

Written submission from the National Union of Students (SPP0108)

Introduction

1. The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through our member students' unions, we represent the interests of more than seven million students. NUS represents students and students' unions to ensure that education is transformative, skills and learning are accessible and every student in the UK is empowered to achieve their potential.
2. NUS welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Women and Equalities Select Committee, and would be pleased to provide further evidence in any way the Committee may see fit.

The scale and impact of sexual harassment of women and girls in public places

3. In educational settings, sexual harassment is widespread with over two thirds of women having experienced some kind of verbal or non-verbal harassment in their institutions.ⁱ
4. NUS' 2010 report 'Hidden Marks' shows harassment to be normalised for women students. It also uncovered widespread experiences of stalking, experienced by 12% of respondents, and kissing, touching or molesting, experienced by 16%, much of which happened in public spaces.
5. A further NUS report in 2014 on 'lad culture' found that 37% of women and 12% of men surveyed had faced unwanted sexual advances at university.ⁱⁱ
6. NUS report 'Power in the academy', about staff to student sexual misconduct, found that 41% of respondents had experienced some form of sexual misconduct from staff.ⁱⁱⁱ
7. Women were more likely than men to have experienced some form of misconduct, and gay, queer and bisexual women were more likely than heterosexual women to have experienced misconduct. This was true across most cases of behaviour – suggesting that marginalised groups face further risks of harassment.
8. Power in the academy found that it is common for shared spaces to be sexualised by staff – through unwanted touching, sexualised comments and jokes, and other forms of sexualised behaviour.
9. NUS's 'Hidden Marks' research focused entirely on the experiences of women students and these women reported perpetrators to be predominantly men, with 89% reported male.^{iv}
10. Our Power in the academy report also found 76% of reported perpetrators to be male, and 17% female.^v
11. Furthermore, the vast majority of perpetrators were academic staff, suggesting that the learning environment in higher education is sexualised in unequal ways. Even in

public places, both these reports found that in educational settings, the perpetrators are still in the majority of cases known to the person experiencing harassment.

12. In an educational context, harassment impacts on women in a variety of negative ways. It can negatively impact on the education, including educational outcomes, for students.
13. Deterioration of mental health is also one of the key impacts. Poor health and educational outcomes for women are likely to have a wider impact on society in terms of service use and economic outcomes.
14. 'Power in the Academy' found that women respondents were more likely than men to report experiencing negative consequences as a result of misconduct and harassment, and to experience more serious consequences.^{vi}
15. Women were more than three times as likely than men to have changed their behaviour or academic trajectory because of misconduct.
16. Women were also far more likely to say that they avoided going on fieldwork or conferences and made up the vast majority of participants who reported obtaining lower grades, requesting academic deadline extensions, and suffering physical health problems.
17. Our 'Hidden Marks' research also reported the negative impacts on education, attendance and confidence for victims of harassment. Loss of motivation, commitment and even leaving education were all cited as consequences of harassment. Furthermore, deterioration of mental health is the most common consequence of harassment for women – but not all of those who are affected will seek help.^{vii}
18. The impact on women cannot be underestimated. This undoubtedly creates further gendered inequalities in higher education, on top of the existing barriers faced by women – which has knock on effects and implications for the reproduction of gendered norms and inequalities within academia and society more generally.

Why does sexual harassment of women in public places happen?

19. Sexual harassment of women and girls in public places is ubiquitous and normalised, as part of the prevailing culture of society. We note that sexual violence exists on a continuum, and individual acts of harassment cannot be seen in isolation: everyday behaviours considered 'low-level' are part of a continuous pattern of normative behaviour, opening up to more extreme forms of violence and abuse.
20. NUS' report into 'lad culture' describes a sexist, misogynist, homophobic culture which objectifies women and sometimes spills over into harassment and violence. These attitudes, even if they form a minority, appear to dominate social life, with a few men acting as gatekeepers for social spaces in a way that is very difficult to challenge. What counts as 'acceptable' behaviour is partly learned from received norms and witnessing what counts as 'acceptable', and in university, the social sphere, dominated by laddism, is described as a key site for the formation of campus culture.^{viii}

21. In the case of staff-student misconduct, academia is a high pressure environment which is policed by a few gatekeepers. Similarly to other competitive environments, the failure of witnesses to speak out has a normalising effect. In the academic environment, when the fate of student and supervisor can be so intertwined, the costs of reporting may outweigh the incentives.
22. Furthermore, women are at an epistemic disadvantage; they are constantly judged as unable to make sense of their own experiences, both by others and themselves, also causing them to question their own judgement of situations. Silence inevitably contributes to the normalisation of harassment, which ceases to be recognised as such.
23. We noted that the definitions of sexual harassment are themselves limited; misconduct can occur beyond the narrow sexual harassment context of 'unwanted behaviour' and exist as part of the culture of an organisation and a power imbalance, specifically in this case between students and staff at institutions.^{ix}

Preventing and responding to sexual harassment of women and girls in public places

24. **NUS believes that tackling sexual harassment and violence should be a priority, and that a culture which enabled sexual harassment both from strangers and towards those the perpetrators know must be addressed.**
25. Sexual harassment is enabled and perpetuated by the normalisation of cultural misogyny. Any action to tackle sexual harassment must start from the roots, with these structures and attitudes. As such, **we would urge the government to mandate statutory PSHE education from school age, which should cover issues such as consent and the construction of masculinities.**
26. Education institutions should also implement workshops on gender, power and consent for all faculty and students, in order to raise awareness of the damaging and gendered impacts of everyday misconduct and to change the culture around this
27. Educational establishments have a responsibility to tackle sexual harassment - as institutions that manage public spaces and that have the responsibility to support students who experience sexual harassment. Sexual harassment and misconduct is also a wider problem for the accessibility of education which should be particularly concerning to educational institutions.
28. Institutions such as universities and colleges have a responsibility to their students to support them if they are impacted by sexual harassment or misconduct. This has been recognised by representative bodies such as Universities UK.^x
29. Progress in this area has been highly variable by institution and low reporting rates likely mask more widespread failures to address this issue. As such, the Office for Students should lead on formulating more detailed guidelines on data collection in this area, in consultation with sector experts. This data should be publically available on an annual basis.
30. Our research shows that this is not currently the case, with institutional responses to reporting in particular seen as insufficient. Furthermore, mental health services both in institutions and generally, are already stretched and should be better funded.

31. Centralised reporting structures and care pathways for those that experience sexual harassment is central to developing a culture where survivors are believed, supported, and the issue is addressed.
32. Institutions should implement a single point of contact who is trained in responding to disclosures and investigations processes. They should implement better support systems for students who report, including counselling support and advocacy.

June 2018

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- ⁱ 'Hidden marks,' https://www.nus.org.uk/Global/NUS_hidden_marks_report_2nd_edition_web.pdf
 - ⁱⁱ 'That's what she said,' <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/nus-calls-for-summit-on-lad-culture/>
 - ⁱⁱⁱ 'Power in the academy,' <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-staff-student-sexual-misconduct-report>
 - ^{iv} 'Hidden marks,' https://www.nus.org.uk/Global/NUS_hidden_marks_report_2nd_edition_web.pdf
 - ^v 'Power in the academy,' <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-staff-student-sexual-misconduct-report>
 - ^{vi} Ibid
 - ^{vii} 'Hidden marks,' https://www.nus.org.uk/Global/NUS_hidden_marks_report_2nd_edition_web.pdf
 - ^{viii} 'That's what she said,' <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/nus-calls-for-summit-on-lad-culture/>
 - ^{ix} Kelly, L., *Surviving Sexual Violence*, University of Minnesota Press, 1988
 - ^x <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/changing-the-culture-final-report.aspx>