Author expertise and focus

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This contribution to the present inquiry focuses on the online dimension of sexual harassment and sexual violence experienced by children and young people in the UK. We base it on our research projects, especially those conducted for the European Commission and for the European NGO Alliance for Child Safety Online.

1. Executive summary

- In 2013-14, 15% of UK 9- to 16-year-olds had been bothered, uncomfortable or upset by something online in the previous year. Such experiences are reported much more by girls, older teens and those from high SES homes. In 2010, the figure was a little lower, at 13%.
- Contrary to popular opinion, nationally representative survey research suggests that lately in the UK there has been a sizeable decrease in the proportion of young people receiving sexual messages via the internet or mobile phone.
- Qualitative research suggests that strong double standards prevail in the case of sexting as with other types of sexual behaviour. It was reported that boys frequently pressure girls into sending sexual pictures, yet when they send these images they are harshly judged as ‘sluts’ and they become vulnerable to further harassment.
Overall, the issue of gender seems to be at the centre of the sexual harassment problem both in real and digital world. There exists a “deeply rooted notion that girls and young women's bodies are somehow the property of boys and young men” (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012, p. 28) which results in various forms of harassment directed at girls.

A whole range of sexual harassment behaviours, for example, verbal requests for sexual acts, have been intensified through digital and mobile technologies. Visual scrutiny and bodily objectification that is ever-present in teens’ digital interactions can easily escalate from the consensual forms of playing to technologically mediated harassment.

In terms of intervention, it is important to make sure that restrictions are not the sole or primary response, especially insofar as these limit girls’ activities or seem to perpetuate victim-blaming. Rather, it is important to support the development of important coping strategies and relevant social skills (Dobson & Ringrose, 2015).

Most important is to introduce a comprehensive sex and relationship education into the school curricula, across the age range, with a focus on emotions, consent, sources of reliable information, and awareness of gender issues.

2. Establishing the scale of the problem – see Livingstone et al. (2014) at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/57598/

- In 2013-14, 15% of UK 9- to 16-year-olds had been bothered, uncomfortable or upset by something online in the previous year. Such experiences are reported much more by girls, older teens and those from high SES homes. In 2010, the figure was a little lower, at 13%.
- Online upsetting experiences are much higher among smartphone and tablet users than nonusers, reflecting the fact that these children do more online generally, and possibly more privately from their parents.
- Taking online and offline bullying together, 21% of children aged 9-16 said this had happened to them, and 18% overall were upset by what happened. The incidence of bullying is higher among girls, and this marks a substantial rise since 2010.
- UK children aged 11-16 report receiving fewer sexual messages (4%) than the European average (11%). This represents a notable decrease since 2010 (when the figure was 12%). As with cyberbullying, receiving sexual messages is reported more often by smartphone and tablet users, especially via SNSs.
- Seventeen per cent of children aged 9-16 reported seeing sexual images in the past year, online or offline – this is less than across Europe (28%) and less than in 2010 in the UK (24%). This is more common among teenagers, and girls, who are also more likely to report being upset, or even very upset by this.
- Twenty-nine per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds had seen one or more of the potentially negative forms of user-generated content (UGC) asked about, with hate messages (23%) being the most common, followed by self-harm sites (17%). Such exposure
represented a sharp increase on 2010, and was more common among teens, especially 15- to 16-year-olds.

- When they encounter an upsetting problem on the internet, UK children are much more likely than the European average to talk to others (to mothers 48%, friends 26%, and teachers, near the bottom, at 7%). Twelve per cent said that they did not tell anyone when something bothered them online.

3. Understanding the nature of the problem

It is important to establish that the set of behaviours referred to as ‘sexting’ or sexual harassment online incorporates a wider range of practices than one might imagine. These may include

- boys asking girls for photos in their bra, bikini or with naked breasts etc.;
- boys claiming to have such photos on their phones;
- girls and boys sending sexually explicit messages over the phone or internet;
- the negotiation of sexual propositions on digital devices;
- the accessing and recirculation of pornography on phones;
- and the use of sexually explicit photographs on Facebook or as the default picture on networks such as Blackberry Messenger. (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012, p.25)

Research suggests that lately in the UK there has been a sizeable decrease in the proportion of young people receiving sexual messages via the internet or mobile phone. While in 2010, 12% of children reported receiving such messages this number dropped to 4% in 2014. (Livingstone et al, 2014). While the numbers are relatively low it is still important to identify the adolescents who are engaged in sexting and sexual harassment in order to prevent the potential adverse consequences of this behaviour. It is largely agreed that older adolescents (age 16 and 17) are more likely to engage in sexting that the younger ones (Lenhart, 2009, Mitchell et al., 2012, Livingstone et al., 2011) as they tend to be more interested in sexuality. Older adolescents also tend to use the internet more and are less likely to be supervised by their parents and, therefore, have a greater number of opportunities to engage in sexting, whether consensual or coercive (Livingstone et al, 2014).

Gender differences, while less pronounced, can also be observed in relation to sexting. While boys seem to be more likely to use the internet to satisfy their sexual interests the results are mixed. The results of a qualitative study conducted by Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, and Harvey (2012) suggests that strong double standards prevail in the case of sexting and sexual harassment as with other types of sexual behaviour. Boys frequently pressured girls into sending sexual pictures, yet when they send these images they are harshly judged as ‘sluts’ and they become vulnerable to further harassment. In contrast, it was perceived as normal for boys to produce and show off their possession of sexual images received from girls.

Overall, the issue of gender seems to be at the centre of the sexual harassment problem both in real and digital world. There exists a “deeply rooted notion that girls and young women’s bodies are somehow the property of boys and young men” (Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012, p. 28) which results in various forms of harassment directed at girls. This, in
A whole range of sexual harassment behaviours, for example, verbal requests for sexual acts, have been intensified through digital and mobile technologies. Visual scrutiny and bodily objectification that is ever-present in teens’ digital interactions can easily escalate from the consensual forms of playing to technologically mediated harassment, such as being repeatedly asked for photos. If girls refuse to send their photos to someone they may still become objects of the routine forms of sexism. On the other hand, when girls do engage in sexting they face much harsher judgement when those images are shared beyond the intended recipient (Livingstone & Mason, 2015).

The impact of double standards that exist around the development of positive sexual subjectivity adds pressure upon girls and young women. This pressure further increased by digital technologies allows them little space to explore or articulate their own sexual desires or wishes. On those rare occasions when girls do express their desires a significant identity work has to be undertaken in order to avoid negative stigmatisation. As a consequence, girls often adopt a slightly fatalistic attitude towards the situation accepting it as a given.

4. What impact is pornography having on levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools?

It is widely agreed that exposure to pornographic material may have an impact on young people’s sexual attitudes, expectations and beliefs. More specifically, they learn sexual behaviours and scripts from those depicted in pornography (Alexy, Burgess & Prentky, 2009; Haggstrom-Nordin et al, 2006; Hunter et al, 2009). In their longitudinal study Brown and L’Engle (2009) found a link between exposure to pornography and more permissive sexual attitudes. They also noted a relationship between adolescents’ exposure to sexually explicit material and less progressive gender role attitudes for both males and females. In addition, boys who had greater exposure to pornographic materials were more likely to engage in sexual harassment in adolescence. Flood (2009) also finds that exposure to such materials may sustain sexist attitudes towards both intercourse and relationships. For boys and young men frequent exposure to sexually explicit materials, consumption also intensifies attitudes that are supportive of sexual coercion.

5. What can be done by school and other stakeholders to deal with sexual harassment?

In terms of intervention, it is important to make sure that restrictions are not the sole or primary response, especially insofar as these limit girls’ activities or seem to perpetuate victim-blaming. Rather, it is important to support the development of important coping strategies and relevant social skills (Dobson & Ringrose, 2015).

4.1. Introduce comprehensive sex educations into the school curricula

It is important to introduce a comprehensive sex and relationship education into the school curricula. In order to start addressing some of the issues in advance the relevant modules
might have to be introduced before young children become interested in sexuality. While it is expected that teachers may experience some degree of embarrassment about sexual matters and be reluctant to raise certain issues with their student. The same level of embarrassment is probably experiences by parent and this leaves teenagers with few or no adults with whom to discuss the matters of their developing sexuality. Therefore, matters related to the internet and the use of its capabilities for exercising one’s sexual rights and ensuring sexual protection should be embedded into such curricula. Such topics as emotions, consent, sources of reliable information, critical analysis of available information ought to be discussed in addition to sexual and reproductive health issues.

Importantly, teachers should be able to recognise that not all sexting is inherently problematic and that it does not necessarily lead to embarrassment and disappointment. Adolescents’ interest in developing their sexuality and exploring sexual ideas should be embedded in the discussions alongside with the themes of respect, consent and reciprocity in sexual relationships, including digital sexual communications. At the same time teachers should remain aware of the fact that sexual harassment, both online and offline, may not come from a stranger but rather from another child in the same class. They may, in short, be addressing both perpetrator and victim in the same lesson.

Various devices and digital platforms have different affordances and offer different capabilities. Therefore, in order to remain credible with the student it is important that teachers and schools remain aware of the technology students are using and the platforms they favour (Livingstone & Mason, 2015).

4.2. Teach about consent

The issue of sending self-generated images or images taken by an intimate partner brings consent under a microscope (Albury & Crawford, 2012). As discussed previously, sexting can become a source of significant pressure and coercion for girls (e.g. Ringrose et al, 2012). Furthermore, if intimate pictures are shared without consent beyond the intended recipient it may result in devastative consequences for young women and sometimes young men. It has been argued that in the context of digital communications and modern, largely digitised, environment the boundaries between consensual and coerced sex may become blurry which pose additional challenges to navigating relationships (Powell, 2010).

With many confusing messages about sex readily available from media sources, it is more important than ever to engage young people in conversations about consent (Kearney, 2011). Many researchers argue that educational programmes need to counteract ideas that devalue female sexuality, and young people should be educated about responsibility of obtaining enthusiastic consent, where both parties express mutual pleasure, not a form of consent where women are required to make their refusal or displeasure loudly heard (Powell, 2010).

4.3. Support to and from parents

Both schools and governments ought to offer additional supports reinforced with relevant materials to make sure they are capable of providing advice and guidance to children and
young people on issues related to sex, relationships and sexualisation in commerce, the media and online. These materials should be adjusted depending on the age of a child in order to help parents to engage in an age-appropriate conversation. In addition to being age-specific these materials should also be tailored to children’s diverse needs, including those who are at risk or from a sexual, ethnic or other minority, avoiding inappropriate assumptions about ‘typical’ or ‘normal’ development.

As mentioned previously older adolescents are less likely to be supervised by their parents while they use the internet which opens up a window of opportunity for engaging in sexual activity. A common reasoning behind this trend is that older children have enough skills and are capable of looking after themselves. While the skills do tend to improve, it has to be remembered that during the teenage years the degree and variety of sexual experimentation increases, and each step may bring new challenges and risks to the young person’s wellbeing. Therefore, parents need to adjust and develop their approach as their children grow up and face different challenges in relation to technologically mediated communications.

Nonetheless, it would be inappropriate for policy makers to rely too heavily on parental responsibility for their children’s wellbeing. This is not because most parents refuse such responsibility but rather because, for some of the more vulnerable children most in need of support and guidance, their parents in particular may be less able or willing to help. For especially vulnerable children, therefore, or those already disadvantaged or ‘at risk’ in their everyday lives, the chances are both that their online activities may compound their problems and, further, that their parents may be less able to alleviate them. For the most vulnerable children especially, the responsibility for their well-being must be spread across multiple stakeholders

4.4. Pay closer attention to vulnerable, at-risk and minority groups

Young people who are more vulnerable to risk are vulnerable both online and offline. Young people who have already been victimised or who experience psychological distress may be more vulnerable to future victimisation. It is suggested that those who are at greater risk of harmful online sexual experiences are youth who are part of a sexual minority, vulnerable due to past abuse or difficult family circumstances, or otherwise at risk due to disability, discrimination, poverty, homelessness or other difficult personal circumstances (Mitchell, Ybarra & Korchamaros, 2014).

REFERENCES


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