

Tackling teenage sexual violence: history shows culture, not just technology, should be addressed

Dr Hannah Charnock (University of Bristol)

About the research

Debates over the prevalence of peer-based sexual violence among teenagers and young people were reignited by Soma Sara's [Everyone's Invited](#) movement in 2021. In the space of several months almost 15,000 Everyone's Invited users shared experiences of sexual harassment and abuse. These revelations have called into question how well [government guidance on how to handle sexual violence between young people in education settings](#) is being implemented. They also highlight areas for development within the delivery of Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) both within and beyond schools.

The historical research outlined here shows this is not a new problem. It highlights the long history of sexual harassment and violence experienced by young women in England, drawing attention to the deep-rooted understandings of intimate relationships and adolescent sexual practice that underpin these experiences.

This research explored teenage girls' experiences of sexuality between 1950 and 1980. Drawing upon reflective testimonies, including 45 original oral history interviews and over 150 accounts collected as part of the [Mass Observation Project](#), it offers first-hand accounts of young women's experiences of sex and sexuality.

The continuities in young women's experiences indicate that the problem of sexual abuse in schools is not a new phenomenon linked solely to the advent of digital technologies but reflects deep-rooted issues within British sexual culture. These findings have significant implications for how RSE should be delivered as well as how safeguarding structures operate in schools and colleges.



Policy implications

- *Safeguarding and education policies should address deeply-embedded cultures of adolescent sexuality, intimate relationships and sexual practice. They should not focus solely on the problems posed by social media and the internet.*
- *Sex education delivered both within and outside schools should acknowledge that young people engage in a wide range of intimate and sexual behaviours. It must be clear to students that issues of consent, coercion, and mutual respect apply to all forms of sexual activity, not simply penetrative intercourse.*
- *Sex education should acknowledge the varying relationship formations in which young people engage in sexual activity. It must be clear to students that issues of consent, coercion, and mutual respect apply within all interactions not simply in clearly-defined romantic relationships.*
- *Sex educators should avoid gendered and hierarchical explanations of sexual activity that normalise male aggression and female passivity as a 'natural' part of sexual experience.*
- *Safeguarding structures should recognise the porous boundaries between young people's home, school, and social lives. Reporting structures need to clearly set out the boundaries of oversight so that young people (and responsible adults) know how to report abuse that occurs in locations other than school or college grounds.*
- *Sex education should include discussions of the various forms of medical, social and legal support available to those affected by sexual assault and harassment. While taking potential trauma seriously, it should be made clear to those affected by sexual harassment and abuse that it is possible to have meaningful sexual relationships and experiences following assault.*

Key findings

Personal testimonies of the post-war generation suggest that teenage sexuality had a different character to adult sexuality. Testimonies also record numerous instances of sexual harassment, abuse, coercion, assault and rape. Many of these abuses were committed by fellow young people and occurred within existing intimate relationships. The experiences articulated resonate clearly with young women's accounts of assault and harassment in twenty-first century Britain.

- *Teenage sexuality was embedded in developmental understandings of adolescence.* The teenage years were characterised as a time when young people were discovering and testing the boundaries of their sexuality as they gradually developed to sexual maturity.
- *Young people engaged in intimate behaviour in different types of relationships.* These included engagement, couples who were 'going steady', casual or early stage relationships, individual dates, one-night stands, friendship, and fleeting encounters with acquaintances (including dares and games).
- *Young people's intimate lives were embedded in their social networks and extended across multiple spaces and locations.* Relationships between classmates were lived out in domestic homes and leisure spaces, as well as in the classroom and on the playground. Relationships with partners from outside the school community were often known about and discussed with school friends.
- *Post-war teenagers engaged in a wide range of intimate behaviour.* This included various forms of kissing, touching one another's bodies, genital stimulation, mutual masturbation, oral sex, and penetrative intercourse.
- *Sexual activity was thought of in hierarchical terms.* Having penetrative sex for the first time ('losing your virginity') was a particularly profound threshold but other forms of sexual activity were also ranked.
- *Although many girls engaged in sexual activity willingly and enthusiastically, others described situations and dynamics where distinctions between coercion and consent were blurred.*
- *It was widely believed that young men were naturally more sexually aggressive than girls and that the male partner would be the one to encourage movement from one stage of sexual activity to another.*
- The notion of 'boys try, girls deny' was common and many women described having to constantly 'fight off' partners and boyfriends who wanted to engage in higher-level intimate acts. This did not just apply to penetrative intercourse but across all levels of intimate behaviour and sexual activity. While many women were able to assert their unwillingness to engage in sexual activity, some described having consented to sex after having been 'worn down' by partners, and others described having been assaulted or raped.
- Experiences of harassment and abuse were notable moments in women's sexual life histories. However, *experiences of abuse did not necessarily define women's sexual lives and many went on to have meaningful sexual, romantic and intimate relationships and experiences.*

"First of all is ordinary kissing with your mouth closed, then it's kissing with your mouth open and then more kissing [gesticulates touching through clothes] and then the fellas trying to get their hand up your bra, was always, I mean or sort of feeling your bra and then undoing your bra or getting your hand up under your bra, all that sort of stuff."

'Diana' (b. 1947)

Further reading

Hannah Charnock, 'Teenage girls, female friendship and the making of the 'sexual revolution' in England, c. 1950-1980', *Historical Journal* 63, No. 4 (2020), 1032-53.

Tanya Horeck, Jessica Ringrose and Kaitlynn Mendes, '[Schools urgently need to tackle rape culture by educating pupils about online world](#)', *The Conversation* (31 March 2021)

Carlene Firmin, 'School rules of (sexual) engagement: government, staff and student contributions to the norms of peer sexual-abuse in seven UK schools', *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 26, No. 3 (2020), 289-301.

Cicely Marston, '[Concerned about porn? Here's what we should really worry about](#)', *The Conversation* (16 June 2016)

Contact the researchers

Dr Hannah Charnock, Lecturer in British History: hannah.charnock@bristol.ac.uk