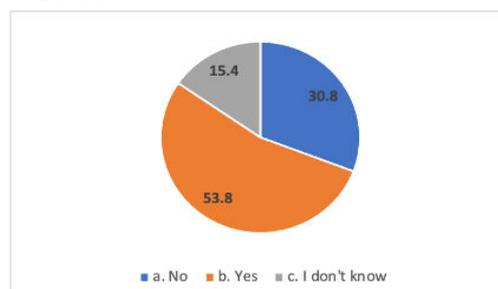
#### Pre-workshop knowledge

The majority of girls and around one third of boys said that they had never been taught in school about sexual violence. However, it is important to note that, before they attended the workshops, many participants understood sexual violence as related only to physical violence, such as sexual assault or rape.

GIRLS



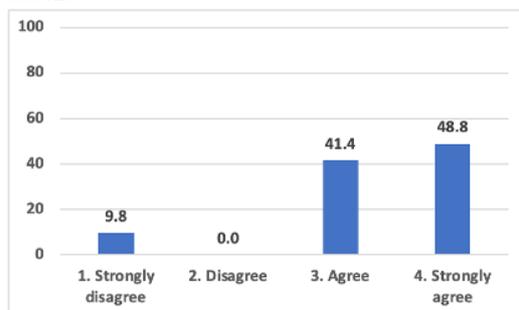
BOYS



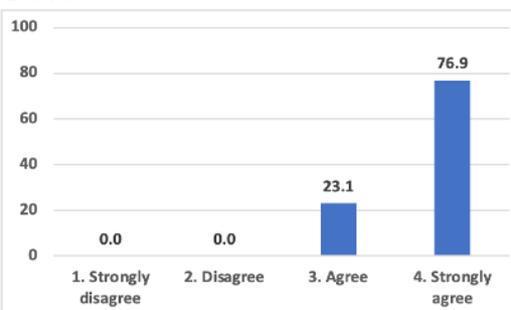
#### Have you been taught in school about sexual violence?

Overall, boys showed more confidence about how much they already knew about sexual consent, sexual violence and online safety. However, during the workshops and in the focus groups, many of them demonstrated less knowledge on these topics than they originally assumed. Although girls were less confident than boys that they had knowledge about 'digital defence strategies' to stay safe online, their survey responses showed that they were in fact more aware than boys of the security and privacy features of the various social media platforms.

## GIRLS

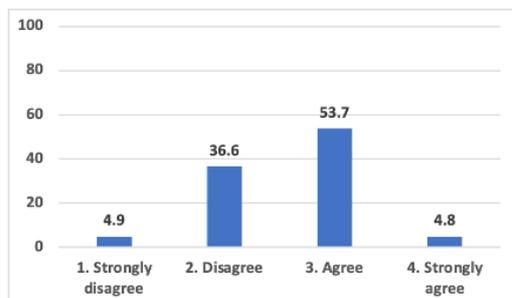


## BOYS

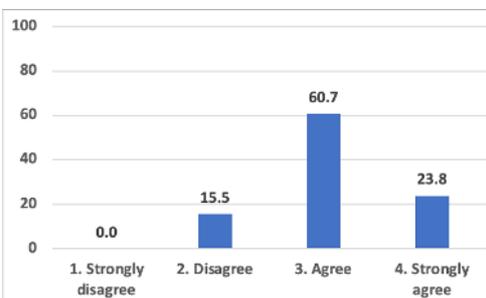


**'I know how to practice consent in my relations with others'**

## GIRLS

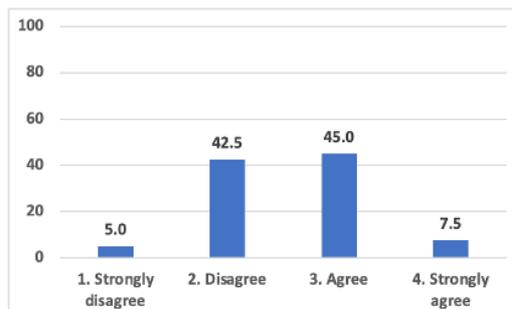


## BOYS

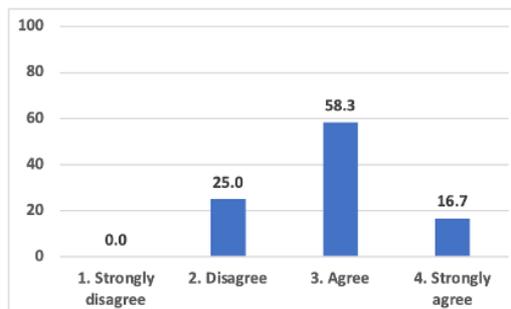


**'I know what digital sexual violence is and the types of actions it describes'**

## GIRLS



## BOYS



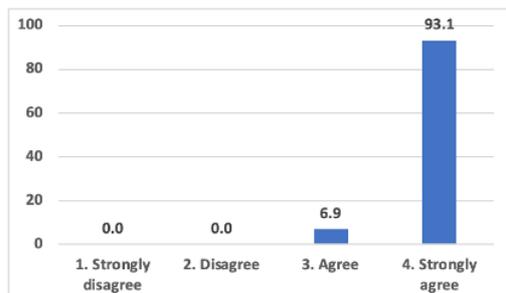
**'I have knowledge about 'digital defence strategies' to stay safe online'**

## Post-workshop knowledge

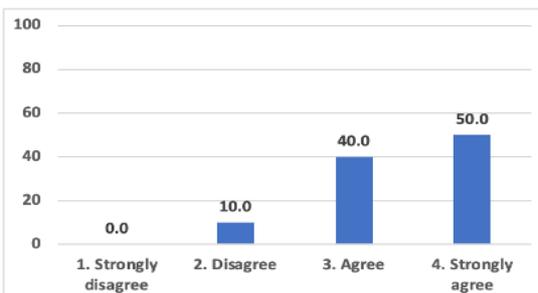
Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the impact of the workshops on their understanding of sexual violence. Girls were more confident, with 100% saying that the workshops had improved their knowledge of what sexual violence is and the different forms it takes. 10% of boys disagreed with this statement and 20% of boys disagreed that the workshop had improved their understanding of how gender, sexuality and sexual violence interrelate, and

which groups sexual violence most impacts. It is this 10-20% of boys that future workshops must seek to engage.

### GIRLS

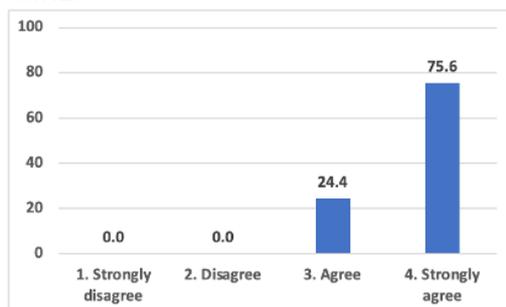


### BOYS

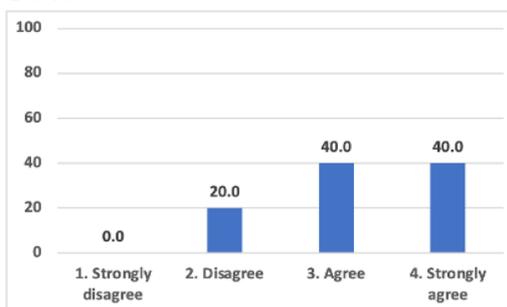


**'The workshop has improved my knowledge of what sexual violence is and the different forms it takes'**

### GIRLS

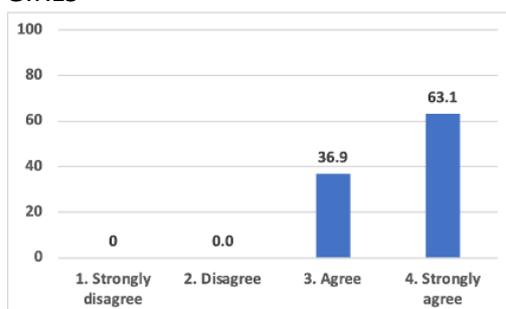


### BOYS

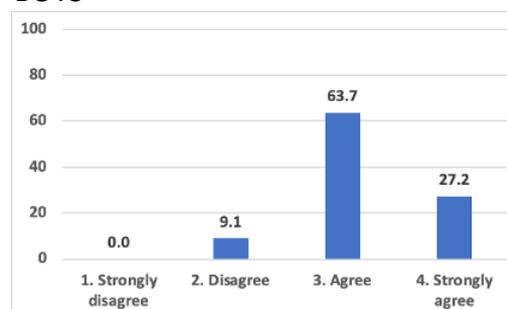


**'The workshop has improved my understanding of how gender, sexuality and sexual violence interrelate, and which groups sexual violence most impacts'**

### GIRLS



### BOYS



**'I will apply the content of the workshop to my relations with others'**



# 4

## The focus groups

## 4. The focus groups

In this section, we discuss the main themes which emerged from the 10 focus groups that we conducted with the students (n59) who had participated in the workshops. The first two themes address the content and format of the workshops and, related to this, participants' opinions on RSE. In the subsequent section we discuss the key thematic issues that emerged from the focus groups, namely de-normalization, boys showing empathy, the political economy of nudes, the sexual double standard and victim blaming, unpacking 'toxic masculinity' and men as victims, and suggestions for improvement.

### Workshop Content and Format

Student responses to the workshops were overwhelmingly positive. In particular, they commended their interactive format and facilitation of open discussion, relatable scenarios, definitions of different forms of abuse and de-normalizing of practices to which they had become desensitised. This feedback supports calls for an experience-near and co-produced approach to RSE (Renold and McGeeney, 2017), which is informed by young people's lived experiences and perspectives.

'I feel like, when you have a say and you're more involved, then it makes it more beneficial to everyone ...if you hear more of people's points of view than your own, it furthers your knowledge and everyone else's.' (Focus Group 4, Participant 3, Girl)

'I liked that it was interactive. We got to say our own thoughts rather than being talked at.' (Focus Group 4, Participant 2, Girl)

Participants welcomed the scenario-based approach because the scenarios are relatable and realistic, and because they facilitated lively discussion in break-out groups.

'Everything that was discussed yesterday was really important. And anything that happened that we talked about yesterday was really common.' (Focus Group 1, Participant 2, Boy)

'I think the scenarios were quite real as well. Like a lot of the scenarios I've seen happening to my friends or to people in real life.' (Focus Group 4, Participant 2, Girl)



Another recurring theme in the focus groups was the importance of definitions, and that the workshops had given students a vocabulary and conceptual frameworks with which to understand sexual and gender-based violence. We did not expect participants to be so interested in this more pedagogic aspect, i.e. defining words and concepts, but it became clear that this knowledge was highly valued. In particular, students appreciated understanding that sexual violence was a continuum of behaviours, and recognising that some forms are not legally recognized as sexual harassment (e.g. voyeurism and catcalling versus upskirting and cyberflashing).

Interviewer: 'Did you learn anything that you didn't know already?'  
'Yeah, the actual, official laws' (Focus Group 9, Participant 2, Girl)

'Because when you think about sexual violence, it's normally just rape and stuff. But in the workshop you realised that it's catcalling and online stuff like images, so you realise that's part of sexual violence as well. But before the workshop if someone asked me like what sexual violence was, I'd just say rape. But it's more than that, yeah.' (Focus Group 9, Participant 1, Girl)

'I guess it kind of showed that some situations were in fact sexual violence. And not just something that would just happen as a regular thing...that was kind of surprising sometimes.' (Focus Group 5, Participant 1, Boy)

Also key here was the training the teachers received, which gave them the necessary structure, vocabulary and confidence to facilitate the workshops. Many of the students expressed surprise at how comfortable their teachers were with the material, how relaxed the conversations were, and how important it was to have an engaged and empathetic facilitator. Their comments suggest that the success of this pedagogical approach is largely dependent on how prepared teachers are to listen, facilitate and moderate complex conversations.

'I think the workshop was really good. But I was really surprised at how much people were comfortable talking about it...because normally everyone would just be silent if topics like that came up.' (Focus Group 2, Participant 3, Girl)

'It was a lot more informative than I expected. I expected it to be more like what we've done in school...I expected it to be a lot less condensed, a lot more sugar-coated. But it was very blunt, which I think was a really good thing.' (Focus Group 6, Participant 2, Girl)

'I feel like teachers, they don't really go into much detail about it. And some teachers are like awkward about some things. And it kind of makes the whole room silent. In the workshop we did, everyone was just speaking. It was everyone sharing their knowledge and it was good. SPHE is usually awkward.' (Focus Group 6, Participant 3, Girl)

## Problems with RSE

Most participants were dissatisfied with the provision of sex education in school or felt the quality of delivery depended on having a committed teacher, a finding which is supported by recent Irish research (Lodge, Duffy and Feeney, 2022). Students cited teacher discomfort, unrelatable content, unsatisfactory class formats (being ‘talked at’) and lack of LGBTQ+ inclusivity as the main problems. It is clear that the RSE programme cannot keep pace with the rate of technological development and the intensely mediated nature of young people’s lives. In addition to this, the pandemic had further disrupted delivery.

‘Like SPHE, it’s doing the bare minimum I think. Like it’s really basic. It wouldn’t be nearly as intricate as this workshop. We wouldn’t learn about nearly as much in regular SPHE class.’ (Focus Group 4, Participant 1, boy)

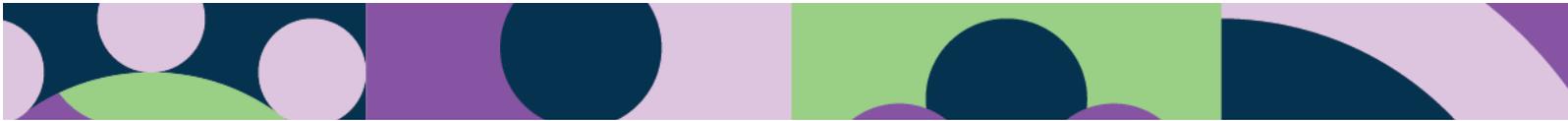
Students expressed frustration with the format of RSE classes, claiming they were rarely given opportunities to communicate their opinions or discuss issues openly. Some also mentioned teachers’ awkwardness, reliance on the textbook and reluctance to address sensitive topics, which effectively shut down any scope for collaboration or exchange of ideas.

‘There was an element...you were just kind of told what to do. Do this, do that. And there was no personal opinion involved and I think that made it hard for people to discuss it or get anything out of it. (Focus Group 2, Participant 3, Girl)

‘A lot of it is very like, it’s not as interactive. You have books for SPHE from First to Third Year. And you read these scenarios and you’re just told to write about it instead of having an open discussion about it.’ (Focus Group 4, Participant 1, Boy)

‘And I think as well, in SPHE it was very much from a book. If we were talking about consent or anything, it was like ‘open page 34’ and it’s not an open discussion.’ (Focus Group 2, Participant 2, Girl)

In terms of content, participants complained that RSE classes were too basic and overly focussed on biology, risk of pregnancy and a perception of sex as negative and dangerous. For many, the workshops were the first time they had ever encountered issues such as sexting, image-based sexual abuse, (digital) consent, the sexual double standard and victim blaming in an educational context. In particular, they felt that consent education came much too late and should be addressed in primary school.



'I think yesterday, the class, the workshop class yesterday was the first class that I think I've had, from what I remember, that we talked about dick pics, nudes, that kind of thing.' (Focus Group 1, Participant 2, Boy)

'I think that even just in SPHE, the topics are kind of lightly touched on and it was never getting into the depths of things.' (Focus Group 2, Participant 3, Girl)

'I suppose this workshop was quite up-to-date with what actually happens. Like in SPHE they're quite off sometimes in scenarios. So, for this one they were actually accurate. It was interesting that way.' (Focus Group 8, Participant 2, Girl)

'Because once you turn like 10-12, these things all start happening all around you and it happens to you, even at that age. And that's primary school age...it should be talked about much more because then, it would happen less.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 2, Girl)

Finally, RSE is not perceived as very inclusive as it mainly assumes sex to be heterosexual, leaving little room for discussions involving the LGBTQ+ community. Participants pointed out that all groups should be included, embracing the diversity of behaviours, attitudes and sexual expectations.

'I think we should probably have a bit more focus on other dynamics as well, like LGBT. You know, a lot of it is about straight relationships too.' (Focus Group 2, Participant 2, Girl)

'It's really grounded around heterosexual relationships as well. That needs to be improved.' (Focus Group 4, Participant 2, Boy)

## Key learning from the focus groups

### De-normalisation

A recurrent theme, which became something of an ‘aha’ moment for girls in particular, was the de-normalisation of a range of practices to which they had become desensitised. These included being sent unsolicited ‘dick pics’, being pressured to send nudes and the threat of nudes being shared. Their comments confirmed the statistics produced by the survey, which show that girls were much more likely than boys to experience these forms of harassment:

‘Yeah, I feel like, hearing it from your friends and all around you, and it happens so much, about spreading nudes, sexual violence, harassment. We’ve kind of normalised it and we’re like OK, well this is supposed to happen, it’s going to happen, it’s inevitable in some shape or form. And this kind of workshop kind of taught me it shouldn’t happen, it’s very sad. It shouldn’t happen.’ (Focus Group 4, Participant 3, Girl)

‘Yeah, definitely in recent years I feel like it’s become normal. Like if you’re sent one you’re like Oh!... but I was reminded how not normal it is. And how weird it is just to be sent that out of nowhere.’ (Focus Group 9, Participant 3, Girl)

‘I feel like stuff like maybe catcalling is not analysed a lot. And in the workshop, you talk about it more and realise like it’s not OK and it shouldn’t happen. But it’s just normalised, so you’re just like Oh well, it happens all the time. But in the workshop, it’s like it’s not ok, it shouldn’t happen all the time.’ (Focus Group 9, Participant 3, Girl)

There was also a strong sense of relief among many of the girls that the boys had been exposed to their experiences and perspectives, but also that they had an opportunity to hear what the boys thought:

‘Like none of those statistics surprised me or my friends. But I feel like it would surprise a lot of the guys and a lot of the boys would be like ‘Wow, it’s as common as this?’ (Focus Group 8, Participant 2, Girl)

‘Sometimes I wouldn’t know or hear all the boys’ opinions because I might not talk to them about it. I’d usually talk to my friends that are girls about it. So, it was interesting to hear what they thought as well.’ (Focus Group 3, Participant 2, Girl)

### Boys showing empathy

For many girls, it was particularly important to see boys taking on the workshop statistics and realising their lack of knowledge about sexual violence was attributable to the fact that they did not personally experience it in the same ways or frequencies:

'Well, you'd be talking to the girls after and they'd tell you how much they get catcalled walking down the street...I didn't realise it was an everyday thing' (Focus Group 2, Participant 4, Boy)

'I knew things would happen but not as much. And not how bad others feel about it. The winking thing on the bus, that one I didn't think would make anyone feel that uncomfortable but it did.' (Focus Group 2, Participant 1, Boy)

'Yeah, it was good because you get what the girls would feel and what the boys would feel.' (Focus Group 2, Participant 3, Boy)

'I mean, yeah. Even on a normal day, you don't want an unsolicited picture of someone's penis. It's just weird.' (Focus Group 8, Participant 5, Boy)

Most participants also agreed that receiving unsolicited nudes or having your ass slapped were generally not the same for boys because they are not as sexualised as girls and because there is not the same level of intimidation involved:

'It is kind of different because girls' bums are more sexualised than men's.' (Focus Group 2, Participant 4, Boy)

'I don't think boys get sexualised as much. So, to them it probably would be a joke.' (Focus Group 2, Participant 2, Girl)

## The political economy of nudes, the sexual double standard and victim blaming

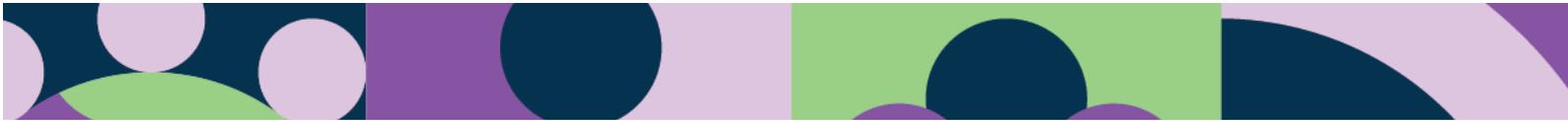
Although students generally felt that the exchange of experiences and perspectives was positive, some also commented about divisive moments in the workshops. These revolved around two components, namely the Plan International video about street harassment<sup>6</sup> and Scenario 4 (Sasha and Jacob are dating and consensually share intimate photos. They split up and Sasha shares a dick pic of Jacob with her friends, joking 'he wasn't worth it anyway!').

In response to the video, some of the boys had instigated a discussion about the varying levels of seriousness associated with the different forms of abuse (e.g. winking and staring versus cat-calling or upskirting), which some of the girls felt was inappropriate.

'I feel like unless you're in the situation, you don't understand how it feels. And I think [Boy] was trying to say that the bus one was like the least worst. But I'd say that's one of the worst.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 4, Girl)

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdn15-t7kg0>



'I also think like ranking it would also be like invalidating people's stories, because they will have trauma from that. They will be affected by it in future. It's not something that just goes away.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 2, Girl)

'Yeah, like they were ranking how bad the video was of the different stuff, that was quite interesting. And I think also, when we were talking about the whole 'dick pic' thing, they were going straight to 'what would happen to me?' I found that quite interesting as well.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 4, Girl)

These moments of anger erupted around three key issues: the political economy of nudes, the sexual double standard and victim blaming. In the above exchange, the girls' criticism of the boys' ranking of the video led directly into their recollection of the discussion surrounding Scenario 4. While all students agreed that Sasha shouldn't have shared the photo, the girls felt that what she did was not as bad as when boys share nudes of their (ex-)girlfriends, whereas the boys felt it was equally bad. In this discussion the boys believed it was unfair that they would be castigated, whereas if a girl did it, it wasn't perceived as so serious. According to the girls, this is because Sasha was looking for emotional support from her friends rather than trying to threaten or intimidate Jacob, and because she knew her girlfriends would not share it on. The girls also pointed out that the reputational damage associated with leaked nudes was not the same for boys and girls:

'The girl would probably lose a lot of social standing, a lot of friends, she'd get a lot of slut shaming as well. Whereas the guy would probably get a tiny bit of teasing and maybe some actual claps on the back.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 1, Girl)

This discussion led to a conversation about the gendered power dynamics underpinning image exchange, whereby everybody agreed that boys share nudes mainly to show off. In all of the focus groups, students said that girls rarely or never share unsolicited sexual images and rarely come across nudes or 'dick pics' sent by their female friends. When asked why boys did it, participants said it gives them 'bragging rights', i.e. a sense of status and validation among their peers. It also emerged that the more familiar the victim is to the friend group, the more valuable the bragging rights. Girls in particular understood these behaviours as embedded in cultural stereotypes of masculinity and power.

'I think some guys, they might see nudes almost as a bragging right as well, or like collectables.' (Focus Group 4, Participant 2, Girl)

'And they use it maybe to gain a higher status as well amongst their friends, maybe.' (Focus Group 4, Participant 1, Boy)

'Yeah, like say in that friend group, those guys would probably know that girl as well. It's not just some random person, it's someone they know. Like that personal connection, you can get a lot of bragging rights off that I think.' (Focus Group 4, Participant 1, Boy)

'I feel like men also want other men's validation. I feel men want men's validation more than girls would want girls' validation.' (Focus Group 4, Participant 3, Girl)

'I think part of it is maybe cultural. There is this pressure on men to be more predatory sexually and to sort of assert dominance in that way. In some ways, it's a show of power, the fact that you're showing this person in quite a vulnerable position to a considerable number of people. And also, in a way, it's a way of, in their head, of showing their prowess.' (Focus Group 10, Participant 3, Girl)

**Many participants compared the unequal dynamics of sexting with how young people's sexuality is perceived more generally, depending on their gender.**

'I think it's the same with guys having sex and girls having sex. A guy does it and it's 'oh, yes get in!' But then the girl does it and she's called a slut, or they think she's passed around. If a guy does it, he's seen as cool. But the girl does it, it's disgusting.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 2, Girl)

'I feel like they're really unfair because like what's the difference if we've done the same thing? But it just comes down to the stereotypes that need changing, that's why these courses are really good.' (Focus Group 10, Participant 4, Girl)

'And they might spread rumours about sluts, they might not even be true but all his mates will say it and then it seems like it is true.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 3, Girl)

**Finally, many participants were critical of the ways in which girls and women are made feel responsible for sexual harassment because of their clothing or how much they have had to drink. A couple of girls also recounted stories in which a friend or parent disbelieved or dismissed their account of sexual harassment:**

'And then one of my friends was like.. what you're wearing, like you deserve it, you were asking for it. And I literally was like: 'No, no, no...' it's just ridiculous! I was like, how do people think like that? They were kind of like messing but it just wasn't funny at all.' (Focus Group 6, Participant 1, Girl)

'I think it's normalised to ask the victim what were they wearing? How much did they drink? When they should be asking first, Do you know who did this? Are you ok? Do you need medical help? I think it's really common for people to instantly think that they're making it up.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 4, Girl)

'Like even just stuff from your parents being like 'Oh, don't wear that outfit. Put something on longer.' Stuff like that. They're doing it because they love you and stuff. But it's just they're not realising that is it almost victim-blaming, that's going to be the reason why you get sexually assaulted or something.' (Focus Group 7, Participant 1, Girl)

'But like, in one of the videos, she was on the bus and she was with her sister. And the old man was staring at her and winking at her. I was like 'Oh my God!' like because I remember I was coming back from France and there was an old man sitting on the aisle across from me. And for the whole flight he stared at me the whole entire time. I was like so uncomfortable. You just feel it and you're like 'Uck!' It makes your skin crawl. It makes you feel dirty almost, even though it's nothing to do with you...Like I said to my Mum after we got off the plane, I was like 'that guy was staring at me the whole time.' And she was like 'I'm sure it was nothing' and I was like 'Okay!' [laughter] And then my sister's ten and she turned around and said to me 'there's a guy staring at you' and I was like 'I know. I saw, yeah' (Focus Group 6, Participant 4, Girl)

## Unpacking 'toxic masculinity' and men as victims

Despite having seen the statistics and being shocked and angered by them, and although the workshops also address men as victims of sexual and gender-based harassment and abuse, some participants commented there was too much emphasis on women as victims and males as perpetrators, and that there was a need for more equal representation:

'When it's mostly girls, it's essentially girls it's happened to, it shouldn't be a negative view but it's very nearly an anti-men view all the time. So, I think it would be better to level it out to just people instead of at men.' (Focus Group 8, Participant 1, Boy)

'Yeah, I think it should also touch on like issues that men face as well. Because, I know it tends to happen to women more, but I did find that the guys seemed a bit like, not annoyed, but there wasn't a lot about men. And stuff happening to men from other men and girls. I get that you kind of look at the big issue at the moment but that is still an issue, I think.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 1, Girl)

'Like, there wasn't much about rape happening to men, especially rape happening to men by women. They were mostly focused on the men doing it. I guess that's what happens most of the time. But it does happen and I think if there was a guy in the class and it happened to him, he might feel a bit invalidated that it wasn't included.' (Focus Group 3, Participant 2, Girl)

This feedback highlights the tension between the need to acknowledge the stark gender inequality in the statistics on abuse and the need to make boys feel more included, heard and comfortable in this space. Suggestions to improve the workshops included having more discussion of 'toxic masculinity' related to why boys don't talk about or report sexual violence they have experienced and challenging the myth of hard masculinity. The feedback also suggests that we need to create a greater awareness of boys' experiences both as potential perpetrators and victims, and to create more spaces in which they can talk about their own victimization and vulnerabilities, notwithstanding that this can be difficult to balance with strategies to address defensive masculinity and boys who are reluctant to address their own entitlement and privilege.

## Suggestions for improvement

Both the survey and the focus groups highlighted that many of the patterns and practices of sexual and gender-based harassment and abuse are tied into the dynamics of heterosexual relationships. The statistics on this issue both online and offline also point to the prevalence of abuse in the context of male-female relationships, and to the dominance of male perpetrators and female victims (in face-to-face contexts as well as in the context of unsolicited 'dick pics', non-consensual sharing of nudes and other forms of image-based sexual abuse).

As a result, we know less about boys' experiences as victims of abuse. In our survey, boys were twice as likely to be made fun of or humiliated online and four times more likely than girls to receive threats of physical harm. Boys also reported receiving more offensive and/or degrading messages, and comments or 'jokes' about their sexual orientation. Finally, although it was twice as prevalent among girls, 17.4% of boys said they received unwanted sexual photos or videos online from an adult stranger. However, because boys did not elaborate on these issues in the focus groups, we know little about the nature or origin of these images.

The heterosexual dynamics of the majority of gendered abuse and harassment also means that we know less about the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people. Finally, although 9.7% of the survey participants were Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic, the limited scope of the current study did not permit an analysis of how gender, sexuality and ethnicity intersect. Both larger and more focussed studies are required in future to explore in more detail the scope and nature of abuse and harassment experienced by these groups. Participants specifically recommended that we include more scenarios featuring LGBTQ+ people. Other recommendations from participants included more content on consent in the context of drugs and alcohol, more information on coercive control within relationships and the need for much earlier educational interventions about consent.

## Recommendations

- Improvements to the RSE curriculum should pay more attention to young people's needs and lived experiences, especially in relation to the complexities and unequal power dynamics of their digital lives. Interventions must be founded on a robust research base about what young people are actually doing and thinking.
- Young people need relatable content delivered in an open, interactive format. Their experiences and input should inform the development of curricula.
- Our thinking about online harms needs to shift focus away from cybersafety toward a framework of digital rights, ethics and citizenship (Albury et al., 2010). This would also help to move the emphasis from victims to perpetrators, enabling educators to tackle the causes as well as the symptoms of (digital) sexual and gender-based abuse.
- Education about consent and gender-based and sexual abuse and harassment should be more LGBTQ+ inclusive. More empirical research is needed to quantify and qualify young LGBTQ+ people's experiences and needs in this area.
- There is insufficient ongoing professional training for SPHE/RSE teachers. RSE teachers need more support on content, materials and methods to deliver more effective education on consent, digital ethics and gender-based and sexual abuse and harassment.
- Consent education (in the context of bodily autonomy, assertiveness, etc.) should start at a much earlier age: consent needs to be a key focus of primary, junior-cycle and senior-cycle materials.
- Not all responsibility for this issue can fall on schools. The government could provide more funding to external experts for the provision of resources and training, similar to the School of Sexuality Education in the UK. A dedicated national helpline could also be set up to provide advice on how to report, and to advise on designated mental health and trauma support services (Andreasen et al., 2022).
- Social media companies must also bear responsibility for young people's digital safety and wellbeing. They must work with governments, educators and NGOs to make their platforms safer for young people. While digital safety measures are essential, the overall guiding principle should be one of digital rights and citizenship.

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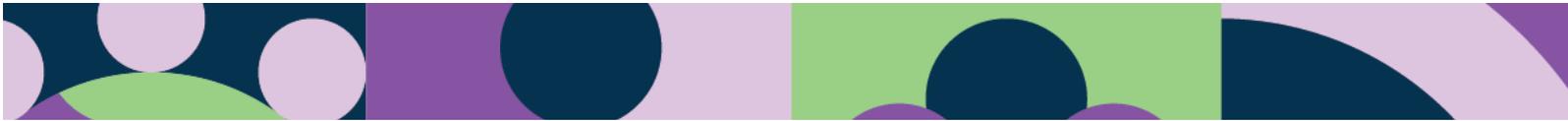
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