RAPE CRISIS SCOTLAND

Equality and Human Rights Committee

Scoping session on Bullying and harassment of children and young people in schools

Written Evidence from Rape Crisis Scotland

October 2016

Introduction

Rape Crisis Scotland coordinates a national sexual violence prevention programme, operating from 13 Rape Crisis centres around Scotland. This programme is funded by the Scottish Government Children, Young People and Families Early Intervention Fund. Using our externally evaluated evidence-based resource pack, prevention workers deliver programmes to young people in schools and youth groups on issues such as consent, gender, the law, sexualisation and pornography, the impacts of sexual violence and how to access support. Through our engagement with young people we have learnt much about how the dynamics of gender and sexism play out in their peer groups, and how they shape the way that bullying happens, and the ways it is experienced. We also support young people to take the lead in identifying their own concerns and finding ways to tackle them, and examples of their concerns are given below.

In our evidence we discuss sexual coercion, sexual assault and rape in relation to bullying. It is important to distinguish between these, and not to suggest that sexual coercion and assault are forms of bullying. However, the relationship is very important because everyday phenomenon such as unwanted sexual comments and sexual harassment, and the attitudes and values that support them, underpin all forms of sexual violence.

The nature and extent of prejudice and bullying in schools

Young people identify clear gendered patterns of behaviour in relation to bullying, as it relates to sexual violence. There is a focus on girls’ sexual behaviour and appearance, for example:

- Girls or young women may face scrutiny and negative judgments in relation to how many sexual partners they have had, whilst this is rarely the case for boys. Words such as ‘slag’, ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ are common. Whether or not a girl is bullied about this depends in some cases on whether she is popular within her peer group.
- Young people often report pressure to take part in sexting. In most scenarios boys ask girls for images, and that boys often share these images without consent. Girls can often be blamed (by their peers and by adults) for taking and sharing the image, however this does not take into account the significant pressures they often face, nor does it acknowledge the responsibility of the
boy who obtained the image and shared it without consent. Young people tell us that boys often use compliments and persuasion to obtain the image, and sometimes threats can be used to coerce. Messages aimed at tackling sexting often emphasise girls’ choice whether or not to send the image, which can lead to girls feeling to blame if their images are shared without consent and they face bullying, and therefore less likely to seek support.

- Images of girls bodies can be scrutinised, and compared to pornographic ‘standards.’
- Boys sometimes share their own images, with or without the consent of the recipient. Young people identified that occasionally boys can be bullied when their sexual images are shared. One group gave an example of a boy deemed to be unpopular who was very seriously bullied. Language like ‘creep’, ‘pervert’ and ‘beast’ can be used.

- We have heard of instances where girls have reported that boys in their school have raped them or coerced them into sending an image which has subsequently been shared. In some cases this has been reported to the police or social work, but no further action taken and the boy remains in the school. In addition to the trauma of the original abuse or assault, the girls have faced bullying, with problematic attitudes being brought into play for example that girls and women often lie about rape, and that when they are raped or sexually assaulted, they are in some way responsible.
- In general it should be noted that young women report feeling pressured and coerced into engaging in sexual activity in intimate relationships. Where her partner is in the same school this is likely to play out in the school setting.
- Intersections of gender with other protected characteristics should also be noted, however we have had insufficient time in preparing this submission to give more specific detail.

How do schools respond to bullying and how are they supported in that role?

- There are very mixed responses. Many teachers are keen to tackle these issues. We also hear that some teachers do not feel it is their role to engage.
- There are some mixed messages, for example in relation to girls’ responsibility for others’ abuse.
- One of our young people’s participation groups has identified concerns that school uniform policies sometimes have a sexist rationale, for example by focusing on girls’ skirt length or the tightness of trousers. Messages are often given out in justification of the policy that girls’ bodies can be distracting to boys and male teachers. The group has also noted that some Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education (RSHP) focuses on issues of young women’s morality in relation to sexual activity. These messages reinforce sexual double standards, rather than challenging the assumptions and attitudes underpinning sexist bullying.
- There are a range of positive policies and improvement frameworks in place, which emphasise respect and equality. However these are largely gender neutral and do not support schools and teachers to understand the gendered dimensions of bullying and violence as discussed above, or considerations for prevention and safeguarding.
What needs to change to ensure schools can deal with cases of bullying and promote inclusivity in schools?

- Rape Crisis Scotland is working in collaboration with Zero Tolerance and the Social and Public Health Sciences Unit at the University of Glasgow to design and evaluate a whole school intervention to tackle gender based violence in the context of gender inequality. This aims to support schools to understand, prevent and respond to all forms of gender based violence by taking a whole systems approach encompassing policies, staff knowledge, curriculum, young people’s participation and school ethos. We are aiming to pilot the intervention next year with a view to applying to National Institute of Health Research for a large-scale evaluation to demonstrate impact.