



ON THE FRONTLINE: DEVELOPING BYSTANDERS' RESPONSES TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

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Violence against women was included on the international political agenda in the 1970s and in Portugal in the 1980s. Over the current decade, Sexual Harassment (SH) has been denounced as the most prevalent form of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG).

In 1979, Catherine Mackinnon was the first author to propose a definition of sexual harassment, as a form of sexual and gender discrimination, with particular emphasis on the use of this form of violence in the workplace. Moreover, in Portugal, only in 1994 did SH become a topic of academic research (Amâncio & Lima, 1994),

Sexual harassment is not only a concept, but also a research topic, and it has been documented as an important form of VAWG by the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2011), as well as the most prevalent form of violence against girls and women, across all the 28 EU member states, by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in 2014.

This form of gender-based violence (GBV) is characterized by the existence of unwanted verbal, nonverbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature, resulting in intimidation, humiliation and / or attempting to denigrate the victim's image (Council of Europe, 2011). Sexual harassment has been acknowledged as a widespread tolerated form of violent sexism and misogyny towards adolescents, that harms their physical, psychological, sexual and social development (Magalhães & Pontedeira, 2018).

Sexual harassment in the school context has been studied internationally, however, studies showing the prevalence of this violence in such young ages are still scarce. Sexual harassment has been addressed in awareness-raising sessions, but holistic projects specific about the topic are not known to the authors best knowledge.

Where school prevention is concerned, SH appears, at times, diluted in other broader topics, or addressed in university campuses, with different approaches to intervention (Magalhães et al., 2017). Some of the projects, targeting mostly students and teachers, that we would like to highlight are: the Gear Project (2016, op. cit), that benefited teachers, professionals and teens; the Bringing in the Bystander program (Banyard, Moynihan, & Crossman, 2009, op. cit), that worked with university students and resident advisors; the Mentors in Violence Prevention model applied to a high school setting (Katz, Heisterkamp & Fleming, 2011, op. cit); or even the Teen Action Toolkit (Whitman, 2007, op. cit), offering a range of activities to teens and professionals (from education to law enforcement). Amongst others, these projects provided a framework for the Bystanders' Project we will focus on next.

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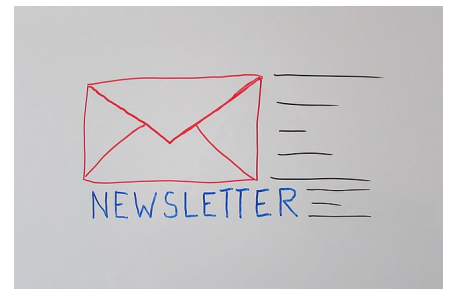
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The Bystanders' Project was a pioneer prevention programme in all the countries where it took place, due to its approach to preventing sexual harassment in schools through Bystanders. Within it, the *Speak Up/Speak Out* programme "was considered innovative in relation to preventative work in schools, where there has thus far been little discussion or action" (Dhaliwal & Kelly, 2019: 4).

The Bystanders' Project – Developing Bystanders' responses to sexual harassment among young people was a school-based prevention project, developed between 2016 and 2018, in four countries: Portugal, Malta, United Kingdom and Slovenia. The project aimed to increase the awareness and knowledge of young people and professionals about sexual harassment in the school context, and its prevention through the action of bystanders. Bystanders are all those who have witnessed or are aware of a harassment situation and who may intervene in it. An active and participatory methodology was used, focusing on an approach that involved the entire school community (students, teachers and staff) in a whole-school approach.

After the literature review, several focus groups were conducted in all the four countries oriented to design with the participants an intervention-model appropriate to their needs, interests and expectations. The pilot project was set up, and after that, some necessary adjustments have been made and elaborated a final guide for the project implementation. The final-program includes three sessions with students in secondary education (two separated by sex and one with all youngsters gathered in the class) and two sessions with teachers/school staff. After the project's implementation, a follow-up session was also held with students to a better understanding of the long-term outcomes.

Given this brief methodological description, it is important to emphasize that this paper will focus on the main results obtained in the intervention with the students only. The following table summarizes the total number of youth participants by school and country.

Table 1: Number of student participants by country and school

COUNTRY	SCHOOL 1	SCHOOL 2	SCHOOL 3	TOTAL
ENGLAND	44	15	13	72
MALTA	30	25	19	74
PORTUGAL	32	51	39	122
SLOVENIA	60	62	39	161

(Dhaliwal & Kelly, 2019: 13)

Recognizing and understanding Sexual Harassment

The results were not consistent within schools or across the four countries, however, in general, it was possible to conclude that sexual harassment is normalised and tolerated at schools. Despite some behaviours are seen by some students as severe, and by others with less severity, it is consensual that they view SH as a joke or as bullying.

One of the most important results is that students made a distinction between the seriousness of touching and non-touching forms of SH, considering the first one more severe, despite sometimes girls had entirely normalized, for instance, boys slapping girls on their bums. Across the schools, students identified a huge array of potential harassers including: professors, priests, family members, school friends and the influence of power relations. In terms of victims, they consider that there is a wide range of victims. Nevertheless, there was a tendency to identify girls/women as more likely to be the victims of SH. As potential locations for harassment, students identified as more dangerous places like internet/online, schools, parks, on the street, on buses, at bus stops, in the toilets.

In all countries it was also possible to identify forms of victim-blaming or to justify the violent behaviour, by labelling victims of SH as 'provocative' (e.g. by their clothing) and 'daring' and as less respectful, and by claiming that boys have difficulties controlling themselves because of their hormones, and also convinced themselves that the girls 'liked it'. Moreover, boys, projected SH as a show of affection and love.

Responding to Sexual Harassment

The participants aimed to implement several responses to sexual harassment in their schools. Generally, after the project, their willingness to help prevent sexual harassment in their schools was great in all countries.

After these sessions, students were more engaged with action and felt they had more knowledge and power to prevent these forms of violence. For example in England, a female student that firstly described sexual harassment as normal behaviour from boys was keen to be part of a poster campaign against this form of violence at the end of the programme. In Portugal, girls that have described feelings of shame, fear or compassion towards the victim and, at the end of the implementation, mentioned feelings as anger and resistance.

Nevertheless, when considering how they would respond to sexual harassment, students also highlighted the reasons why they would not intervene (if applicable). Some of these reasons were related to not thinking it was important to intervene, minimizing the harassment situation and lack of interest. Despite being a minority, these arguments demonstrate that the programme was not successful with all students. Slovenia, Malta and Portugal encountered challenging groups, especially where boys were the majority of participants.

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Responses to sexual harassment were addressed with a role-play exercise and gender differences were found in England and Malta: whilst girls as bystanders would try to support the victim and stand by her; boys tended to act more aggressively – facing and confronting the offender.

In the programme, that aimed for students' action against sexual harassment, several activities were prepared and implemented by the participants, representing a fundamental outcome result of this project. Amongst other, activities through schools included designing websites, poster campaigns, photography exhibitions, song writing, debates, or the creation of cocktails and drinks against SH.

Concluding, students were responsive to this project, were engaged with its aims, and actual responses to sexual harassment have happened in each of the schools involved, encouraging participants to be active bystanders and proactive in finding solutions to reduce violence.

Final Reflections

Sexual harassment prevention has been addressed differently in several projects and countries. The Bystanders Project aimed to increase knowledge and provide tools to prevent and combat SH in schools. Although the sessions were held with young people, teachers and school staff, this paper focused on the main results achieved with youth intervention in the four countries. While the results are quite different depending on the context, the Project has achieved the main objectives that were initially outlined. Although some studies relate bullying to the occurrence of sexual violence in schools (e.g. Espelage, *et al.*, 2012), explaining to young people the difference between these behaviours was an objective effectively achieved by the Project. As well as stated by Banyard and colleagues (2007), the three-session program produced significant results, namely in changing the feelings and behaviours of young people.

The focus on bystanders offers an alternative perspective towards the combat against this form of violence. An engaged youth and their willingness to help is key for the continuation of implementation of prevention programs that speak to their needs and work toward making them active bystanders and alert citizens.

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Bystanders' project literature review.

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