

University of Glasgow submission of 15 December 2023

PE1934/H: Develop an educational resource on gender-based violence for all year groups in High School

We thank the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee for the opportunity to share further information on the Equally Safe at School evaluation called “Whole-school approach to addressing Gender-Based violence (GBV) in secondary school (Equally Safe at School): A pragmatic cluster-randomised trial and mixed-methods evaluation. This [three-year evaluation](#) (2023-2026) is funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR).

Background

The Equally Safe at School (ESAS) intervention was developed via a 6-year collaboration between University of Glasgow and Rape Crisis Scotland (RCS). The intervention development phase (2016-2018; CSO Catalytic Research grant CGA/16/9) involved student/staff group interviews and stakeholder consultation. The resulting ‘theory of change’ and draft intervention design were refined via consultations with voluntary and statutory stakeholders. MRC programme funding [MC_UU_00022/3] supported small-scale formative evaluation research alongside a 3-school pilot implemented by RCS (2019-2021).

Although recognised as a widespread problem, limited evidence on GBV and sexual harassment in schools exist in the UK, including Scotland. Our recently published paper ([Sweeting et al., 2022](#)) showed that two-thirds of students reported being a victim of one or more of 17 sexual harassment behaviours in last three months. At school, sexual harassment most commonly involves unwanted jokes and gestures and showing or sending unwanted sexual images or messages and less frequently includes kissing or sexual touching. [An animated video](#) co-produced with young people also presents evidence from the pilot phase study.

Attitudes that enable or excuse GBV are underpinned by harmful beliefs about gender. Sexual harassment and GBV in adolescence can lead to men’s violence against women later in life. Teachers, students and policymakers want to address this major problem and recognise the

importance of improving the whole-school environment. However, there is little evidence on the best ways to do so.

Evaluation overview

This underscores the significance and timeliness of assessing the Equally Safe at School intervention. Adopting a comprehensive 'whole-school approach,' the intervention works across every aspect of school life to continually build and reinforce messages that challenge gender-based violence and promote gender equality. This includes the school curriculum, staff training, everyday interactions between staff and students, school policies and procedures, and the culture and ethos of the school community.

The aim of this study is to find out whether the ESAS intervention is effective and cost-effective. We will assess whether the ESAS intervention is effective in reducing sexual harassment within secondary schools alongside other benefits. We are currently recruiting 36 secondary schools in Scotland, half of whom will start ESAS immediately, and half of whom will join a 'waitlist' and start ESAS one year later. We will compare the level of sexual harassment in schools that have implemented ESAS (group 1) with those who have not yet started (group 2), by surveying students at the beginning of the trial and after 12 months. We will compare schools in group 1 and group 2 again at 24 months.

We will assess whether ESAS makes it more likely for students to report incidents of sexual harassment to teachers and for teachers to feel more confident in intervening. We will also evaluate whether the ESAS intervention represents value for money, and whether it is delivered well. We will focus on how closely schools follow the intervention guidance, the degree of involvement and acceptance of the school community, and any barriers or aids to successful implementation. Additionally, we will investigate any unforeseen impacts, and aim to understand how ESAS causes change to happen.

As part of the process evaluation, we will also conduct case studies in six schools over two years to see how well the ESAS approach works in practice and if it helps establish changes in school culture over time. We will collect detailed information from staff, students, and parents to produce scientific evidence on the effectiveness, costs and delivery process of ESAS. This evidence will help policymakers decide how to address GBV in schools.

Timeline and dissemination

The evaluation is taking place between July 2023 and September 2026. The full results of the evaluation are anticipated to be published in December 2026. Dissemination of emerging research findings will take place periodically throughout the study. The research team will prioritise communication of study findings to policymakers, practitioners, and evaluation participants. This includes a regular newsletter on evaluation progress to interested stakeholders. Other dissemination channels include blogs, workshops and conferences.