

Sexual Violence in Further Education

**A study of students'
experiences and perceptions of
sexual harassment, violence
and domestic abuse in further
education**

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Foreword

As Founding President of St George's University's Intersectional Feminist Society (2016–17), I began campaigning to tackle sexual harassment and violence as a student activist in my small and specialist institution. While studying, I co-founded the university's first anti-harassment campaign and worked to introduce compulsory consent training workshops for all incoming students. Indeed, it was through this work – supported by then Women's Officer, Hareem Ghani – that I first became involved in NUS Women's Campaign.

When I became NEC Second Place for the Women's Campaign (2017–18), part of my role involved visiting further education colleges across the UK to facilitate workshops on issues of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Over the course of these visits, the significant lag between sector-leading anti-harassment work the campaign was supporting in higher education, and that of anti-harassment work on college and sixth form campuses became clear. While the campaign has contributed greatly to tackling sexual harassment and violence, as outlined in this report, its work to combat these issues has so far largely been in higher education settings. The conversations, campaigns and resources we have created and supported in higher education have yet to reach and include our siblings in further education.

When elected National Women's Officer in March 2018, I pledged to undertake the Women's Campaign's first piece of targeted research into sexual harassment and violence within further education. This report examines how sexual harassment and assault manifest themselves in further education settings, and shows the significant impacts of these gendered issues on the lives of further education students. This research affirms our knowledge that further education is in no way exempt from sexual harassment, sexual violence or unhealthy relationship behaviour, and our understanding that these issues are heavily gendered.

I hope that this report's findings provide a platform for further education students, educators and staff members to begin demanding and developing urgent responses to tackle sexual harassment and violence in their institutions. The sooner we can open our understanding of feminism and educate young people on sexual harassment and assault, along with healthy and transformative gender relations – the sooner we will be able to eradicate toxic behaviour and attitudes that replicate and concretise themselves in the minds of young people.

In Solidarity,

Sarah Lasoye, NUS Women's Officer 2018-19

Acknowledgements

NUS Women's Campaign would like to extend our sincere thanks to the students who took part in this research. In particular, we would like to thank those focus group participants who shared personal stories and revisited difficult experiences with us to inform this important work. We hope that this work will help to create healthier, safer spaces in further education and tackle sexual harassment and violence in our society.

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- Hareem Ghani, NUS Women's Officer 2017/18 for first steering the Women's Campaign to focus on sexual harassment in further education and engaging with stakeholders to shape earlier stages of this work

Executive Summary

Overall Experiences of Sexual Violence

- Our survey grouped unwanted sexualised behaviour and experiences into four sections: sexual harassment; domestic abuse; sexual assault; and rape. Overall, 75 per cent of respondents to our survey had had an unwanted sexual experience at least once.

Sexual Harassment

- Half (48 per cent) of respondents had experienced unwanted sexual remarks on at least one occasion and over a third (37 per cent) had received such comments via media (social media or text message). Three in 10 students participating in our survey (28 per cent) felt they had been pressured to establish an unwanted sexual or romantic relationship, and one in six respondents (17 per cent) told us they had been stalked.
- Three in 10 (29 per cent) respondents reported receiving unwanted genital exposure, such as photos on their phones, and 6 per cent had had sexual photos or videos of themselves distributed to others without their permission, a practice often referred to as 'revenge porn'.
- Previous romantic partners were the most commonly responsible for behaviour such as threats for being sexually uncooperative (responsible for four in ten reported incidents) or having sexual images distributed without their permission, where former partners accounted for just over half of them and friends for a third. Four in 10 of this group had also been pressured to establish a sexual or romantic relationship with a friend despite their efforts to discourage them.
- Some 9% of unwanted sexual comments were received from a figure of authority (such as a boss or tutor) and this group were also responsible for 4 per cent incidents where respondents had been both pressured into a relationship and threatened for being sexually uncooperative by them.
- Revenge was a common theme, particularly when women have rejected the sexual advances of others. Participants often spoke of facing a backlash if they have expressed not being sexually interested in a man, being called names like 'slut' and 'whore'.
- The vast majority of all reported sexual harassment was carried out by men with women respondents being significantly more likely to experience this (93 per cent). However, women were responsible for 17 per cent of unwanted sexual behaviour and this was significantly more likely to be experienced by men respondents.
- Further education students' experience of sexual harassment is gendered. Women were significantly more likely than men to have experienced unwanted sexual remarks or comments via media more than five times. They were also significantly more likely than men to report experiencing sexual harassment in public spaces such as on the street and on public transport.
- One in three experiences (33 per cent) of sexual harassment experienced by further education students took place at their college. While 20 per cent of college-based sexual harassment was experienced during class, the vast majority (87 per cent) took place at college but not during class.
- It was not always possible for respondents to profile those demonstrating the unwanted sexual behaviour they experienced but in 43 per cent of cases they reported that other further education students were responsible for them.

Domestic Abuse

- More than half of respondents who had been in romantic relationships had experienced verbal abuse such as name-calling and insults at least once (53 per cent). Within this group, four in ten had been on the receiving end of such behaviour more than five times (23 per cent). While half of respondents who had been in a relationship had been unjustly accused of flirting with others or of cheating by their partner, just under half (40 per cent) had experienced this more than five times.
- 43 per cent of respondents who had been in a relationship had feared their partners and 42 per cent had experienced verbal or non-verbal threats or intimidation. A third of this group had been subjected to physical violence such as pushing and slapping by their partners, and a fifth had experienced this more than once. A third had also been prevented from seeing or communicating with family and friends by their partner.
- Experiences of domestic abuse were consistently higher for students from liberation groups.¹ One in two women who had been in romantic relationships reported having been fearing their partner at least once compared to one in three men. Although a small sample size (3 per cent of respondents), those identifying as non-binary were the most likely group to have experienced both physical violence and having feared their partner compared to both men and women. LGBT+ and disabled respondents also consistently reported having experienced higher rates of domestic abuse.
- Two-thirds of respondents understood this behaviour to constitute domestic abuse, but this was significantly more likely among respondents aged over 30, suggesting that mature participants have a lower threshold for what is considered domestic abuse and what is acceptable within a relationship.

Sexual Assault

- More than one in three respondents had experienced unwanted sexual contact such as pinching or groping, with a similar proportion having had someone attempt to kiss them against their will
- Participants faced difficulties in challenging such behaviour, fearing the consequences.
- One in five respondents told us they had been kissed when they did not want that, and a similar proportion reported unwanted exposure of their own bodies, such as someone else lifting their skirt or pulling their trousers down. Acquaintances were most frequently reported as responsible for both unwanted kissing (42 per cent) and genital exposure (27 per cent) yet respondents' friends were also common offenders, being responsible for a third (33 per cent) and quarter (26 per cent) of such incidents, respectively.
- Some 16 per cent of both unwanted kissing and genital exposure was instigated by respondents' previous romantic partners. Current partners were responsible for 5 per cent of these incidents, a level matched by figures of authority such as bosses and lecturers.
- Other further education students were reported as being responsible for 61 per cent of sexual assault. These incidents often occurred when they were at college with 27 per cent of respondents who had had been assaulted by their peers

¹ NUS' five liberation groups are; women, disabled, Black, LGBT+ and trans students, recognising the oppression these groups face because of their identities. To explain these terms further, Black is an inclusive term NUS uses to denote people of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean heritage; the + in LGBT+ refers to identities not include in the acronym LGBT such as queer, questioning, asexual, aromantic among others.

reporting it occurring at their institution but outside class and a further 9 per cent during class itself.

- Three-quarters of reported sexual assaults by another further education student took place while socialising. In the majority of all cases of sexual assault, regardless of perpetrator, the most commonly reported locations were a club (53 per cent) or at someone else's house (41 per cent).

Rape

- Approximately one in seven respondents (14 per cent) had experienced unwanted physical attempts at sexual intercourse (defined as someone unsuccessfully trying to have oral, vaginal or anal sex with them). One in eight (12 per cent) had experienced unwanted sexual intercourse, and half of this group had experienced this more than once.
- Experiences in this section were highly gendered, with women much more likely to report both attempted and unwanted sexual intercourse/rape than men.² Men were the perpetrators in 93 per cent of cases.
- 5 per cent of respondents reported assault by penetration using an inanimate object, such as the insertion of a bottle into their vagina or anus. A further 7 per cent had experienced another type of sexual experience not described by these options such as digital penetration, being forced to undress or perform sexual acts in front of others.
- Previous romantic partners were the main offenders, accounting for almost half (46 per cent) of reported attempts and 39 per cent of rape incidents. Friends were the second most commonly reported group of perpetrators, with one in three respondents in this group identifying attempts by friends.
- Acquaintances were the second most frequently reported perpetrator of unwanted sexual intercourse (accounting for 27 per cent of cases), with friends and strangers reported as being responsible for 23 per cent and 21 per cent of cases, respectively.
- Previous romantic partners were the group most commonly responsible for unwanted sexual experiences not described in this section (reported by 45 per cent of respondents who had experienced this behaviour), followed by strangers (35 per cent) and acquaintances (30 per cent).
- In terms of sexual assault by penetration, although reporting numbers were low (23 respondents told us they had experienced this), acquaintances were the main offenders (accounting for eight incidents), followed closely by friends (responsible for seven incidents) and previous romantic partners (responsible for six incidents).
- These findings indicate the use and presence of serious sexual violence among who are known to each other – through previous or current existing romantic or platonic relationships - and that this is more common than sexual assault and rape perpetrated by strangers.

² The legal definition of rape specifies that it is a crime committed by a person with a penis.

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/section/1>

Unwanted sexual intercourse perpetrated by a woman or someone of another gender who does not have a penis would be considered sexual assault by law.

The Normalisation of Sexual Violence in Further Education

- Beyond these direct experiences of unwanted sexual behaviour, our findings also allude to several factors that create a wider environment that tolerates and normalises them, sometimes referred to as 'rape culture'.
- Respondents consistently reported high rates of awareness of the prevalence of unwanted sexual behaviours. Younger respondents (those aged 22 and younger) were significantly more likely to know of peers who had experienced a number of described unwanted sexual behaviours.
- Respondents were less likely to consider the behaviour included in the domestic abuse section as constituting domestic abuse compared with behaviour in other sections; sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape. If domestic abuse and sexual harassment are considered everyday part of college life, these acts become invisible and therefore harder to prevent and tackle.

Consent

- Participants spoke frequently about difficulties in challenging unwanted behaviour, even from their romantic partners. Fear of someone else's reaction often governed students' decision not to question unwanted behaviour, ranging from fear of emotional abuse to fear of violence. They found consent difficult to navigate in relationships, where there was pressure from their partner to engage in sexual activity.
- While experiencing challenges in navigating consent, women respondents were largely confident that they knew what consent looks like and how it should operate with a partner but articulated being unable to put this knowledge into practice.

Perception

- Of those who reported experiences in each section, over half (54 per cent) of respondents considered themselves to have been sexually harassed. Just under half (45 per cent) said they had been in an abusive relationship, 40 per cent felt they had been sexually assaulted and 43 per cent considered themselves to have experienced rape.
- Older student respondents aged 30 and above were significantly more likely than other age groups to consider the behaviour outlined in the sexual harassment and domestic abuse sections as such. They were also more likely to agree that they personally had experienced domestic abuse in a relationship.
- Respondents' gender identities also affected how these experiences were understood, with men who had faced behaviour described in the sexual harassment section significantly more likely to feel that they had not been sexually harassed.
- Participants commented on there being more insults referring to women's sexual activity compared with men. Even where sexualised names for both genders exist, terms such as 'fuckboi' are considered complimentary for men and do not carry the negative connotations that they do for women. They felt that insults aimed at men often related to them being a virgin or sexually inactive (such as 'incel'), or about their sexual identities and effeminate behaviour.
- Participants felt that domestic abuse and violence against men was hard to acknowledge and tackle, as some do not even view women instigating violence towards men as assault. Such beliefs have meant that men further education students experiencing acts of violence from women tend not to challenge this behaviour.

Reporting

- While three in four respondents (75 per cent) had experienced some form of unwanted sexual behaviour, only 14 per cent of them had ever reported it to anyone. Among those who had reported unwanted sexual behaviour, half (47 per cent) reported it to the police while one in five told their college (22 per cent) and one in seven told a friend.
- Students who chose not to report their experience largely stated this was because they did not think it was serious enough (57 per cent of those who had such an experience) and one in four of them did not consider such behaviour to be problematic. There was a stigma around experiencing unwanted sexual behaviour, with a quarter of respondents feeling too embarrassed and a fifth (21 per cent) afraid that nobody would believe them. A similar proportion reported that they did not know who to tell (20 per cent), suggesting a lack of information around the kinds of support and responses available.
- Students had varying levels of both knowledge about, and trust in, institutional responses to sexual harassment. A lack of clarity on the college's position on sexual harassment was thought to be a common barrier to reporting and leaving this behaviour unchecked.

Impact

- The most common way that respondents were affected by unwanted sexual behaviour discussed in the survey was feeling anxious (42 per cent). One in three respondents distanced themselves from others (34 per cent), had avoided social events (33 per cent) or had felt depressed (33 per cent) because of this behaviour. Some 13 per cent felt unsafe at college and the same proportion reported using drugs or alcohol excessively as a result of such experiences.
- Unwanted sexual behaviour had negative impacts on students' studies, causing 18 per cent of respondents to have missed class, 17 per cent to have lowered their academic performance and 14 per cent considering dropping out of college.
- Particularly concerning were those students who had considered suicide (15 per cent), considered self-harm (13 per cent) or attempted suicide (7 per cent).
- The effects of unwanted sexual experiences are also highly gendered. Women students were significantly more likely to report feeling anxious, depressed or to change their behaviour by avoiding certain social events as a result of them.

Sexual Orientation

- LGBT+ respondents were consistently disproportionately affected by unwanted sexual behaviour compared to their heterosexual counterparts. The experiences of bisexual students were particularly stark.
- LGBT+ respondents were more likely than those defining as heterosexual to have experienced being pressured into a sexual or romantic relationship and facing threats for being sexually uncooperative. Bisexual respondents were significantly more likely to report having experienced unwanted sexual comments and remarks via media more than five times.
- Bisexual women experience sexual harassment with particularly high frequency as a result of the double oppressions they face. While women were more likely than men to have experienced unwanted kissing, bisexual respondents were most likely to have dealt with *all* forms of assault – including unwanted contact such as groping and pinching, attempted kissing and exposure of their bodies.
- LGBT+ respondents also reported experiencing domestic abuse at a significantly higher rate than their heterosexual counterparts. Around a third (36 per cent) of

heterosexual respondents who had been in a relationship had experienced threats or intimidation from their partners at least once, but 61 per cent of lesbian or gay respondents reported having experienced this, rising to 64 per cent and 66 per cent for bisexual and queer respondents, respectively (although the sample size for queer respondents was small).

- LGBT+ respondents were significantly more likely to have experienced *all* the unwanted sexual experiences described as rape.
- Bisexual students who reported any unwanted sexual experiences described in the survey were significantly more likely than other sexual orientations to say their embarrassment was their reason for not reporting an incident to anyone.

Experiences for Disabled Students

- Students who told us they were disabled were significantly more likely than those with no known disability to have experienced several forms of sexual harassment and sexual assault at least once.
- Disabled respondents were significantly less likely to consider such behaviour as sexual assault. This may indicate that disabled students view problematic behaviour differently, perhaps because of complex carer relationships or different experiences of sex education.
- They were also significantly more likely than non-disabled students to have experienced a broad range of associated behaviour from current or previous partners, including threats and intimidation, physical violence, and being stopped from communicating with or seeing friends and family members.
- Disabled students who had experienced any form of unwanted sexual behaviour outlined in the survey but who did not report it were more likely to cite being too embarrassed as a reason for this (one in three compared to one in five non-disabled respondents).
- Disabled respondents were also more likely than non-disabled students to report being negatively affected by unwanted sexual behaviour in a number of ways, such as missing class (28 per cent compared to 12 per cent of non-disabled respondents) and a decrease in their academic performance (24 per cent against 12 per cent of other students).

Recommendations

We have developed a range of recommendations for further education institutions and students' unions, further education sector bodies and NUS. These are listed at the end of this report.

Methodology

We used two approaches to understand further education students' experiences of sexual harassment and violence. Firstly, a survey aimed at UK-based students in further education and secondly, three focus groups at further education colleges in London and Liverpool. Due to small sample sizes we have not analysed the findings by UK nation.

The survey was developed by NUS and a final sample of 544 students was achieved. NUS Women's Campaign offered a prize draw of £200 to encourage responses. The survey was advertised via the NUS Extra student database, through NUS channels and those of other stakeholders in the further education sector such as the Association of Colleges. The survey took most respondents approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Within this report, a number of demographic questions are broken down and compared. Where there were any statistically significant differences between answers, they are reported where applicable to a sufficiently large base size ($n > 30$) and are valid at a confidence level of 99 per cent.

NUS facilitated focus groups lasting 60–90 minutes at City and Islington College in London (14 participants), Woodhouse College in London (four participants) and City of Liverpool College (seven participants). Focus groups involved students with different gender identities, but the majority were women. Focus groups were promoted as open to all students by the host students' union.

Introduction

NUS Women's Campaign first conducted research to tackle sexual harassment in education in 2010. That year, we published *Hidden Marks*,¹ our report on the prevalence and nature of harassment, stalking, control, and physical and sexual violence faced by women students, which also outlined the impact of this on women students' health, relationships and education.

The UK-wide study provided a snapshot of the experiences of women students in both further and higher education. We followed this up with further research and a report on lad culture in 2014.¹ Both reports were key to inspiring initiatives to tackle sexual violence and harassment on campuses across the country, from students' unions joining our #Standbyme campaign¹ to supporting survivors of sexual assault, to feminist societies and activists running consent workshops for their peers.

We have seen huge gains in the education sector on this issue, but this has been largely limited to higher education.¹ NUS Women's Campaign became increasingly concerned that students in further education, with their colleges already working with fewer resources than universities, were getting left behind. The research undertaken to produce this report and the recommendations that follow endeavour to redress that imbalance. They provide the further education sector with an in-depth understanding of the experiences and functions of sexual harassment and violence in its students' lives to help the sector develop solutions to prevent and intervene in harmful practices.

Although there has been little research into sexual harassment and violence in further education colleges specifically, there is a wide body of literature examining the role of sexual harassment in schools. This work has provided us with an extensive theoretical overview for this study and much of it has affirmed the centrality of sexual harassment in school cultures. Despite this, there exists a gap between this understanding and prevention practices in the UK. Indeed, research suggests that prevention strategies are insufficient, with education providers in the UK not currently responding to sexual violence on an institutional level.

The Landscape

No centralised data collection of sexual violence in schools currently exists but all the evidence from large-scale surveys suggests endemic levels of sexual harassment and violence within schools. The Women and Equalities Committee report into this topic found that 59 per cent of girls and young women aged 13–21 had faced some form of sexual harassment in the past year, when asked in 2014, while 29 per cent of 16–18-year-old girls said they had experienced unwanted sexual touching at school. Some 41 per cent of girls aged 14–17 who had been in a relationship reported having experienced intimate partner violence, while 71 per cent of 16–18-year-olds reported sexual name-calling towards girls at schools.¹

Sexual harassment and gendered violence have significant impacts on the lives of young people in the UK. The Girlguiding survey in 2018 showed sexual violence, and the threat of sexual violence, to be a constant presence in the lives of girls and young women. The report revealed 63 per cent of respondents feeling unsafe to walk home alone, 52 per cent having experienced street harassment and 33 per cent having been stalked.¹

The Women and Equalities Committee report, quoting UK Feminista, reveals the impact of sexual harassment on participation in school, with 25 per cent of 11–16-year-olds citing concerns over potential sexual harassment making them consider whether to speak up in class.¹

The existing body of knowledge highlights that sexual violence against women and girls cannot be divorced from young people's relationship to violence more generally.³ Sexual violence is part of a continuum of violence yet failing to see it as such contributes to its normalisation to such an extent that lower levels become invisible to educators. Challenging and preventing sexual violence in schools must take this into account and work on both a structural as well as an interpersonal level. With violence playing a crucial role in how pupils' social identities are formed in a school setting, of heterosexual masculinity and the reproduction of social power, it is also essential that responses must provide both alternative masculinities for young men to identify with and enact. Responses must also understand and treat sexual violence as a cultural and political phenomenon, rather than just acts perpetrated by individuals.⁴

NUS Women's Campaign aims for this report to mark the start of a programme of work to understand sexual violence in further education and measures to combat it. It is crucial that violence prevention work is informed by an understanding of the wide-ranging issues at stake. NUS Women's Campaign hopes to contribute to the wider work to prevent and address violence among young people, and against young women.

Explanations of Terminology Used in Survey

This report uses a number of terms to describe a range of unwanted sexual behaviour, which was grouped in the survey as outlined below.

Unwanted sexual behaviour/sexual harassment

- unwanted sexual remarks, including wolf-whistling and catcalling
- unwanted sexual comments via media (e.g. text/social media)
- unwanted genital exposure from another person via media (e.g. photos received via mobile phone)
- sexual photographs ('nudes') and videos of you being distributed to others without your permission (e.g. revenge porn)
- being pressured to establish a sexual or romantic relationship, despite your efforts to discourage this person
- being threatened for not being sexually cooperative
- being stalked

Unwanted sexual behaviour/domestic abuse

- threats or intimidation (verbal or non-verbal)
- physical violence (pushing, slapping, etc.)
- verbal abuse (name-calling, insults, belittling, etc.)

³ Robinson, K, Saltmarsh, S and Davies, C (2012) 'Introduction: The Case for Rethinking School Violence', in Saltmarsh, S, Robinson, K and Davies, C (eds.) *Rethinking School Violence*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.1–21

⁴ Sundaram, V (2013) 'Violence as understandable, deserved or unacceptable? Listening for gender in teenagers' talk about violence', *Gender and Education*, 25 (7). Pp.889–906

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- your partner preventing you from seeing or communicating with your friends or family members
 - your partner unjustly accusing you of flirting with other people or cheating
 - being scared of your partner

Unwanted sexual behaviour/sexual assault⁵

- unwanted attempts to kiss you
- unwanted kissing
- unwanted exposure of your body (e.g. your skirt being lifted, or trousers pulled down)
- unwanted sexual contact (e.g. pinching, groping, slapping)

Unwanted sexual behaviour/rape⁶

- unwanted attempts at sexual intercourse (when someone has tried to have oral, anal or vaginal sex with you but has not been successful)
- assault by penetration (someone putting an object, such as a bottle, in your anus or vagina⁷)
- unwanted sexual intercourse (someone putting a penis in your mouth, vagina or anus)
- Other unwanted sexual experience not described above

Media

In the context of the survey this refers to social media and mobile phones (i.e. calls, texts and images sent by phone).

Overall Experiences of Sexual Violence

Our survey grouped unwanted sexualised behaviour and experiences into four sections: sexual harassment, domestic abuse, sexual assault and rape. While the findings are reported below in separate corresponding sections, overall 75 per cent of respondents to our survey had experienced an unwanted sexual experience at least once.

Sexual Harassment

Respondents were asked about their experiences of a range of behaviour considered to be sexual harassment, ranging from unwanted sexual remarks such as wolf-whistling or catcalling to being stalked and being threatened for being sexually uncooperative.

Half (48 per cent) of respondents had experienced unwanted sexual remarks on at least one occasion and over a third (37 per cent) had received such comments via media, (social media or text), with the vast majority having experienced this on multiple occasions. Three in 10 students participating in our survey (28 per cent) felt they had been pressured to establish an unwanted sexual or romantic relationship at least once and one in six respondents (17 per cent) told us they had been stalked. Apart from instances outlined in the 'Power relationships' section below, strangers were the most

⁵ The legal definition of sexual assault in England and Wales. See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/section/3>

⁶ The legal definition of rape in England and Wales. See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/section/1>

⁷ Legally defined as sexual assault by penetration and not rape. See: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/section/2>

common perpetrator of behaviour listed as sexual harassment, accounting for around 70 per cent of incidents, followed by acquaintances.

Three in 10 respondents (29 per cent) reported having received unwanted genital exposure, such as photos on their phones. Some 6 per cent had had sexual photos or videos of themselves distributed to others without their permission, a practice often referred to as 'revenge porn', highlighting the use of mobile phones as a platform for sexual harassment. That younger respondents – those under 22 – were significantly more likely to know other further education students who had received unwanted genital exposure and sexual remarks via their phones also indicates the increasingly prevalent role of media in young people's sexual interactions.

These findings begin to build a picture in which the use of phones enables young people to be identified and harassed remotely with ease and without the need for pre-existing relationships, familiarity or proximity.

Power Relationships

There were examples of unwanted sexual behaviour where previous romantic partners were most commonly responsible. These included being threatened for being sexually uncooperative (four in 10 reported incidents were carried out by this group). In just over half of incidents where respondents had had sexual images of them distributed without their permission was done by someone who had previously been intimate with them and friends accounted for a third. Alongside this, four in 10 of all respondents said they had been pressured to establish a sexual or romantic relationship with a friend despite efforts to discourage them.

These interactions establish and reinforce power relations between young people, where one person's desires are considered more important than another's. On a much smaller scale but incredibly concerning is the number of respondents who attributed this behaviour to a figure of authority in their lives such as a boss, tutor or supervisor. Almost one in 10 respondents who had received unwanted sexual comments did so from such a figure and 4 per cent (accounting for one in 25 of the same group) had been both pressured into a relationship and threatened for being sexually uncooperative by people in authority. As evidenced in our previous research on higher education,⁸ these abuses of power create an intimidating working and studying environment for students in further education.

A number of women participating in our focus groups also alluded to the use of unwanted sexual attention to establish power relations. While catcalling made them uncomfortable, they explained how wolf-whistling was worse as it made them feel as if they were animals. Cars beeping their horns was considered worse than both:

"They want you to feel intimidated, they want your reaction. What do you gain from beeping at me?"

"What is the difference between that and shouting words?"

"You can pretend you didn't see or hear them, but if a car stops by you, people see, your heart starts beating, so many things can happen. They can even run you over."

⁸ NUS Women's Campaign (2018) *Power in the academy: staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education*. Available at: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-staff-student-sexual-misconduct-report>

"They get really aggressive. Then they say, 'Oh you're butters⁹ anyway!' OK, you came to me though!"

(Woman student, age unknown)

This idea of revenge was a common theme, particularly when a woman student had rejected the advances of others. Participants often spoke of facing a backlash if they had expressed not being interested in a man, being called names like 'slut' and 'whore':

"There was a guy in my school. After I rejected him a few guys started calling me a slut. All those rumours, guys messaging me for sex on social media ... The way he saw it, he thought I was leading him on. I had done nothing to imply that, I was just a friendly person. He kept asking me out and I would say no. I think it was about anger, a kind of revenge."

(Woman student, 16 years old)

Research examining the production of young masculinities in schools has demonstrated how young women who perform femininity in a certain way are often considered to be inviting sexual harassment. Sexual harassment can also be used as a method of retaliation and seen as an appropriate response to girls who have angered boys.¹⁰ While this was evident in our focus groups it can also be seen in women participants' frustration at being stuck in a no-win situation where they are also criticised if they do show someone attention. This left them feeling like there was no appropriate way to behave in such interactions, no way of asserting their own wishes without damaging their reputation in some way. Such practices contribute to the production of hierarchies and social power in educational settings.¹¹

Gender

Women accounted for the majority of all survey respondents (77 per cent). The vast majority of all reported sexual harassment was carried out by men and women respondents were significantly more likely to have experienced this (93 per cent had done so). However, it is important to note that women were responsible for 17 per cent of incidents of unwanted sexual behaviour reported via the survey and this was significantly more likely to be experienced by men. While the numbers are smaller this highlights that sexual harassment is not just experienced by women and it is not just perpetrated by men. Indeed, when looking across the full range of unwanted sexual experiences covered in the survey, 61% of men have experienced one of them compared with 78% of women respondents.

As we explore later, gender stereotyping of this nature can be harmful to all young people and their ability to learn healthy relations and behaviour. This heteronormative assumption also renders other forms of sexual harassment invisible, such as that experienced by non-binary people (who accounted for 3 per cent of respondents).

However, the ways in which respondents have experienced sexual harassment are gendered, leading to crucial differences between men and women. For example, when

⁹ Youth slang meaning 'ugly'

¹⁰ Robinson, K (2005) 'Reinforcing hegemonic masculinities through sexual harassment: issues of identity, power and popularity in secondary schools', *Gender and Education*, 17 (1), pp.19–37

¹¹ Duncan, N (1999) *Sexual Bullying: Gender Conflict and Pupil Culture in Secondary Schools*, London: Routledge.

looking at the specific behaviour reported, men were significantly more likely to have never experienced either unwanted sexual remarks or comments via media than women and non-binary people. Women were more likely to report having experienced this more than five times (the most frequent answer they could give in the survey) suggesting that sexual harassment is comparatively normal in women further education students' lives.

When asked where these experiences took place, the majority of incidents occurred on the street (61 per cent) and via media (54 per cent). However, women were significantly more likely to have been subjected to them in public spaces such as on the street and on public transport, suggesting that sexual harassment has a function in controlling and subjugating women in public space.¹²

Further Education Spaces

One in three experiences of sexual harassment (33 per cent) took place at respondents' further education college – the third most commonly cited location after the street and media, followed by nightclubs (32 per cent), public transport (26 per cent) and somebody else's house (22 per cent). Due to both the prevalence of online harassment and the overlapping nature of further education students' experience within and outside of education, it is neither possible nor helpful to try to quantify how far sexual harassment is attributable to being a further education student. For example, unwanted sexual behaviour in clubs, at house parties or on public transport may not be taking place on campus but it is possible, even likely, that respondents will be in these spaces with their peers. Similarly, online harassment may come from other college students or be experienced during a respondent's time on campus. Of the incidents of sexual harassment that took place at college 20 per cent of students experienced it during class, but the vast majority (87 per cent) took place at college but not during class. Around half of them took place while students were socialising or travelling/commuting (51 per cent and 49 per cent of incidents, respectively).

It was not always possible for respondents to identify the profile of those demonstrating the unwanted behaviour they experienced (19 per cent were unsure, as is likely the case with a stranger). But in 43 per cent of cases, respondents reported that other further education students were those responsible for sexual harassment. Even without respondents directly experiencing such behaviour, sexual harassment is understood as a common occurrence among their peer group. A significant proportion of all respondents reported knowing other further education students who have experienced unwanted sexual remarks (56 per cent), received sexual comments via media (48 per cent) or received unwanted genital exposure via media (41 per cent).

Around a quarter of all respondents knew a peer who had been pressured to establish a sexual or romantic relationship (28 per cent), had sexual images of themselves distributed without their permission (26 per cent), been stalked (25 per cent) or been threatened for not being sexually cooperative (22 per cent). Together, these findings go some way to paint a picture of the pervasiveness and normalisation of unwanted sexual behaviour in further education students' lives.

¹² Stanko, EA (1995). 'Women, Crime, and Fear'. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 539(1), pp.46–58.

Domestic Abuse

Respondents also shared their experiences of unwanted sexual behaviour within the context of a relationship. Of the three in every four respondents having been in a romantic relationship at least once, a large number of them had experienced abusive behaviour from a current or previous partner. Many respondents who had been in relationships reported having been subjected to them on multiple occasions. For example, while more than half of respondents who had been in relationships had experienced verbal abuse such as name-calling and insults at least once within a relationship (53 per cent), half of this group (23 per cent) told us they had been on the receiving end of this more than five times. Similarly, while half had been unjustly accused of flirting with others or cheating by their partner, just under half of those respondents (40 per cent) had experienced this more than five times.

It is particularly concerning that respondents also reported having been fearful of or having experienced controlling behaviour from their romantic partners. This included having been scared of a partner (43 per cent of those who had been in a relationship) and having experienced either verbal or non-verbal (i.e. physical) threats or intimidation (42 per cent). A third of respondents who had experience of romantic relationships had been subjected to physical violence such as pushing and slapping by their partners, and a fifth had experienced this more than once. Other forms of coercive behaviour reported by respondents included their partners preventing them from seeing or communicating with relatives and friends, experienced by a third of those who had been in romantic relationships. This form of domestic abuse was proportionately more likely than other named behaviour to have been experienced on multiple occasions, indicating that it is a form of control practised within their relationships.

Experiences of domestic abuse were consistently higher for students from liberation groups. Among those who had been in romantic relationships, women were significantly more likely than men to have experienced nearly all the behaviour associated with domestic abuse. The greatest difference was evident in women reporting having been scared of a partner – one in two women had experienced this at least once, compared to one in three men. Although small, respondents identifying as non-binary shared mixed experiences of this behaviour but were the group most likely to have experienced both physical violence and having been scared of a partner than either men or women. LGBT+ and disabled respondents also consistently reported having experienced higher rates of domestic abuse, which is explored in more detail later.

Differences Across Age Groups

There were differences in how domestic abuse was experienced across students from age groups. For example, older further education students (aged 30 and over) were significantly more likely than other age groups to have experienced verbal abuse in a relationship, having been scared of a partner, or having experienced threats, intimidation or physical violence within a relationship on more than four occasions. This is likely due to more relationship experience leading to greater opportunities to experience abuse. In a third of cases across all respondent age groups, the romantic partner in question was another further education student. This was significantly more likely among younger respondents (16–22-year-olds).

How respondents perceived the behaviour covered in this section also highlights an age-related difference. While two-thirds of students who participated in our survey understood these acts as domestic abuse, this was significantly more likely among older respondents aged over 30. While mature participants have a lower threshold for what is considered abuse, it also suggests that an understanding of what is acceptable within a relationship develops with age.

Sexual Assault

We asked respondents about their experiences of unwanted sexual behaviour that involved physical contact. More than one in three had experienced unwanted sexual contact such as pinching or groping, with a similar proportion having had someone attempt to kiss them against their will. Respondents reported multiple encounters with both types of assault. One in four of all respondents had experienced unwanted sexual contact more than once, and one in five had experienced unwanted attempted kissing more than once. A stranger was responsible for half of the incidents of unwanted kissing attempts, but acquaintances and friends had tried to kiss respondents against their will in 46 per cent and 40 per cent of cases, respectively.

Focus group participants shared the difficulties they had faced in challenging such behaviour, for example strangers rubbing up against them on public transport, because they feared the consequences of speaking out. They joked about this, saying, *"When someone is touching you, you're scared to say no. Imagine you say 'no' and he takes a gun out"*, which highlights fear of the repercussions of rejecting unwanted advances.

Beyond attempts, one in five respondents told us they had been kissed when that was not wanted, and a similar proportion reported unwanted exposure of their own bodies, such as someone else lifting up their skirt or pulling their trousers down. While these were less frequently reported than potentially less serious forms of sexual assault described above, it is nevertheless telling that one in 10 respondents had experienced these more than once and that those in their social circles were often the perpetrators. Acquaintances were most frequently reported as having been responsible for both unwanted kissing (42 per cent) and genital exposure (27 per cent). Respondents' friends were also common offenders, with a third (33 per cent) and quarter (26 per cent) of such incidents involving them.

In smaller numbers but worthy of note is the role that current and previous partners also play in demonstrating this behaviour. For example, 16 per cent of both unwanted kissing and genital exposure was by previous romantic partners. Current partners were responsible for 5 per cent of these incidents, a level matched by figures of authority such as bosses and lecturers.

Other further education students were reported as being responsible for 61 per cent of all forms of sexual assault described in this section, with a further 12 per cent unsure whether the perpetrator was a further education student. The sexual assault instigated by further education students upon respondents often occurred at college. Some 27 per cent of this group have been assaulted at their education institution but outside class and 9 per cent (11 respondents) during class itself. The prevalence of sexual violence among peer groups starts to emerge when we consider that three-quarters of sexual assaults by another further education student took place while socialising (at a party for example), and that – regardless of perpetrator – the most commonly reported locations of sexual

assaults experienced by further education students were a club (53 per cent) or at someone else's house (41 per cent).

While some of these findings can be understood in the context of an environment where healthy sexual behaviour is undefined and understanding of appropriate conduct is still being learned by respondents and their peers, the same cannot be said for incidents involving tutors, bosses and supervisors where clear policies and practices govern their relationship with students or employees. It is therefore incredibly concerning that abuses of power through unwanted genital exposure and kissing are being committed by those who should be key players in modelling healthy relationships and behaviour to further education students.

Rape

The final form of unwanted sexual behaviour that the survey asked further education students about was their experiences of rape and serious sexual assault. Approximately one in seven respondents (14 per cent) had experienced unwanted attempts at sexual intercourse (defined as someone having tried to have oral, vaginal or anal sex with them but had been unsuccessful). One in eight respondents (12 per cent) had experienced unwanted sexual intercourse, with half of those students having experienced that more than once. Responses were highly gendered, with women much more likely than men to have experienced both attempted- and unwanted sexual intercourse. Furthermore, men were the perpetrators in 93 per cent of cases. While we cannot specify exactly how many of these incidents would be legally defined as rape, this combined with the demographics of respondents (see *Respondent profile*) allows us to reasonably assume the majority would be.¹³ These incidents do not show us the full scale of serious sexual assault, as 5 per cent of respondents reported having experienced assault by penetration with an inanimate object, such as the insertion of a bottle into their vagina or anus. A further 7 per cent of respondents had experienced another type of sexual violence not described by these options, which included digital penetration, being forced to perform sexual acts in front of others, forced to masturbate another person in a college toilet, attempts to have their bra removed, and unwanted sexual experiences where respondents were drunk or had their drink spiked so are unclear of what happened.

Previous romantic partners were the main offenders in cases of attempted- and unwanted sexual intercourse/rape, accounting for almost half (46 per cent) of attempts and 39 per cent of rapes.

Friends were the second most common group to attempt unwanted sexual intercourse/rape, reported by one in three respondents who had experienced this behaviour, followed by acquaintances and strangers (reported by one in four students who had experienced this form of serious sexual assault). Beyond attempts, among respondents who had experienced unwanted sexual intercourse/rape, acquaintances were the second most frequently reported perpetrator (accounting for 27 per cent of cases), followed by friends and strangers at 23 per cent and 21 per cent, respectively.

Previous romantic partners were those most commonly responsible for students' experiences of serious sexual assaults not described in this section (45 per cent), followed by strangers (35 per cent) and acquaintances (30 per cent). In terms of sexual assault by

¹³ 'Unwanted sexual intercourse' and 'rape' were used interchangeably in the survey, regardless of perpetrator.

penetration, although reporting numbers were low (23 respondents told us they had experienced this) acquaintances were the main offenders (accounting for eight incidents), followed by friends (seven incidents) and then previous romantic partners (six incidents).

These findings indicate the use and presence of serious sexual violence among people through romantic or platonic relationships, which is more common than serious sexual violence perpetrated by strangers. This is reflected in national data, such as the *Crime Survey of England and Wales*.¹⁴ Indeed, in 41 per cent of cases reported in this section another further education student was responsible (a further 11 per cent were unsure whether the perpetrator was a fellow student). This highlights the shortcomings of a popular myth that positions rape as a threat located in the unknown and demonstrates that effective rape prevention relies on us intervening in the misogynistic culture in which these relationships are formed.

The Normalisation of Sexual Violence in Further Education

While the direct experiences of respondents in relation to the behaviour outlined in the survey strongly indicate that sexual harassment and violence are common in further education the findings also allude to a number of factors that create a wider environment that tolerates and normalises them, sometimes referred to as *rape culture*.¹⁵

Beyond further education students' direct experiences, we asked if they knew other further education students who had been subjected to the same types of unwanted sexual behaviour. Respondents consistently reported high rates of awareness of such experiences among their peers. In terms of sexual harassment and sexual assault, younger respondents (those aged 22 or below) were significantly more likely to know of peers who had experienced various types of unwanted sexual behaviour.

When looking at awareness of domestic abuse among their peers, women and bisexual respondents – groups who were more likely to have experienced it themselves – were also significantly more likely to know of other further education students who had experienced a range of identified behaviour. Respondents were also less likely to consider the behaviour included in this section to be domestic abuse compared with behaviour outlined in other sections of the survey. One in four did not consider these types of behaviour as domestic abuse (compared with one in five thinking the same about behaviour outlined in other sections of the survey). This suggests that the more common an experience is among peers, or the more normalised it is, the harder it is to identify as problematic.

If domestic abuse and sexual harassment are considered an everyday part of college life these acts become invisible yet, as described later on, they contribute to more extreme and severe forms of violence against women and other marginalised groups.¹⁶

¹⁴ According to Office of National Statistics (2018) *Crime Survey of England and Wales 2017*, the victim-offender relationship for rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) experienced since the age of 16 by women aged 16–59 showed that 45 per cent of incidents were perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner, 38 per cent by another person known to them and 5 per cent by a family member, in contrast to 13 per cent of perpetrators reported as a stranger.

¹⁵ Defined as “the normalisation of sexualised violence against women in social, cultural and political spaces” by Fanghanel, A (2019), *Disrupting Rape Culture*, Policy Press

¹⁶ Kelly, L (1988) *Surviving Sexual Violence*, Cambridge: Polity Press

In subsequent sections of this report we reflect on focus group discussions to explore the conditions that give rise to rape culture in further education.

Consent

Issues around consent run through our findings and highlight serious issues for students in seeking, understanding and giving consent; a theme that emerges throughout the research when looking across the spectrum of sexual interactions, from featuring in social conversations to sexual encounters.

Focus group participants spoke about their experiences at parties where they felt pressured to participate in games such as truth or dare when they turn sexual. When expressing that they no longer felt comfortable to play a boy told a woman participant to *"Stop killing the vibe, stop killing the game"*, which demonstrates how, even at this level, they are pressured to comply and ignore their own wishes to not ruin the atmosphere. Participants spoke frequently about difficulties in challenging unwanted behaviour even from their romantic partners, leading one woman participant to believe *"I don't feel, in relationships, you get what you want"*. Fear of someone else's reaction often governs their decision to not question unwanted behaviour, ranging from fear of emotional abuse to fear of violence. They found consent difficult to navigate in relationships, where there was pressure to engage in sexual activity from their partner.

"You can be afraid of the response, [what] if they get violent or aggressive? If with a partner, suddenly it creates a sour moment in their relationship. It's so easy to ... say 'I do really like it' and just compromise."

(Woman student, 17 years old)

When discussing what they both want and their boundaries if they articulated not wanting to have sex, respondents shared that they were then subject to an 'emotional backlash' where partners questioned why they were in a relationship with them. This led them to believe relationships were not about their own desires and that it was impossible to be in one without engaging in sexual activity.

While experiencing challenges in navigating interactions around consent, participants were largely confident in what consent looks like, both verbal and non-verbal, and were firm in their understanding of how it should operate with a partner:

"Consent is a big thing for me. I consented and then realised I didn't want to continue, and the other person saw that and stopped, which was really good ... It needs to be really clear that consent is more than a verbal yes or no."

(Woman student, 16 years old)

"Body language is very important. Most people can tell if someone has negative body language then don't go near them. I think we should spread the idea of being very blunt. If you're completely not into something, just say no."

(Man student, 17 years old)

"You should just slap their hand. Girls should feel like they can."

(Woman student, 16 years old)

"If you're having sex with someone you should make it clear what your boundaries are. I want to go this far, or this far. So, it's clear. A guy or girl should look at body language, expressions, checking if they're enjoying it."

(Woman student, 16 years old)

"There should never be pressure to do sexual stuff. There should be simple consent; yes or no. And even then, people might change their mind. You have to be respectful ... If you're pressuring, it's your fault for going ignorant to satisfy your craving."

(Woman student, 17 years old)

While women participating in our focus groups appeared well-versed in the theory of consent and good practice, they are unable to put this into practice, unable to say "no" in a way that is *heard* by the other person or feel silenced by a probable backlash. This is an expression of rape culture we live in. Some participants believed that confidence to push back and assert their boundaries is something that develops with age for a number of reasons. Firstly, that their experiences of sex education at school left them ill-equipped for these interactions as they lack an understanding of what is OK and what is not, and secondly that girls their age are often timid and are yet to feel sufficiently empowered to say no and not cave into pressure. This suggests a need for ongoing sex education provision at different stages of development during primary, secondary *and* further education.

Perceptions of Unwanted Sexual Behaviour

We asked respondents to reflect on the experiences they had shared throughout the survey to understand how they perceived them. We asked respondents if they considered that they had directly experienced any form of sexual violence covered by the survey, which were grouped together as sexual harassment, domestic abuse, sexual assault and rape.

Over half (54 per cent) of the respondents who said they had experienced behaviour outlined in the sexual harassment section considered themselves to have been sexually harassed. Just under half (45 per cent) agreed that they had been in an abusive relationship, 40 per cent felt they had been sexually assaulted and 43 per cent considered themselves to have been raped. While an often-similar proportion told us, they did not consider their experiences to constitute those forms of sexual violence, it is noteworthy that that a sizeable number of respondents who had had these experiences remained unsure, which could be due to uncertainties of either definitions or of their memories if under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Of those reporting unwanted sexual behaviours in the relating sections, one in eight (12 per cent) were not sure if they had been sexually assaulted and one in five (20 per cent) were unsure if they had been raped.

Age was a recurring factor in how further education students understood these experiences. Respondents aged 30 and above were significantly more likely than other age groups to consider the behaviour outlined in the sexual harassment section (unwanted sexual comments, genital exposure, being stalked, etc.) as such. In contrast, 16–17-year-olds who had experienced this behaviour were significantly more likely to feel they had not been sexually harassed. Similarly, mature student respondents (those aged 30 and above) were both more likely to think the behaviour described as domestic abuse could be defined in that way and that they personally had experienced it. If younger

further education students are less likely to find these experiences inappropriate, they may be less likely to take action against them than mature students. While it is not possible to ascertain how and if views change as students become older, it does suggest that students' understanding of these terms is an ongoing process that develops over time.

There were also differences in how respondents' gender identities affected how they understood these experiences, with men who had faced behaviour described in the sexual harassment section significantly more likely to feel that they had not been sexually harassed than their female peers who had experienced it. That women and non-binary respondents were therefore more likely to identify this behaviour as threatening and intimidating to the extent where they feel harassed suggests, again, that that these interactions should be understood within a wider misogynistic culture wherein men are able to attach less meaning to, and are therefore less affected by, this kind of behaviour. This is supported by existing studies that demonstrate that young men and women view behaviour they experienced differently, so that boys in general feel unthreatened by sexualised attention from girls unless it threatens or questions their masculinity.¹⁷ That men do not consider themselves to be sexually harassed when subjected to the same unwanted sexual behaviour may also reflect hypermasculinity and their construction of a gender identity that denies them the freedom to display or express weakness or victimhood.

Perceptions of Name-calling

"If you call a woman a slut it's to offend. But if you call a guy a 'fuckboi', they'll say, 'Yeah, I am!'"
(Woman student, 19 years old)

These findings corroborate our focus group participants' feelings of the sheer quantity of insults available to women that referred to their sexual activity, in contrast to equivalent names levelled at men. On a much broader level, this reflects the greater number of gendered insults that exist for women, and the role of these insults in regulating and policing women's identities.¹⁸

"Women are more called names related to their sexuality. With men, it's other things. Men aren't criticised for their sexual lives, it's more [for] their intelligence."
(Woman student, 17 years old)

Even where sexualised names for both genders exist, terms such as 'fuckboi' are considered complimentary for men and do not carry the negative connotations that they do for women, where names like 'slut' and 'slag' are damaging labels that stick with them.

"In general, there's no negative view of a guy being slutty, it's seen as being cool. Whereas a girl, they're thought to be used, dirty. If I ever called a guy 'manslut', I doubt he'd be offended. There are other words more likely to offend: 'weak', 'pussy'."
(Woman student, 16 years old)

¹⁷ Robinson, K (2005) 'Reinforcing hegemonic masculinities through sexual harassment: issues of identity, power and popularity in secondary schools', *Gender and Education*, 17 (1), pp.19–37

¹⁸ Preston, K, Stanley, K (1987); 'What's the worst thing? Gender-directed insults' Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00287626>

Toxic Masculinity

The only exception, where 'slut' was known to be used in a derogatory way towards men, was between GBT+ men. Focus group participants reflected that insults aimed at men, in contrast to those targeted at women, often related to their being a virgin or sexually inactive, such as 'incel'¹⁹, or about their sexual identities and effeminate behaviour. This kind of name-calling is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it highlights wider issues around gender stereotyping and contributes to an image of hypermasculinity that seriously affects men as well as women by setting expectations around how they perform their masculinity. Secondly, it perpetuates homophobia in further education spaces.

Previous research on sexual violence has highlighted that work to prevent sexual harassment often takes place in a depoliticised framework within the realm of bullying, attributing this behaviour solely to individuals.²⁰ The literature argues that we must instead take into account men's use of violence towards each other and understand men's violence toward women within this context – where male violence is normalised.²¹ Failing to do so contributes to normalising widespread practices that are seen to be at the lower end of the violence continuum, making much of school violence invisible to educators.

A body of research has also emphasised that sexual violence and harassment play a key role in gender construction for young people. For example, Sundaram describes the differences in how violence enacted by men and women are perceived by young people – while women's violence is seen as unthreatening, the perceived danger of men's physical bodies leads to the belief that men are naturally more aggressive.²² Although Sundaram found evidence that young people perceive men and women to be equally capable of intimate partner violence, violence enacted by women is trivialised. This clearly resonated in our focus groups, where participants felt that domestic abuse and violence against men was hard to acknowledge and respond to, and some people do not even view women instigating violence towards men as assault. They explained how such beliefs have meant that men further education students experiencing acts of violence from women tend not to challenge this.

"I've been slapped by a girl at a party. It's a catch 22. I can't say, 'Stop this'. There's a lot of social stigma."

(Man student, 17 years old)

"It's an abuse of power, but it's been switched round. We've been socialised to believe men hit women. And a woman feels like she can use that, 'I can hit him, and he can't respond'."

(Woman student, 17 years old)

¹⁹ A term coined online that refers to 'involuntary celibates'. It refers to members of an online subculture who define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, a state they describe as 'inceldom'. Self-identified incels are largely white and are almost exclusively male heterosexuals.

²⁰ Robinson, K, Saltmarsh, S and Davies, C (2012) 'Introduction: The Case for Rethinking School Violence', in Saltmarsh S, Robinson K and Davies C (eds.), *Rethinking School Violence*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.1–21

²¹ Sundaram, V (2013) 'Violence as understandable, deserved or unacceptable? Listening for gender in teenagers' talk about violence', *Gender and Education*, 25 (7). Pp.889–906

²² Sundaram, V (2014) *Preventing Youth Violence: Rethinking the role of gender in schools*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Traditional gender roles shape our understanding of how men and women experience each other and, in doing so, limit our ability to comprehend experiences that do not neatly sit within this framework. This gender binary is harmful to us all. It perpetuates norms about our gender identities, marginalises LGBT+ people, and our pursuit to conform to it is especially damaging to liberation groups, which is expanded on later.

Reporting Unwanted Sexual Behaviour

While the vast majority of respondents (75 per cent) had experienced some form of unwanted sexual behaviour, of this group the number who officially reported these incidents was very low at 14 per cent. Of those who did take such action, half (47 per cent) reported their experience to the police while one in five told their college (22 per cent). The third most common answer, provided by one in seven respondents who took action after experiencing unwanted sexual behaviour, was telling a friend. While many of our findings indicate significant barriers to reporting various forms of unwanted sexual behaviour, a good number of those who experienced such behaviour did not consider it to be problematic, with one in four respondents who had experienced this behaviour choosing this option.

Those who chose not to report their experience largely stated that this was because they did not think their experience was serious enough (57 per cent). Responses also suggested a stigma around experiencing unwanted sexual behaviour, with a quarter feeling too embarrassed to report their experience and a fifth (21 per cent) being afraid that nobody would believe them. A similar proportion (20 per cent) reported that they did not know who to tell, suggesting a lack of information around the kinds of support and responses available to further education students experiencing sexual violence. One in four respondents had another reason for not reporting incidents of sexual violence that they had experienced.

"What will they think of me? What does this say of my personality? Even to my parents, I wouldn't have the confidence to tell them ... It happens, and no one speaks."
(Woman student, 18 years old)

Participants had mixed views on how best to deal with unwanted sexual attention at college, with many stating a preference for students to deal with issues among themselves rather than inform staff. They shared a number of ways they would respond to incidents of this behaviour, which included bystander intervention techniques. This ranged from interposing themselves if a fellow further education student was being catcalled: *"I act as if I'm her friend, I make her feel safe"* to challenging the behaviour themselves.

"As further education students we're more inclined to handle it ... ourselves. I [don't] think the safeguarding team are that great at dealing with these matters. I think I can be intimidating sometimes. I would give him a very stern talking-to, [to] dissuade them from ever doing it again."
(Woman student, 16 years old)

Research participants had varying levels of knowledge about, and trust in, institutional responses to various forms of sexual violence. Some expressed a belief that staff should intervene in instances of sexual harassment as it is their responsibility to make students

feel safe and their involvement may make the issue more likely to be taken seriously by other students. Besides feeling shy and internal shame, lack of clarity on the college's position on sexual harassment was thought to be a common barrier to reporting, leaving this behaviour unchecked. Students were unsure *how* the safeguarding team would respond, and whether their response would be proportionate to the offence: *"They might contact the police, and not keep it confidential to you, which blows it out of proportion"* (woman student, 17 years old). This suggests a need for further education institutions to be more explicit in communicating their policies and procedures across the student body and also a need to reassure students that there is value in taking action against unwanted sexual behaviour.

"If you show people that you will give them the solution, they will [tell] you the problem. They should speak to the person who did the sexual harassment. If they don't respond, I don't know what else [to do]."

(Woman student, 18 years old)

"In my opinion, you can reprimand them. If they aren't taught or challenged, they won't change. If they don't, and they continue to ignore, then [the college] could kick them out. This is a place of education, not [a place] to argue, fight or be rude to people."

(Man student, 19 years old)

"So, it's OK to kick them out?"

"Advise and teach [perpetrators]. Kicking out is the last choice."

(Woman student, 18 years old)

However, some questioned how much control staff could realistically have on large further education campuses. While not a specific option in our survey, focus group participants had positive experiences of reporting unwanted sexual behaviour to their students' union representatives, who dealt with the issue quickly.

The Impact of Unwanted Sexual Behaviour

Six out of 10 of all respondents (57 per cent) reported that the unwanted sexual behaviour mentioned in the survey had affected them in some way. The most common impact was feeling anxious (42 per cent). One in three respondents of all respondents told us that they distanced themselves from others (34 per cent), had avoided social events (33 per cent) or had felt depressed (33 per cent) as a result of unwanted sexual behaviour. Their welfare and feelings of safety were also affected in other ways – 13 per cent felt unsafe at college and the same proportion reported using drugs or alcohol excessively as a result of such experiences. This experience had negative impacts on their studies too, leading 18 per cent of respondents to miss class, 17 per cent lowering their academic performance and 14 per cent considering dropping out of college altogether. Particularly concerning were the respondents who had considered suicide (15 per cent), considered self-harm (13 per cent) or attempted suicide (7 per cent). This highlights the grave consequences that sexual violence, abuse and cumulative experiences of sexual harassment can have on an individual's education and their overall wellbeing.

While the wide-ranging effects and consequences of sexual violence are clear – the majority of respondents reported a change of behaviour or a detrimental effect to their wellbeing as a result of either experiencing it or concerns about doing so – there are some respondents for whom this behaviour seemed negligible or minor. Over four in 10 respondents did not feel affected in any way by the unwanted sexual behaviour discussed; a figure that also includes a proportion who have never had such experiences. Among those who had experienced unwanted behaviour, one in four chose not to report

this specifically as they did not consider it to be a problem. Alongside the regular occurrence of sexual harassment and violence in respondents' lives, either experienced directly or by their peers, this illustrates its normalisation in further education students' lives.

Just as there are gender differences in how this behaviour was perceived by respondents, the effects of sexual and violence are also highly gendered. Women further education students reported being significantly more likely to report feeling anxious, depressed or to change their behaviour by avoiding certain social events as a result of unwanted sexual behaviour. This adds weight to the notion that, while the incidents may be similar, they are experienced differently by women and men, having a more severe impact on women as they exacerbate feelings of danger and lack of safety that already exist for them in society.

This was illustrated in how women focus group participants responded to experiences of sexual harassment. Specifically, a number of them reported changing the way they dressed as a result.

"I cycle to college, there and back. And a few times I've had some odd experiences. I had on a tank top and shorts. And a guy opened his window and started shouting at me, catcalling me. It was about what I was wearing. And not just cycling but on buses as a student. Makes me feel really uncomfortable. Like, I was wearing cycling clothes ... After that experience, I never wore that shirt again. It made me really self-conscious, it's hard to explain. Like, I wanted to cover myself up a bit more. More recently, I have wanted to be driven to college rather than going by bus or bike. I feel like there's always going to be that feeling of being self-conscious. It wasn't just that one time, it was a few times."
(Woman student, 16 years old)

This was not limited to clothes considered to be revealing:

"Clothing shouldn't have anything to do with it. But the fact is that clothing doesn't even have to be revealing. I was wearing red flared jeans and this guy started asking me lots of questions, 'How old are you?', 'Where do you live?' I just don't wear those jeans any more."

"Does it change anything else about yourself?"

"Just the way you carry yourself. The clothes I wear make me feel proud. But when I wear baggy stuff it makes me feel [unproud]."
(Woman student, 17 years old)

Although focus group discussions occasionally found participants grappling with the notion of whether dressing a certain way, for example showing cleavage, sends out a signal and contributes to sexual harassment, there was broad agreement that women should be able to wear what they want without having to navigate such reactions. The range of experiences shared by participants further demonstrates the wider impact of sexual harassment, with participants stating how having been sexually harassed has caused them to dress in order to feel more powerful and confident around men:

"A lot of the time, boys who approach me are taller than me. You have to be careful what you say to them. I started wearing boots, so it made me feel taller. I started self-defence a while ago [too, which is] very empowering."
(Woman student, 16 years old)

While public discourse commonly connects unwanted sexual behaviour and clothing simply in terms of how revealing or sexually appealing one appears, these findings highlight a deeper impact on students' choices of dress. From memories relating to their once-favourite clothes, to self-policing and stopping themselves from wearing what they feel best in, this tangibly illustrates how sexual harassment impacts further education students' self-confidence.

Sexual Orientation and Unwanted Sexual Behaviour

Throughout the data, significant differences emerged between the experiences of respondents with different sexual orientations. The sample sizes of some groups of LGBT+ respondents were small but, overall, two key patterns were evident. Firstly, that LGBT+ respondents were consistently disproportionately affected by unwanted sexual behaviour compared to their heterosexual counterparts. And secondly, that the experiences of bisexual students were more pronounced.

LGBT+ students participating in our research were more likely than those defining as heterosexual to have experienced both being pressured into a sexual or romantic relationship and facing threats for being sexually uncooperative. In particular, bisexual respondents were significantly more likely to tell us they had experienced unwanted comments and remarks via media more than five times. As women were another group more likely to report having experienced these incidents more than five times, those who define as bisexual women experience sexual harassment particularly often as a result of the double oppressions they face. The more pronounced experiences of respondents identifying in this particular intersection was also suggested when looking at behaviour described as sexual assault. While women were more likely than men to have experienced unwanted kissing, bisexual respondents were most likely to have dealt with *all* forms of sexual assault, including unwanted contact such as groping and pinching, attempted kissing and unwanted exposure of their own bodies.

LGBT+ respondents also reported experiencing domestic abuse at a significantly higher rate than their heterosexual counterparts, and particular groups within the LGBT+ community were more severely affected than others. For example, while 36 per cent of heterosexual respondents who had been in a relationship had experienced a threat or intimidation from their partners at least once, 61 per cent of lesbian or gay respondents reported having experienced this, rising to 64 per cent and 66 per cent for bisexual and queer respondents, respectively. There was a mixed picture regarding how queer respondents compared to those with other sexual orientations, especially given the small sample size of 16. However, bisexual respondents were consistently more likely to have experienced behaviour described as domestic abuse than heterosexual or gay/lesbian students participating in our research. This was particularly stark given that 70 per cent of bisexual respondents who have been in a relationship had been unjustly accused by their partner of flirting with other people or cheating at least once, compared to 46 per cent of heterosexual respondents, 42 per cent of gay/lesbian respondents, 44 per cent of queer respondents and 62 per cent of those identifying another way, a group comprising only 16 respondents.

That LGBT+ students are more at risk of sexual violence is also evident as they were significantly more likely to report having experienced *all* forms of behaviour described as rape, including unwanted sexual intercourse or attempted sexual intercourse and penetration using an object. LGBT+ respondents who reported having experienced

behaviour associated with sexual assault were also significantly more likely to consider they had been sexually assaulted.

While LGBT+ students clearly often find themselves at the sharper end of unwanted sexual behaviour, particular attention must be paid to the experiences of bisexual students and their impact on this group. In addition to the differences illustrated above, bisexual students who reported having experienced any of the experiences described in the survey were significantly more likely than other sexual orientation groups to say that they did not report it to anyone because of embarrassment. Further, when compared to heterosexual respondents, students defining as bisexual were significantly more likely to state being affected by unwanted sexual behaviours in a wide range of ways, telling us they had experienced *all* of the impacts listed in the survey as a result of it, from feeling anxious and depressed, to poorer academic performance and trying to kill themselves.

Beyond being directly affected by these incidents, bisexual respondents were also more likely than others to have experience of many forms of sexual harassment, assault and rape in their wider social environments – they reported higher levels of awareness of other students having such experiences. This suggests that both the exposure to, and the consequences of, unwanted sexual behaviour are wider and more serious for bisexual students, with bi-phobic prejudice, particularly around bisexual people's sexual availability, leading to stigma and internalised shame.

Disabled Students' Experiences

Students who told us they were disabled were significantly more likely than those with no known disability to have experienced a number of forms of sexual harassment at least once, including unwanted sexual remarks, sexual comments via media, genital exposure, being pressured to establish a sexual or romantic relationship and being threatened for not being sexually cooperative. They were also more likely to know other further education students who had experienced some of this behaviour. Among students who had experienced a form of sexual harassment described, disabled respondents were more likely than other groups to have experienced this at someone's house (one in three disabled students compared to one in six students overall) and also online or via phone (two in three disabled students compared to one in two).

When looking at behaviour described as sexual assault, we can see similar patterns. Disabled respondents were significantly more likely to have experienced various forms of sexual assault at least once, such as unwanted attempts to kiss, unwanted kissing, unwanted sexual contact such as groping and slapping. They were also more likely to know other further education students who had experienced such behaviour. Interestingly, disabled respondents were significantly less likely to consider this behaviour to be sexual assault (six in 10 disabled students thought so, compared to seven in 10 respondents overall). This may indicate that problematic sexual behaviour is viewed differently by disabled students, especially if the perpetrator is a carer upon whom the respondent relies and may not want to get into trouble, as has been highlighted in existing research on violence against disabled women.²³ Related to the barriers that disabled people already face in accessing education, studies have also shown that assumptions about their sexual inactivity has led to some disabled children being

²³ Violence Against Disabled Women Survey, Daisie Project, Wise Women
http://www.wisewomen.org.uk/docs/Daisie_per_cent20Report_per_cent20PDF.pdf

excluded from sex education, which can result in lower levels of understanding around consent and healthy sexual behaviour than their non-disabled peers.²⁴

Similar patterns can be seen relating to disabled respondents' experiences of domestic abuse. Disabled students were significantly more likely than non-disabled students to have experienced a broad range of associated behaviour from current or previous partners, including threats or intimidation, physical violence and being stopped from communicating with or seeing friends and family members. These findings support government data demonstrating higher rates of domestic abuse experienced by disabled people.²⁵

Disabled students who had experienced any unwanted sexual behaviour outlined in the survey but who did not officially report incidents were more likely to cite being too embarrassed as a reason for this (cited by one in three disabled students compared to one in five respondents overall). This could be due to a number of reasons. Disabled people's experiences are often questioned and they are not believed, especially if the perpetrator is a carer as noted above and as explained by disabled students in kNOW MORE, a recent report published by NUS-USI in Northern Ireland.²⁶ It could also be that shame and stigma surrounds disabled students' understanding of and reaction to such experiences, in a similar way to bisexual students as explained above.

Relating to this, disabled respondents were also more likely than their non-disabled peers to report having been affected by unwanted sexual behaviour in a number of ways. This includes missing class as a result of their experience (cited by 28 per cent of disabled students compared to 12 per cent of other respondents), a decrease in academic performance (24 per cent against 12 per cent), and feeling depressed or anxious as a result, avoiding social events and distancing themselves from others. Only one in three disabled further education students felt they had not been affected in any way by unwanted sexual attention, compared to half of non-disabled respondents. The fact that disabled students are more affected by such experiences suggests that the consequences of this behaviour are more grave for this group, exacerbated by the marginalisation they already face.

²⁴ Gil-Llario, M.D; Morell-Mengual, D; Balester-Arnal, R.; Dian-Rodriguez, I (2017); *The experience of sexuality in adults with intellectual disability*. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jir.12455> and Tamas, D; Brkic-Jovanovic; Rajic, R; Bugarski-Ignjatovic, V; Peric Prkosovacki, B (2019) *Professionals, Parents and the General Public: Attitudes Towards the Sexuality of Persons with Intellectual Disability*. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11195-018-09555-2>

²⁵ Public Health England (2015) *Disability and domestic abuse Risk, impacts and response*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/480942/Disability_and_domestic_abuse_topic_overview_FINAL.pdf

²⁶ National Union of Students Union of Students in Ireland (2019) *kNOWMORE NUS-USI Student Consent Survey*. Available at: <http://nus-usi.org/2019/03/27/survey-results-being-launched-show-more-than-1-in-4-students-in-ni-experienced-unwanted-sexual-behaviour/>

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that sexual harassment in particular is rife in the lives of further education students, whether at their colleges, on social media or in public and social spaces.

For women in particular, the experience of unwanted sexual behaviour is commonplace. This makes unacceptable and unhealthy behaviour harder to identify, which leads to the normalisation of sexualised violence and the rise of rape culture. This is particularly evident through the experience of women students involved in this research, who demonstrated a developed understanding of consent yet reported struggling to put their knowledge into practice, held back by fear of revenge and violence from men.

The findings also highlight severe impacts from unwanted sexual behaviour for further education students other than heterosexual women. Specific concerns arising from the research relate to men and the norms of masculinity by which they are shaped, and for LGBT+ and disabled students in particular. As a result, this study compels us to think beyond heteronormativity when considering how to tackle unwanted sexual behaviour. It also demands that we move from ideas that violence is enacted solely by an individual, towards an understanding of sexual violence as a social and cultural phenomenon constructed in part by our educational environments at their earlier stages.

This poses both a challenge and an opportunity for further education institutions. They need to make all forms of violence, including sexual violence, visible, and to develop students' confidence and skills to put their understanding of harassment, abuse and the theory of consent into practice in their social and sexual interactions.

Recommendations

Further Education Institutions and Students' Unions

- Develop robust policies and reporting procedures to tackle sexual harassment and violence that clearly interlink with broader institutional policies on violence.
- Develop a range of institutional responses that enable students to choose what is appropriate for them, taking into account some students' concerns around confidentiality and police involvement.
- Ensure that responses to reported unwanted sexual behaviour are not limited to reporting or complaint processes but also include support services centring on student survivors' welfare and wellbeing.
- Publicise institutions' policies and the available range of responses internally, and signpost to appropriate external services. While this should be outlined as part of students' induction, reminders and refresher information should be provided throughout the year.
- Raise the profile of staff who deal with sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence, such as a safeguarding team, creating opportunities for students to become more familiar with them to allay any concerns they may have over the process.
- Equip non-specialist staff who have the most contact with students, e.g. academic staff, with skills to deal with disclosures, such as through first responder training.
- Support students' unions or associations to campaign on campus, providing first responder training where possible to students and staff who may receive disclosures of unwanted sexual behaviour.
- Provide workshops on consent and healthy relationships that fully incorporate domestic abuse, working with local higher education institutions where possible to share resources and access a pool of trainers.
- Develop specific support for vulnerable groups identified through this research, notably bisexual and disabled students, including broader education and campaigning across the student body to challenge harmful stereotypes.
- Promote alternative or different masculinities across institutional policies and practices. At staff level, examples might include the recruitment and deployment of staff in non-traditional gender roles. At student level, examples include promoting non-traditional subjects and diversifying leadership positions.

Sector Bodies in Different UK Nations

- Develop guidelines for further education colleges on responding to, and preventing, sexual harassment and violence.
- Work with the secondary education sector to provide continued sex and relationships education that complements and builds on earlier learning.
- Ensure that sex and relationships education is inclusive of disabled and LGBT+ students, avoiding heteronormative assumptions.

NUS

- Develop tailored consent workshops for further education as part of NUS Women's Campaign's 'I Heart Consent' programme and deliver train the trainer training for further education students and staff.
- Create activity funds for student groups in further education colleges to deliver campaigning and education to prevent and tackle sexual harassment and violence.

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- Facilitate resource sharing between local higher and further education institutions where sexual harassment and consent are priority campaigns.
 - As part of its sexual harassment and consent work, develop campaigning activity to challenge harmful stereotypes relating to the sexualities of disabled and bisexual students.

Respondents profile

When looking at the age range of respondents, the majority were 22 years or younger; 23% were aged 16-17, 49% were 18-22, 10% were aged 23-29 and the rest were over 30 years. They covered a broad range of study levels, undertaking A or AS-levels/NVQ 3/BTEC National/Access course or equivalent Level 3 qualification (40%); a Level 5 qualification (21%); 19% a foundation degree /HNC/HND or equivalent Level 4 qualification; 9% undertaking GCSEs/NVQ 2 or equivalent; 6% an apprenticeship; 3% a Foundation or Level 1 course and 1% entry-level.

77% of respondents identified as women, 19% as men and 3% were non-binary. The vast majority were cisgender as 4% told us their gender identity does not match the one they were assigned at birth. In terms of sexual orientation, 73% were heterosexual with LGBT+ respondents identifying as bisexual (16%), gay/lesbian (5%), 3% as queer and the same per cent both in another way and preferring not to say.

27% of respondents told us they were disabled with a further 4% unsure or preferring not to say. Of this 27% the majority of disabled respondents experienced mental health difficulties (21%). Learning difficulties (11%), an unseen disability or health condition (8%), Autistic Spectrum Disorder (6%) and a physical impairment or mobility difficulty 4% were the other main types provided.

The overwhelming majority of respondents were white; either white British (80%) or white – other (5%). Mixed race respondents accounted for 6%; Asian/Asian British for 4% and Black/Black British for 2% of respondents. On faith, 26% identified as Christian, 10% as Atheist, 9% as Agnostic. Other faiths mentioned were Muslim (5% of respondents), Spiritual (4%) and Jewish and Buddhist (1% respectively). A significant proportion told us they did not have one (40%).

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