

To gain more insight into this year's Cheshire youth commission priority 'violence and abuse' I read a BBC's news article that discussed Ofsted's findings about sexual harassment in schools. The article "Sexual Harassment normalised among children, warns Ofsted" (BBC news 10/06/21) gives good insight into the prevalence of sexual harassment in the social dynamics of school and college aged people in the UK today, where "sexist name-calling and being sent unwanted explicit pictures or videos happens "a lot" or "sometimes", as well as other forms of "sexual violence". However, the article gave no mention to the fact that much of the sexual harassment involving school aged children occurs in very different circumstances, towards young people (usually girls) from older, adult individuals (usually men). While it is normally advisable to avoid sweeping generalisations regarding gender, in this context it would be misleading not to mention the different experiences that the different genders have.

The way in which this form of sexual harassment takes place most often in public (eg catcalls while out running, walking to/from school, in town etc.) means that it plays a significant role in shaping what is deemed as socially permissible, by establishing itself as a societal norm to be expected and accepted. This has the unfortunate consequence of making victims of sexual harassment feel as though reporting isn't an appropriate response, which only perpetuates this type of crime as the element of deterrent that comes from legal action is largely eliminated. Ultimately, a diminished sense of criminality has been reached where sexual harassment is seen more as an unfortunate social issue as opposed to legitimate criminal behaviour. This is reflected by the absence of any mention in the BBC article of sexual harassment being criminal offence, and the suggested solution being more staff training and better support for school leaders. Had the issue been surrounding use of illegal drugs, or violence on the same scale, would the response have been different?

While sexual harassment is so common and is predominantly a gendered issue, an overwhelming attitude of dismissal towards the concept that misogyny still acts in modern day Britain impedes the resolution of the problem, attitudes must change before sexual harassment will be addressed with sufficient sincerity to bring about change.

The proposal of better education in schools to eliminate a culture where sexual harassment is accepted is valid. It will reduce incidence in schools and in greater society for future generations. However, more is needed to be done about the participation of those above school age in perpetuating the culture of harassment, not only via means of harassment directly but through tolerance of this behaviour from others.

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