



# **Listening to students and educators: a North Yorkshire case study on the state of gendered violence education in UK secondary schools, and proposals for change.**

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Funded by the Laidlaw Foundation



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## Introduction

The UK is at a critical crossroads for the issue of gendered violence; the National Police Chiefs' Council and College of Policing recently declared violence against women and girls (VAWG) a “national emergency”. Currently, 20% of all offences recorded to the police constitute VAWG, and recorded cases have increased by 37% in the last five years. However, preventative education has not met these new challenges. Plan UK has recently revealed that just 56% of students feel they have had adequate teaching on healthy sex and relationships.<sup>1</sup> The government has pledged to tackle VAWG, partly by “Teach[ing] young people about healthy relationships and consent”<sup>2</sup>. However, this essay will argue that the existing curriculum is fundamentally inadequate if the government is to achieve its aims. It will propose that listening to the perspectives of students and educators provides practical, preventative solutions which, if adopted by the DfE and schools, will reduce levels of gendered violence amongst young people.

This essay deliberately employs the term ‘gendered violence’ to encompass related terms such as VAWG, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and domestic abuse. It describes emotional, physical, sexual and verbal abuse which is perpetrated through a gendered lens, for example, is motivated by misogynistic attitudes. It is crucial that we adopt this broader term when approaching preventative education. ‘Gendered violence’ reflects the wider cultural contexts which socialise men into violence and create harmful models of masculinity. Furthermore, research by Michael Flood highlights that boys are the hardest group to engage on the issue, hence the necessity to frame it as an issue for every student.<sup>3</sup>

The arguments will unfold over two sections. The first explores the challenges for teachers delivering gendered violence education and suggestions for improvements. Fundamentally, this section will conclude that all teachers need lucid, consistent and

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<sup>1</sup> “The State of Girls’ Rights in the UK,” Plan International, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://plan-uk.org/state-of-girls-rights>

<sup>2</sup> “Change.,” Labour, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://labour.org.uk/change/>

<sup>3</sup> Michael Flood, “Changing Men: Best Practice in Sexual Violence Education,” *Women Against Violence: An Australian Feminist Journal* (2006): 26-36



mandatory training on the issue of gendered violence, provided by specialists in the VAWG sector. Finally, to ensure that curricula remain pertinent to students' lived experiences, processes must be implemented to bridge the disconnect between students and teachers, starting with 'student voice' forums to guide school policy.

The second section will examine students' perspectives, proposing how they could be better supported in understanding and tackling gendered violence. This section will reveal the commonalities across genders and schools, including the troubling gap between the curriculum set by the central government and the level of understanding among students. Finally, this section will discuss the separate pressures girls and boys face concerning gender roles. More research must be done on the experiences of students who do not identify with either gender; in this case study no students spoke on this, hence its omission in this essay.

## Literature Review

The study of gendered violence was catalysed by feminist researchers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Catharine MacKinnon was among researchers who theorised that sexual abuse is *not* merely a private issue, but one which is public, political, and directly reflects the values of patriarchal cultures which oppress, silence and objectify women. Furthermore, Liz Kelly proposed the concept of a "continuum of sexual violence", demonstrating how incidences from derogatory language to rape and femicide are interconnected. They are all symptoms of a patriarchal system which condones male abuse, intrusion or coercion of women<sup>4</sup>. This concept is particularly pertinent to prevention education in young people as it reiterates the importance of policing lower-level verbal or emotional abuse. The 'continuum' theory illustrates how the foundations of physical abuse are laid in attitudes towards women and the corresponding expectations of masculinity. This is reinforced by Micheal Flood's recent research, which argues men with negative attitudes towards women are far more likely to become perpetrators of sexual violence<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence – Feminist Perspectives* (Polity Press, 1988)

<sup>5</sup> Michael Flood, "Changing Men: Best Practice in Sexual Violence Education," *Women Against Violence: An Australian Feminist Journal* (2006): 26-36



Despite the stark reality that child sexual abuse is the highest among young girls (particularly aged 15-17), public policy in England is not gendered<sup>6</sup>. Researchers have long argued that sexual violence is a physical manifestation of patriarchal societal norms, yet it is often treated as an “individualised crime”. In other words, the problem starts with a violation of one body and the solution ends with the survivor reporting and the ensuing judicial process (although in 99% of cases, there is no successful prosecution)<sup>7</sup>. Little policy reflects a preventative approach. As reports by the charity *End Violence Against Women* have highlighted consistently, the Department of Education does not view violence as a gendered issue.

Since the proliferation of research into violence from gendered perspectives, increased attention has been placed on preventative education. Studies of children’s engagement with this education reveal that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate. As David Gadd et al. emphasise, gendered differences must be taken into account. In their study, boys responded better to kinaesthetic activities and found education on resisting peer pressure more beneficial, whereas girls engaged best with conversational activities, where their experiences could be openly shared and validated<sup>8</sup>. Not only should education accommodate differences, as Nicky Stanley et al. show, the goal of long-term sustainability should be paramount in any new curricula<sup>9</sup>. Finally, regarding *who* should deliver this education, it is clear that collaboration between students and external specialist agencies or charities proves the most effective. As Gadd et al. note, this is partly because teachers themselves do not always display informed attitudes or have specialist knowledge. The Zero Tolerance initiative in Scotland found that 22% of the teachers who delivered that programme when interviewed, thought that girls could sometimes ‘provoke’ sexual assault with their clothing choices<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> „Child sexual abuse: statistics briefing, NSPCC learning, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/child-sexual-abuse>

<sup>7</sup> Alison Phipps, “Violent and victimized bodies: Sexual violence policy in England and Wales,” *Critical Social Policy* (2010): 359-383

<sup>8</sup> Claire L. Fox, David Gadd, and Julius Sim, “Evaluating the effectiveness of domestic abuse prevention education: Are certain children more or less receptive to the messages conveyed?,” *Legal and Criminological Psychology* (2016): 212-227

<sup>9</sup> Nicky Stanley, Jane Ellis, and Jo Bell “Delivering preventative programmes in schools: Identifying gender issues,” in *Children behaving badly? Peer violence between children and young people*, C. Barter and D. Berridge (John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 217-30

<sup>10</sup> David Gadd, Claire L Fox, and Rebecca Hale, “Preliminary Steps towards a More Preventative Approach to Eliminating Violence against Women in Europe,” *European journal of criminology* (2014): 464-480



Finally, a consistent challenge is the question of engaging young men. As Micheal Flood suggests, men engage best with education when their role is framed as potential bystanders rather than perpetrators<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, Katie Graham et al. highlight that one of the reasons for men's reluctance to participate in sexual violence workshops is because of a perception that it is not personally relevant to them. To combat disengagement, they argue education should not be framed through a victims versus perpetrators dichotomy but rather as a community issue where men can be allies.<sup>12</sup>

## Methodology

The arguments made in this essay are predicated on primary data gathered from two state schools in North Yorkshire: Ripon Grammar School and Ryedale School. In each school, I interviewed a teacher with a managerial role and another with a non-managerial role. The questions were based on their knowledge of the curriculum on gendered violence, the nature and extent of it in their schools, and the challenges in educating students on this issue. Separately, I spoke with 30 students through 'group discussions'. At Ryedale, I spoke to mixed-sex groups aged 12-15. At Ripon, the group comprised girls aged 16-17; although the offer was made to all students, no boys decided to contribute. This may speak to the wider disengagement of boys on this topic, reiterating Flood's arguments. As the End Violence Against Women and Girls charity have noted in their reports, boys are more likely to engage with these issues in single-sex groups.<sup>13</sup> However, in this case study, without more data acquired, it is hard to say definitively.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Flood, "Changing Men: Best Practice in Sexual Violence Education," *Women Against Violence: An Australian Feminist Journal* (2006): 26-36

<sup>12</sup> Katie Graham, Gareth J. Treharne, Zoran Stojanov, Rachel Shaw, and Melanie A. Beres, "A qualitative exploration of barriers to university students' willingness to attend sexual violence prevention workshops," *Sex Education* (2020): 148-160.

<sup>13</sup> "New report: It's #AboutTime – A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls," End Violence Against Women, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/new-report-its-about-time-a-whole-school-approach-to-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls/>.



Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the ethical considerations when working with children, all students had to give consent prior, and the interviews were overseen by a member of staff. Furthermore, I framed the questions broadly to put students at ease by opening up a conversation. For both students and teachers, one of the most fruitful questions was, “What does gendered violence mean to you?”. This exposed a knowledge gap, especially for teachers, as to the exact meaning of the term and highlighted how students of different age brackets perceived it differently. For example, older students, especially girls, were more likely to classify “catcalling” or “street harassment” as a form of violence, whereas younger students either did not recognise the term or only responded with “sexist stereotypes”.

## Teachers

One challenge in delivering effective education around gendered violence revealed by these interviews is that the majority of staff do not feel adequately trained to deal with this topic. The level of engagement and understanding of the DfE’s guidelines varied greatly among staff; when asked about their familiarity with the curriculum, responses ranged from “Not familiar at all” to “very confident”. Furthermore, one teacher said that it was clear that some of her colleagues did not have up-to-date attitudes about gender roles. This disparity in understanding of the issues is expected as much of the DfE guidelines and teacher training on this issue are not mandatory.

Uncertainty around the guidelines also translated into doubt among two teachers as to “what I can say” and “when to intervene”. They mentioned that Ofsted’s increased focus on Safeguarding in the last decade has been beneficial for both students and teachers; staff are expected to have a more heightened awareness of the signs that children are at risk from violence in the home, for example. However, it became clear that teachers are less informed on how to manage and recognise low-level gendered violence; incidences like misogynistic slurs. One teacher suggested that perhaps this uncertainty stemmed from a fear of being criticised for being “too political”.



Furthermore, teachers from both schools highlighted national and local contexts which influence gendered violence in schools. One teacher, when asked how the level of violence had changed over their career, replied that “it comes and goes in waves”. This is due to external factors, particularly “social media trends”; every teacher I spoke to cited Andrew Tate. Whilst the largely unregulated, online world changes rapidly, government guidelines are not reviewed frequently enough to match these changes. For instance, a teacher told me the school did not immediately recognise that when students established a “Hustler Society”, this referenced Andrew Tate.

Other external factors cited were austerity and COVID. One teacher highlighted how, as the school’s budget was “absolutely smashed” by the energy crisis, there is less time and money to engage with outside agencies on PSCE issues. Students in state schools, in particular, have acutely felt the effects of austerity. Furthermore, two teachers discussed how, in the Yorkshire and Humber region, levels of male mental health are consistently higher than the national average<sup>14</sup>. White working-class boys in the north-east also have some of the worst educational attainment<sup>15</sup>. This difference is even more stark when viewed through a gendered perspective; boys are consistently underperforming at every stage. One teacher suggested that boys who feel that “school doesn’t work for them” are particularly vulnerable to the influence of figures like Andrew Tate, who exploit this undercurrent of resentment, especially if they do not have positive male models. Three teachers cited COVID as having an even more “profound” influence; students had been exposed to harmful or misogynistic content online for years with little to no supervision. One teacher articulated the specific the problem as “the lack of catch-up plan for PSCE”; when students returned to school, they wanted to “get back into relationships, but had no idea about how to navigate healthy sex and relationships”.

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<sup>14</sup>“Mental health statistics: prevalence, services and funding in England,”House of Commons Library, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06988/>

<sup>15</sup> “*The forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it*,”UK Parliament, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=The+forgotten%3A+how+White+working-class+pupils+have+been+let+down%2C+and+how+to+change&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>



Finally, interview responses exposed a disconnect between the awareness of gendered violence among teachers and the everyday experiences of students. When asked how often they witness gendered violence in a school setting, the male interviewees said infrequently. They cited the main incidences as “throwaway comments” from students or problematic stereotypes in “conversational discourse”. This vastly contrasts the level of gendered violence students revealed was occurring; a group of Year 10 females told me that “shaming” or “objectifying” language towards girls was a daily occurrence, and “Girls being touched up in the lunch queue” was “frequent”. This exemplifies Kelly’s concept of the “continuum of violence”; some staff did not recognise misogynistic conversation as a potential precursor to physical abuse, whereas the young girls interviewed spoke of the verbal in conjunction with the physical. For example, in response to the question of what gendered violence meant, one girl spoke of sexualised language in school, immediately followed by the physical sexual harassment she witnessed in her part-time job.

In general, female staff were more attuned to gendered violence; one said she “sees it less, hears about it more”. Another female teacher suggested that this was because most incidents happen in students’ “free time” or “unmonitored spaces”: the playground or PE changing rooms. This gap between students’ and teachers’ perceptions of gendered violence must be addressed if gendered violence education is to be effective. One teacher who specialised in the school’s PSCHE curriculum suggested that conducting an anonymous “Student voice” forum frequently had been extremely helpful for her in understanding the reality of what students were experiencing. Thus, to bridge the teacher-student disconnect, students need a safe, anonymous space to disclose incidents.

## Students

Across the interviews, common themes emerged across students’ responses as to the causes of gendered violence. Every group mentioned social media as facilitating abuse; students as young as 12 recognised that misogynistic influencers on TikTok were promoting traditional gender roles. Sixth Formers emphasised the “lack of accountability” for online behaviour and that boys were “given the space online to express sexist views”, which would not be acceptable in a classroom. These students highlighted how influential short-term trends were; three sixth-formers said that in the last three years “toxic or ‘traditional’ masculinity has



become “trendy” alongside a “cultural backlash” against feminism. Other forms of media, such as “easy access to violent pornography”, were cited as entrenching patriarchal values.

The overexposure of toxic online content to young children means preventative education should be more explicit from an earlier age. Two groups of girls spoke of how the school projected an “ethos of equality”, yet this was not helping students who might already be experiencing sexual harassment in the first few years of secondary school. In this vein, sixth formers said that teaching on this issue “skirted around” issues like sexual harassment; the language used around sexual assault was “neutralised” and “not gendered”. Assault was often framed as “stranger danger”, as one girl said, which does not reflect that most sexual abuse happens in interpersonal relationships. NSPCC data supports this; around 1/3 of child sexual abuse (11-17) is perpetrated by other children<sup>16</sup>.

The DfE guidelines declare that students should know their rights against discrimination and harassment. However, a trend soon emerged that demonstrated that little to no students knew the laws around gendered violence; only one student out of thirty cited a law, the 2010 Equality Act. One girl said, “We are taught what *not* to do but not what *to do* if you are experiencing something”. In other words, students told me they felt persistently “lectured” on how they should *not* act but never on how to act in the aftermath of an assault. Thus, moving forward, it is clear that students would benefit from more post-incident support and education that validated their own experiences. One Year 9 student felt like incidences of extreme sexism were taught as “historical experiences”, and another three girls said they felt like there was still a victim-blaming culture, “It feels like it’s always your fault somehow”. Victim-blaming discourse, which this girl alludes to, puts the onus on women and girls to change their behaviour to protect themselves from male violence, rather than placing responsibility on perpetrators themselves. Thus, education must embody a two-pronged approach: preventative teaching alongside emotional support services for students who are already victims. Currently, education does not do enough to tackle the emotional damage in the aftermath of assault, and wider ‘victim-blaming’ discourse which can exacerbate trauma.

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<sup>16</sup> „Child sexual abuse: statistics briefing, NSPCC learning, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/child-sexual-abuse>



Stark data recently published by the NSPCC underlines this urgent need for a change in education in *how* to discuss and support sexual assault victims; 1 in 20 children aged 11-17 in the UK have experienced sexual abuse<sup>17</sup>. Or, framed another way, in every classroom, there will be at least one child who is a victim of sexual abuse. That figure excludes online non-contact sexual abuse, although data suggests this is becoming increasingly prolific; a review of sexual harassment in English schools found nearly 90% of girls and 50% of boys were being sent explicit pictures without their consent frequently<sup>18</sup>.

Boys spoke of the pressure to conform to ‘traditional’ masculinity. Three student groups discussed how the stigma around mental health encourages the notion that boys should be “tougher”; this suppression might later manifest itself through violence. Furthermore, one group spoke of how adolescent boys, when looking for role models, become attracted to harmful online influencers. Another group discussed how they thought that society was still projecting a very narrow template for masculinity. They thought that the “demonisation of more ‘feminine’ men” gave men “much less space to explore gender”. For example, they said it was more acceptable for women to embody both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits, whereas “feminine men” were less accepted in peer groups. Finally, boys mentioned feeling “talked down to” during teaching. To improve preventative education for boys, two groups said they would feel more comfortable in single-sex groups. Furthermore, one boy highlighted how the format of teaching about misogyny is too “saturated” in one week of the year. It might be beneficial to teach gendered issues in shorter, frequent sessions to reinforce knowledge of this issue in a manner which is manageable for young people.

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<sup>17</sup> „Child sexual abuse: statistics briefing, NSPCC learning, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/statistics-briefings/child-sexual-abuse>

<sup>18</sup> “Key messages from research on children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour,” Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/research-resources/key-messages/harmful-sexual-behaviour/>



## Conclusions and proposals for change

This case study provides a glimpse into gendered violence in schools and how current preventative education falls short in failing to protect young people. From only a small cross-section of students in Northern state schools, listening to the insights of students and teachers has provided practical solutions which the DfE should implement if this government is to achieve its goal of reducing VAWG. A summary of the policy proposals resulting from this case study are as follows:

### 1) Format

- Staff should receive better training from specialist agencies. The largest gaps in understanding were in relation to the spectrum of “gendered violence”.
- Students feel more comfortable in single-sex settings.
- There should be a consistent collaboration between specialist agencies and schools.

### 2) Content

- It is critical that greater emotional support and post-incident advice exists.
- To engage boys most effectively, this issue should be framed as “gendered violence”. In other words, the ecology of patriarchal violence encompasses everyone, and its prevention is a community issue.

### 3) Evaluation

- There must be a process implemented which tests the level of understanding among teachers and students; the overall awareness of the current DfE guidelines was, in this case study, very low.
- Anonymous ‘student voice’ forums should be employed to bridge the disconnect between teachers and students.



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