



Engender submission to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee (EHRC) for scoping session on bullying and harassment of children and young people in schools

1. INTRODUCTION

Engender works in Scotland to advance women's economic, social and cultural, and political equality with men. We make visible the ways in which women's inequality impacts Scotland, and bring women together to make change happen.

Engender welcomes this opportunity to submit our views to the Equalities and Human Rights Committee on bullying and harassment of children and young people, with a particular focus on sexism, sexual harassment and gender inequalities in the school system.

Sexist bullying and sexual harassment undermine the dignity and safety of girls and young women, negatively impacting on their views of themselves and their experience of and attainment in education. Sexist bullying and misogynistic behaviours and attitudes within schools also contribute to a culture that sustains and amplifies gender segregation and gender stereotyping, limiting equal opportunities and creating a conducive context for violence against women and girls in society as a whole.

Over the past year, Engender has been working closely with Zero Tolerance and the Educational Institute of Scotland to challenge the culture of sexism and misogyny that exists within schools, and to create safe and enabling environments for young women and girls. It is vital that schools in Scotland are places where bullying, sexism and gender inequality are not tolerated, in order to ensure that girls and young women achieve their full potential within

education as well as to achieve the Scottish Government's broader equality ambitions of a country with opportunities for all to flourish.

There is also a clear demand from girls and school-aged women for schools to make the issue of sexist bullying and sexual harassment a clear priority. The Girl Guides UK 2015 survey found that 90% of young women aged 13-21 agree that the government should make sure all schools are addressing sexual harassment and bullying in schools.¹ Similarly, exploratory research by Zero Tolerance showed that many young people in Scotland want the issue tackled.²

2. GENDER INEQUALITIES AND SEXIST BULLYING AND HARASSMENT IN SCHOOLS

Equally Safe, the Scottish Government's strategy for eradicating violence against women and girls, recognises the education system as a key setting for shifting the discriminatory cultures, attitudes and behaviours that lead to violence against women and girls (VAWG) and notes that education has an opportunity to 'lead the way in attitudinal change'³. More broadly, the failure to challenge expressions of misogyny and sexism within educational settings helps lead to the entrenchment of gender inequalities within society.⁴ One of the ways that this may happen is in the creation and rehearsal of stereotypes about boys and girls, women and men within schools. These stereotypes have a direct influence on the aspirations that girls have for their future, and for subject selection and later choices about work and careers. Work to tackle subject and occupational segregation will necessarily be less successful if it amounts to short interventions that take place against a backdrop of gendered stereotyping, and construction of male-dominated space as dangerous and unpleasant for girls. As such, it is incredibly important that schools and educational institutions play a role in counteracting sexism, expressions of misogyny and gender inequities wherever they occur.

¹ Girlguiding UK (2015), *Girls' Attitudes Survey 2015* <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2015.pdf>

² Zero Tolerance recently conducted exploratory research in Scottish schools in partnership with Rape Crisis Scotland and the Glasgow University Public and Social Health and Wellbeing Unit. Contact Zero Tolerance for more details.

³ Scottish Government (2014), *Equally Safe: Scotland's strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls* <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00454152.pdf>

⁴ Educational Institute of Scotland (2016), *Get it Right for Girls* <http://www.eis.org.uk/public.asp?id=3421&dbase=2>

Within this, sexist/gender-based bullying and sexual harassment form a core concern, as both a consequence of and a catalyst for wider misogyny and gender inequalities, negatively impacting on the educational experiences of girls and young women and normalizing violence against women and gender stereotypes within a school setting.

2.1 THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF GENDER-BASED PREJUDICE AND BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

Sexist and gender-based bullying – of which young women and girls are overwhelmingly the target – can range from name-calling and peer group ‘policing’ around gender conformity, through to unwanted sexual touching and online harassment. Some behaviours, often categorised as ‘sexual bullying’, are criminal in nature: sexual harassment, assault and violence. The consequence of experiencing this type of bullying are enormous for young women and girls, negatively impacting on their physical and emotional wellbeing as well as educational attainment and involvement. According to EIS:

“Faced with sexual bullying which is offensive, abusive, intimidating and malicious in nature, and which represents an abuse of power, victims experience fear, anxiety and stress, loss of dignity, humiliation and low self-esteem. The threat that this poses to victims’ health and wellbeing and on their educational outcomes, is undeniable.”⁵

Members of the ATL teaching union report that consequences of gender-based bullying can include girls being less likely to participate in activities or do anything that “makes them stand out” and are even more unwilling to take risks in academic areas⁶. Sexist and gender-based bullying also work to normalise misogynistic attitudes and behaviours, including normalising violence against women.

Limited data exists on sexist bullying or sexual harassment in schools in Scotland. While schools now routinely collect data on racist incidents, sexist incidents are not recorded, and there is a lack of consistency in how schools report sexual harassment and violence to the police and other authorities. Similarly, sexist bullying and sexual harassment are also very under-reported by girls, in part because they are “normalised, everyday occurrences, often

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2016), *Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools* <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/91/91.pdf>

positioned as “a joke” and therefore not reported.”⁷ The Addressing Sexual Bullying Across Europe (ASBAE) Project found that sexual harassment was often taken for granted by young people and that young people accepted most sexual bullying behaviours as just a ‘normal’ part of their everyday lives, also making it harder for young people to identify (and report) these behaviours as problematic.⁸

Looking at the few UK figures available, data published in September 2015 showed that 5,500 sexual offences were recorded in UK schools over a three year period, including 600 rapes⁹. A 2010 YouGov poll of 16-18 year olds found 29% of girls experienced unwanted sexual touching at school and a further 71% said they heard sexual name-calling such as ‘slut’ or ‘slag’ towards girls at school daily or a few times per week¹⁰.

In 2015 Girlguiding UK found that 75% of girls and young women said anxiety about potentially experiencing sexual harassment affects their lives in some way, with 25% of 11 to 16 year old girls stating that concerns over potential sexual harassment made them consider whether or not to speak out in class¹¹. Girls as young as 11 reported experiencing sexual harassment, and a fifth of girls reported experiencing unwanted touching or unwanted sexual attention at school¹². The House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee has responded by conducting an inquiry into the levels of sexual harassment and violence in schools across England and Wales¹³.

Sexual harassment and violence are however part of a much broader culture of sexism, sexist bullying and misogyny apparent within schools. The EIS has recently published new guidance on challenging misogyny which highlights the extent of misogynistic behaviour amongst children and young people in

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ ASBAE (2015), *Addressing Sexual Bullying Across Europe Project Research Report* <http://www.asbae.eu/latest-news/research-report/>

⁹ BBC Freedom of Information request (2015), *School sex crime reports in UK top 5,500 in three years* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-34138287>

¹⁰ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2010), *2010 poll on sexual harassment in schools*, <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/2010-poll-on-sexual-harassment-in-schools>

¹¹ Girlguiding UK (2015), *Girls’ Attitudes Survey 2015*, <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2015.pdf>

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2015), *Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools inquiry* <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/women-and-equalities-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/inquiry1/>

Scotland, outlining a variety of verbal, non-verbal and physical displays of sexist or sexual bullying and misogyny occurring in Scottish schools, including:

- Casual use of mildly misogynistic language (e.g. 'girly', 'man-up') and overtly sexualised and derogatory language commonly being used against girls or women staff both casually and vindictively (e.g. 'slut', 'skank' and 'whore')¹⁴
- Objectification of women and girls on the basis of their looks and the dismissive attitude that they should have responsibility for menial 'domestic' chores¹⁵
- A range of gendered ideas around sexual behaviour including incidences of boys grabbing and groping girls; criticism of sexually active women in comparison to approval of such behaviour in men; and joking about sexual and physical violence against women and girls¹⁶
- Sending/sharing through social media sexual images of women and girls either with or without consent and use of social media to target sexual innuendo at girls and young women.¹⁷

Similarly, other recent research in Scotland highlights:

- The prevalence of sexist attitudes among pupils, teachers and parents preventing and discouraging girls from engaging with sports or subjects perceived as 'male' – most notably the Scottish Government's priority areas of Science, Engineering, Technology and Maths¹⁸
- A gender divide in what is considered acceptable behaviour reinforced either through explicit policy or through reinforced codes of practice at school (e.g. lining up boys and girls separately, giving girls Barbie/Disney themed items, gendered uniform policies, implicit ideas about who can take up playground space and who is allowed to play with who).¹⁹

¹⁴ Educational Institute of Scotland (2016), *Get it Right for Girls*
<http://www.eis.org.uk/public.asp?id=3421&dbase=2>

¹⁵ Educational Institute of Scotland (2016), *Get it Right for Girls*
<http://www.eis.org.uk/public.asp?id=3421&dbase=2>

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ YWCA Scotland – The Young Women's Movement (2015), *Status of Young Women in Scotland 2015*
<http://www.ywscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Status-of-Young-Women-in-Scotland.pdf>

¹⁹ Zero Tolerance (2016) *Report shows growing need for relationship education in early primary and the early years* <http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/news/report-shows-growing-need-relationship-education-early-primary-and-early-years>

2.2 HOW DO SCHOOLS RESPOND TO BULLYING AND HOW ARE THEY SUPPORTED IN THAT ROLE?

Although schools have a responsibility to tackle sexual harassment and violence against women and girls under their obligations to implement the Equality Act 2010, as well as to tackle bullying under the national anti-bullying approach, it is not clear that this is delivering safe schools for girls.

There is currently limited policy support for work in schools, and while Scotland's National Approach to Anti-Bullying explicitly refers to prejudice-based behaviours including sexism, the strategy gives few practical steps or lessons learned on specific or gendered forms of bullying.

The lack of policy drivers and local or regional leadership means that schools and local authorities are not engaging substantively with sexist and sexualised bullying. YouGov's 2010 poll showed that schools were not teaching their pupils about sexist bullying, harassment or consent: 40% of 16-18-year-olds said that they didn't receive lessons or information on sexual consent, or didn't know whether they did, and close to one in four (24%) of 16-18-year-olds said that their teachers never said that unwanted sexual touching, sharing of sexual pictures or sexual name calling were unacceptable²⁰.

EIS's *Get It Right For Girls* notes the lack of resources, approaches and capacity in place within schools to tackle these issues,²¹ while Zero Tolerance has found that for those educational professionals who were aware of existing resources, the resources provided limited support on "how gender affects understanding of healthy relationships; specifically, a lack of focus on basic consent, challenging of gender assumptions or challenging of gender based bullying."²²

Numerous attempts have also been made to tackle the underlying drivers of gender inequality in education, careers advice and school management. This includes Gender Equality: a toolkit for education staff²³, which formed part of a broader drive to mainstream equality within the new Curriculum for Excellence. However, many of its key performance outcomes remain

²⁰ End Violence Against Women Coalition (2010), *2010 poll on sexual harassment in schools* <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/2010-poll-on-sexual-harassment-in-schools>

²¹ Educational Institute of Scotland (2016), *Get it Right for Girls* <http://www.eis.org.uk/public.asp?id=3421&dbase=2>

²² Zero Tolerance (2016), *Healthy relationships in early primary settings* <http://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/download/833>

²³ Scottish Government (2007), *Gender equality: a toolkit for education staff* <http://www.gov.scot/resource/doc/196713/0052704.pdf>

undelivered and opportunities to tackle gender inequalities in education are being missed.

2.3 WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE TO ENSURE SCHOOLS CAN DEAL WITH CASES OF BULLYING AND PROMOTE INCLUSIVITY IN SCHOOLS?

A number of pieces of development and conceptual work have taken place in the last two years around approaches that schools might take in tackling violence against women and to advance women's equality. While these have produced possible methodologies and processes, we have yet to see this work piloted, implemented, and evaluated. Two of these approaches are briefly summarised below.

Rape Crisis Scotland and Zero Tolerance 'Whole Schools Approach'

International evidence suggests that tackling violence against women and gendered inequalities requires schools to take a 'whole school approach' to building communities in which misogyny and gender inequality are not tolerated in any form, where school policies, including on bullying, safeguarding, equality, teacher training and school management, specifically address gender inequalities, sexist and sexual bullying and violence against women and girls.

Rape Crisis Scotland and Zero Tolerance have developed such an approach for Scotland. This would recognise that along with their gender, women and girls have other protected characteristics that increase their risk of experiencing violence and abuse²⁴ as well as boys and men who are gay or bisexual or who are judged by others to be failing to 'conform to gender norms'.

EIS work on misogyny in schools

EIS has worked with its members, Engender, and Zero Tolerance to develop a set of recommendations for specific actions and measures schools could take. They include: school mission statements that reflect a strategic commitment to gender equality and to which pupils have contributed; regular and open discussions with pupils on issues related to gender equality, derogatory language and violence against women, including assemblies that focus on the issue of gender-based bullying and peer-to-peer anti-sexism educations;

²⁴ Scottish Government (2014), *Equally Safe: Scotland's strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls* <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00454152.pdf>

encouraging teachers to challenge conventional attitudes towards gender displayed by pupils; and equality and diversity training for teachers and support staff which explicitly includes content on gender equality and violence against women.²⁵

An urgent recommendation is for schools to monitor, record and analyse incidents of sexism and gender-based bullying, and disaggregate gender-based and sexist incidences from overall bullying statistics. Other existing data sources that the schools hold, for example on attendance, attainment, pupil participation in extra-curricular activities, should also be analysed by gender, in order to identify any areas of concern regarding gender inequalities and girls' participation.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMITTEE

Engender welcomes the Committee's intention to undertake further and more detailed work on the area of bullying and harassment in schools.

When framing and developing this piece of work, we would recommend that the Committee includes a specific focus on girls and young women, ensuring that the scope of any future work considers violence against women and girls (VAWG) and misogynistic attitudes and cultures within schools. The Committee may want to consider:

- What statutory and other stakeholders are doing to gather evidence on the prevalence and impact of sexualised and sexist bullying in schools in Scotland
- How education and anti-bullying policy reflects the urgent need to tackle gender-based bullying and misogyny in schools
- Whether adequate resources exist for tackling sexist and sexualised bullying in schools, and ensuring that its harms to girls and young women are mitigated.

4. CONTACT DETAILS

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²⁵ Educational Institute of Scotland (2016), *Get it Right for Girls*
<http://www.eis.org.uk/public.asp?id=3421&dbase=2>