RSACC
Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Centre
Darlington and County Durham

THE GENDERED EXPERIENCE OF RAPE CULTURE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE: INSIGHTS FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

MAY 2025
RAPE & SEXUAL ABUSE COUNSELLING CENTRE - DARLINGTON & CO. DURHAM
WITH THANKS TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOL INVOLVED

Contents

Executive Summary

This report explores the gendered experience of rape culture and sexual violence among secondary school students. Drawing on 617 anonymous survey responses from students aged 11–17, the research reveals clear patterns of gendered discomfort, harassment, and underreporting. Female and non-binary students were significantly more likely to have experienced multiple forms of unwanted attention, including comments about their appearance, sexual comments, physical touch and unsolicited sexual images. Male students were more likely to minimise or dismiss discomfort, although a notable minority also reported harmful experiences, predominantly sexual comments.

Key insights include the prevalence of such experiences within school and public environments, the emotional toll of discomfort ranging from shame and anxiety to detachment and avoidance, and the reluctance to seek support via formal structures such as school staff. Peer norms against “snitching” were identified as a key cultural barrier to disclosure or intervention. The data revealed statistically significant differences in the type and frequency of experiences across gender groups confirming a systemic, gendered pattern in students’ exposure to ‘uncomfortable’ behaviours.

Introduction

Over the course of a year delivering assemblies, workshops, and one-to-one sessions in a secondary school, clear patterns began to emerge in how students of different genders discussed their experiences and perceptions of rape culture and sexual violence. Some boys acknowledged that sexual harassment appeared to affect girls more frequently, while others dismissed its existence entirely, citing a lack of personal experience. These reflections, which aligned with observations made by a partner organisation, led us to design a survey exploring both the differences and commonalities in how students of all genders experience and understand these issues.

Definitions

As defined by Rape Crisis England and Wales:

Rape culture - “a society where sexual violence and abuse is normalised, played down and laughed off. And where women and girls are seen as ‘less than’ men and boys.”

Sexual violence is “any sexual activity that happens without consent. This includes rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and more. When people hear the word 'violence', they often think of physical violence. But, sexual violence doesn't have to be physical. We use the word 'violence' because we believe it does a good job of explaining the serious and lasting impact that non-consensual sexual activity and acts can have on victims and survivors.”

Gendered power dynamics refer to the ways in which power is systematically distributed in favour of masculinity and against femininity or gender non-conformity. These dynamics are reinforced throughout society through cultural norms, language, media representations, and institutional practices, often resulting in the marginalisation, silencing, or objectification of girls and non-binary young people.

In school environments, these dynamics often manifest through:

- Normalisation of harassment as “just joking” “banter” or “boys being boys”
- Disproportionate victim-blaming of girls and gender-diverse students
- Under-reporting due to fear of retaliation, disbelief, or judgement especially from girls and non-binary/gender fluid young people.

This power imbalance sustains a rape culture where sexualised comments, coercion, and physical violations are dismissed or downplayed, whilst survivors are encouraged to suppress their experiences and isolate themselves rather than “snitching” or for fear of being blamed and shamed.

Context

Research shows that these patterns begin early. According to Renold (2005), children as young as eight internalise gendered scripts about male dominance and female compliance, which later underpin sexually aggressive behaviour.

The Children's Commissioner 2023 report "Pornography and young people" revealed that "79% of young adults aged 18-21 had seen pornography involving sexual violence before turning 18" with "the average age at which children first see pornography just under 13". It's undeniable that porn plays a key role in the sex education of children and young people, and it's important to recognise this context in which these students are growing up.

Addressing rape culture therefore, is not only about tackling individual incidents, but also about taking a holistic approach to dismantle the gendered power structures that allow such behaviours to persist unchallenged. In schools this includes teaching about consent, highlighting the impact of sexual violence to develop awareness and empathy, and creating institutional cultures where all genders feel equal, safe and believed.

Methodology

To reflect the language students used in workshops, our survey focused on experiences that made them feel "uncomfortable" — a term that students themselves repeatedly used to describe potentially harmful or inappropriate situations. This student-informed framing aimed to make the survey accessible, relatable, and emotionally safe.

The survey combined closed and open questions to allow for both measurable patterns and individual expression. It was distributed anonymously to students aged 11–17 across the secondary school, yielding 617 responses. These responses offer meaningful insight into how young people experience and interpret discomfort, boundaries, and gendered behaviour in their everyday lives.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the survey was anonymous, with students informed of the nature and purpose of the questions in age-appropriate language. Care was taken to avoid graphic or triggering content. The survey was checked, authorised, and circulated by the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) to ensure alignment with school policies and appropriate support procedures. Clear signposting to pastoral and external support services was provided. No identifiable information was collected, and all findings are presented in a way that protects the privacy and wellbeing of participants.

In the months leading up to the survey, RSACC delivered a programme of assemblies and targeted workshops within the school. Assemblies were presented to all year groups, while smaller group workshops were provided for:
Year 7&8 boys x5 pupils
Year 8&9 girls x3 pupils
Year 9 girls x4 pupils
Year 9&10 boys x5 pupils
Year 10 girls x9 pupils

These groups were identified by school staff as likely to benefit from more in-depth work. Workshops explored key themes such as:

- Consent
- Healthy relationships
- Rape myths
- Trauma responses
- Technology and sexual violence
- Impact of sexual violence
- Active bystander approaches

Figure 1 - Respondents by year group and gender

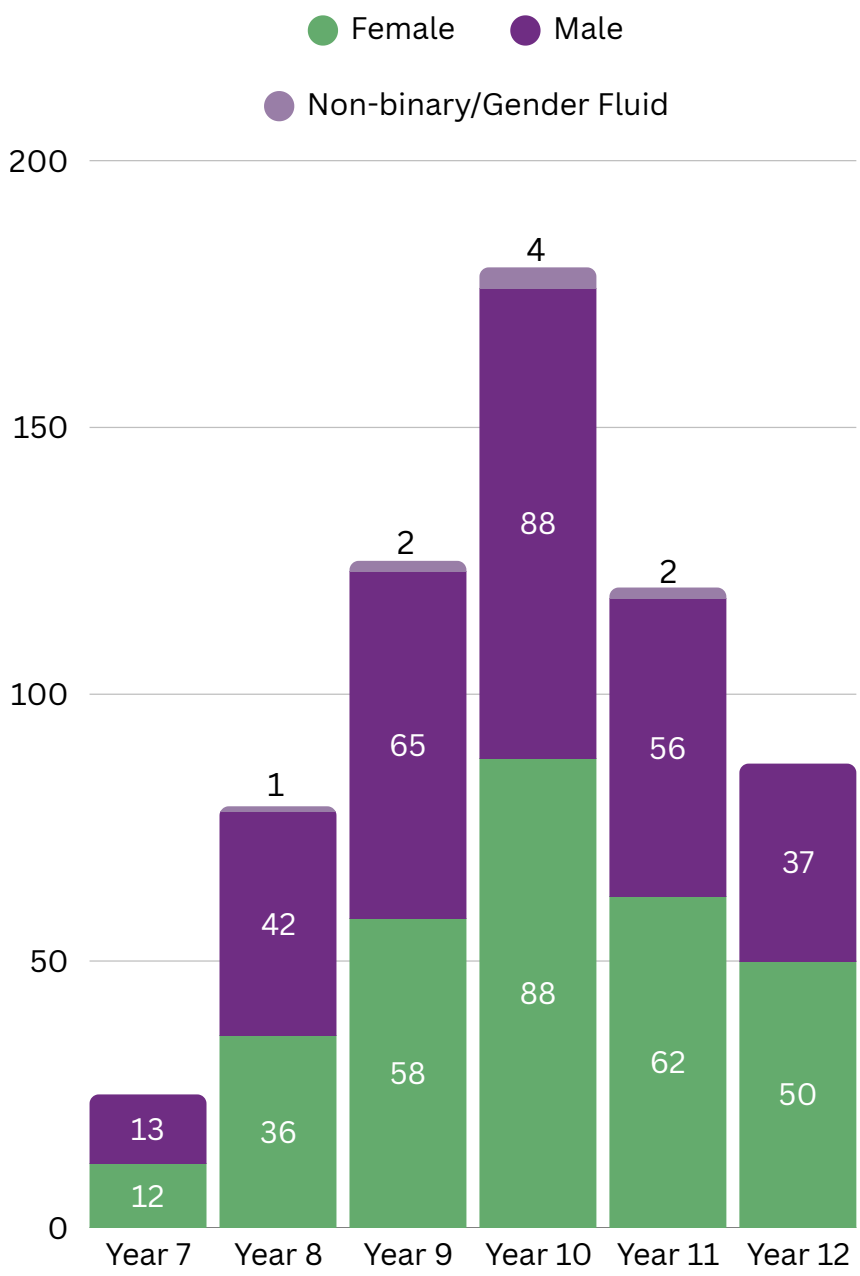
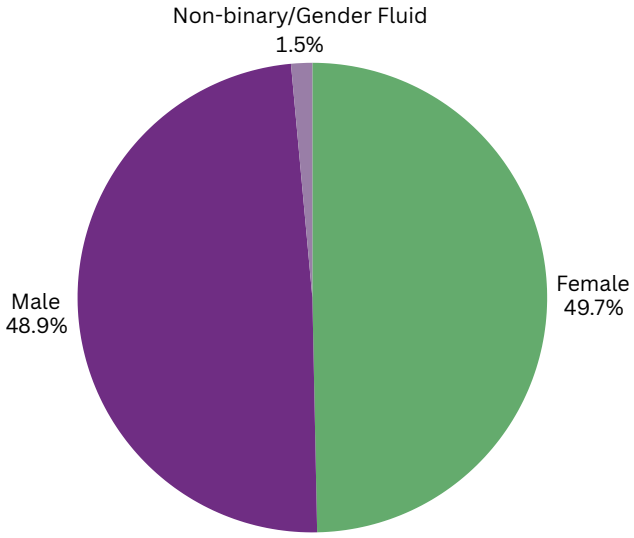


Figure 2 - Total respondents (N=617) by gender



Assemblies were tailored to be age-appropriate for each year group covered topics such as:

- Statistics on sexual violence
- The true meaning of consent
- Common rape myths
- The impact of sexual violence
- How to be an active bystander
- The impact of our actions on others
- Sources of support

It is important to note that this specialist work may have influenced how pupils responded to the survey.

Key Findings

The responses (from 306 female, 302 male, and 9 non-binary/gender fluid students) revealed a range of experiences and perceptions relating to rape culture and sexual violence. Patterns emerged showing that gender significantly shapes how students encounter and interpret discomfort, with girls more frequently reporting experiences such as unwanted comments about their bodies or clothing, while boys were more likely to report either minimal exposure or lack of awareness. Many students described feeling "awkward," "scared," or "confused" in response to these incidents, yet few reported turning to adults for support — most preferred speaking with friends or staying silent.

Discomfort most commonly occurred in schools and online spaces, highlighting environments where harmful behaviours are often normalised and go unchallenged. These findings reflect both the normalisation of such behaviour and a widespread lack of confidence in formal reporting pathways, reinforcing the need for targeted, inclusive interventions.

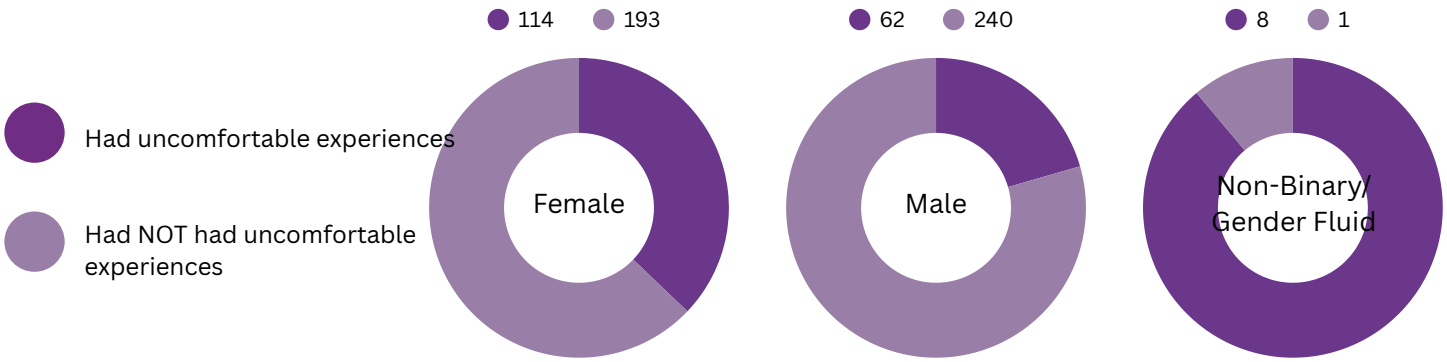


Figure 3 - Gendered breakdown of those who had and had NOT had uncomfortable experiences

To evaluate whether the types of uncomfortable experiences reported by students differed significantly by gender, a chi-squared test was conducted. The test compared reported frequencies of different forms of discomfort across female, male, and non-binary/gender fluid respondents. The result was:

Chi-squared (χ^2) = 54.55, degrees of freedom (df) = 6, p-value = <0.000000001

This p-value is below the 0.01 significance threshold, indicating a statistically significant difference in how students of different genders experience unwanted behaviours. Specifically, female students were significantly more likely to report both a higher frequency and more types of discomfort. Non-binary/gender fluid students reported the highest rate of multiple experiences per individual, while male students had fewer reports overall but still showed notable exposure.

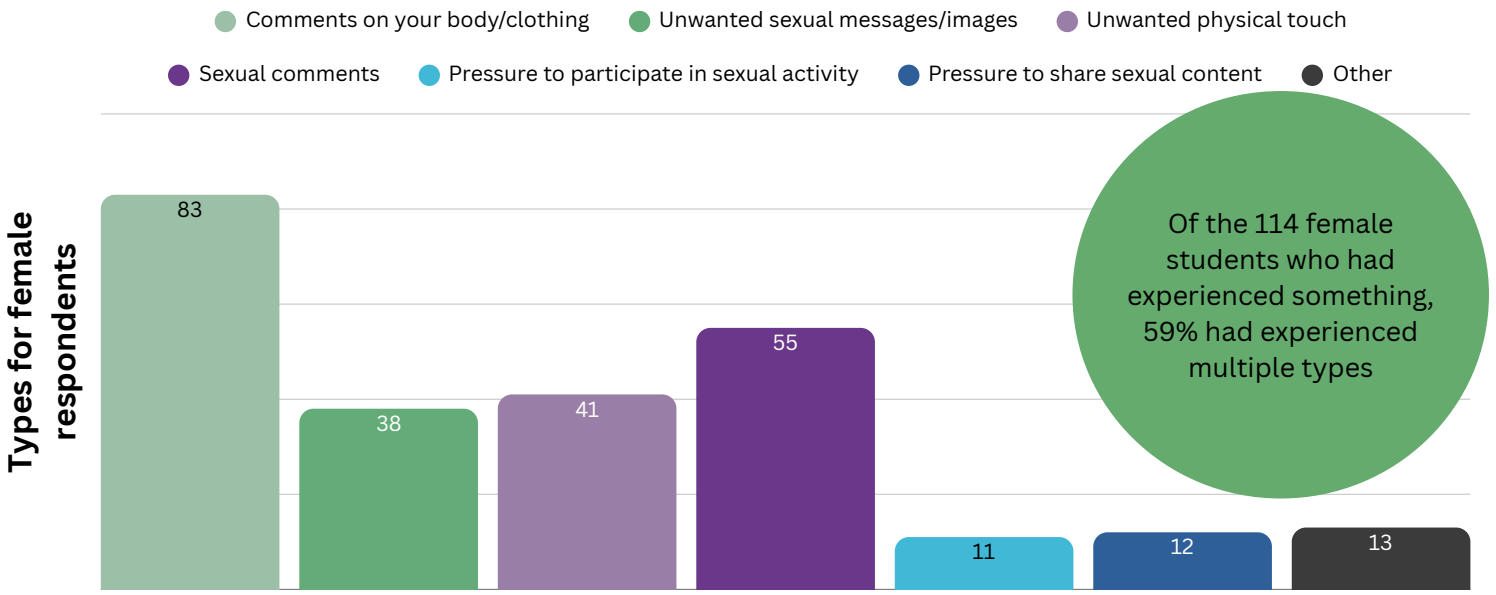


Figure 4 - Types of uncomfortable behaviours experienced by female respondents

Figure 5 - Types of uncomfortable behaviours experienced by male respondents

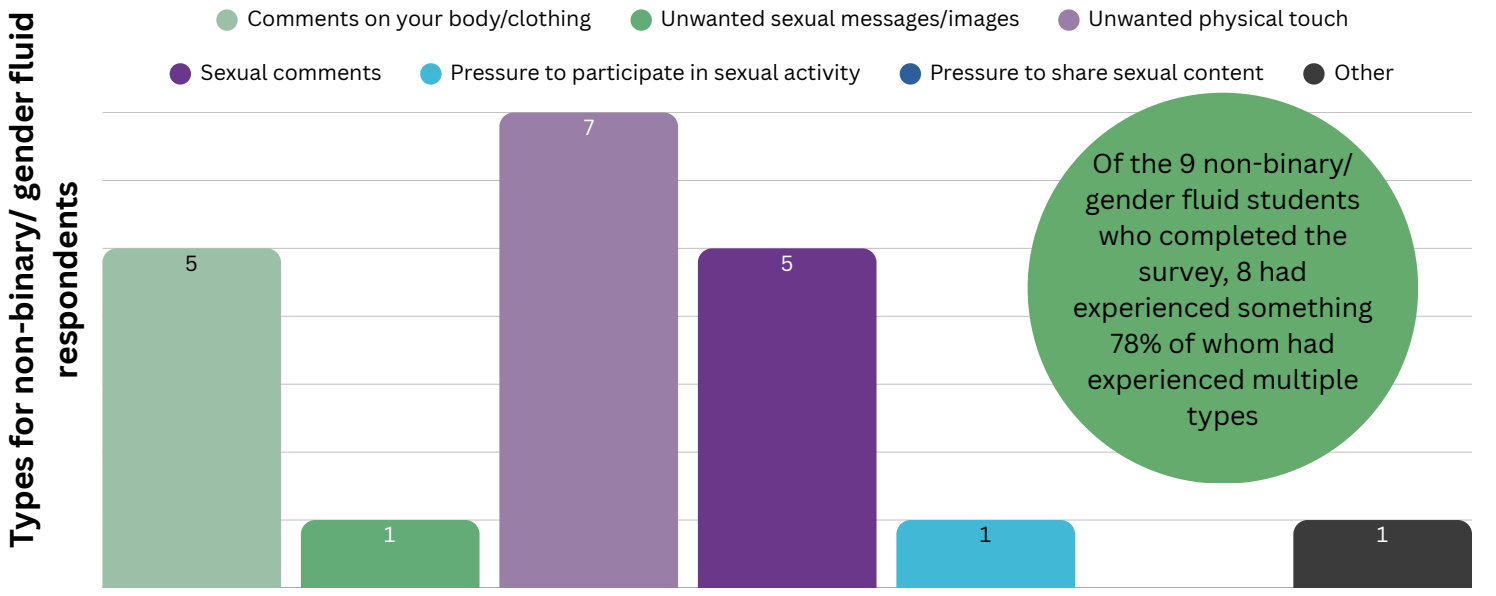


Figure 6 - Types of uncomfortable behaviours experienced by non-binary/ gender fluid respondents

82% of the female students who had experienced something reported either comments on their body/clothing and/or sexual comments

All but one non-binary/ gender fluid student reported experiencing at least one type of behaviour that made them uncomfortable

More female students experienced each uncomfortable behaviour than the male students, except sexual comments which was equal.

Interestingly, some of the students who responded “none” later identified that they had in fact experienced incidents but clearly did not class them as “uncomfortable” perhaps due to how normalised they were. The year group who reported the most experiences that made them uncomfortable were year 9 with 39% of respondents having experienced something at least once.

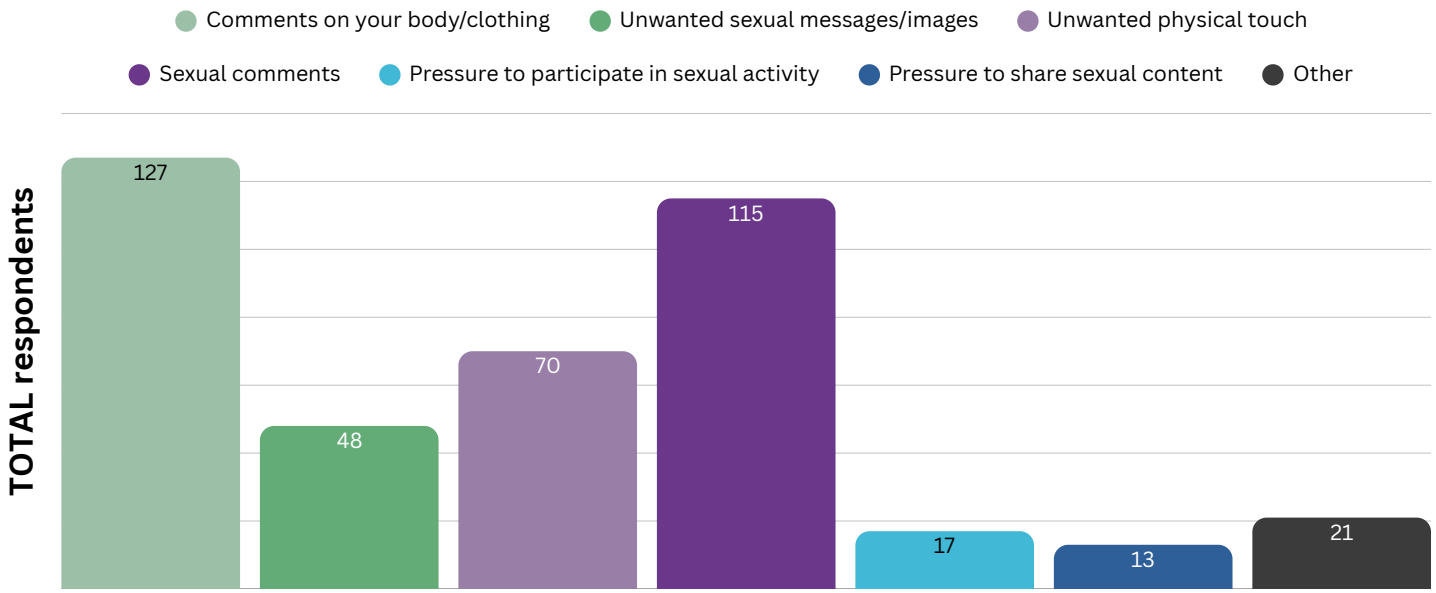


Figure 7 - Types of uncomfortable behaviours experienced by all respondents

The most frequently reported behaviour was unwanted comments on students’ bodies, clothing, or appearance. These included remarks about weight, physical development, or how clothing looked on someone. While often framed as jokes or compliments, students described these interactions as intrusive, distressing and objectifying.

“I don’t like the feeling of people making fun of my weight since I’m already struggling with it as i already judge myself”

“Unsure and self conscious when they comment on my style or build” “It just made me feel bad about myself and body.”

This type of behaviour affected students across genders, though it was most commonly reported by female students. For many, it was a regular occurrence that contributed to feelings of self-consciousness and low body confidence.

Students also reported explicit sexual remarks from peers. These ranged from demeaning jokes to targeted sexualised language.
“It makes me feel extremely upset.”
“I get creeped out and don't want to be there.”
Such comments left students feeling degraded or unsafe.
This behaviour was highly gendered, with male peers often cited as making the comments with female or non-binary students on the receiving end. These comments were reported both in person and online, contributing to a climate in which sexual harassment was normalised and potentially inescapable.

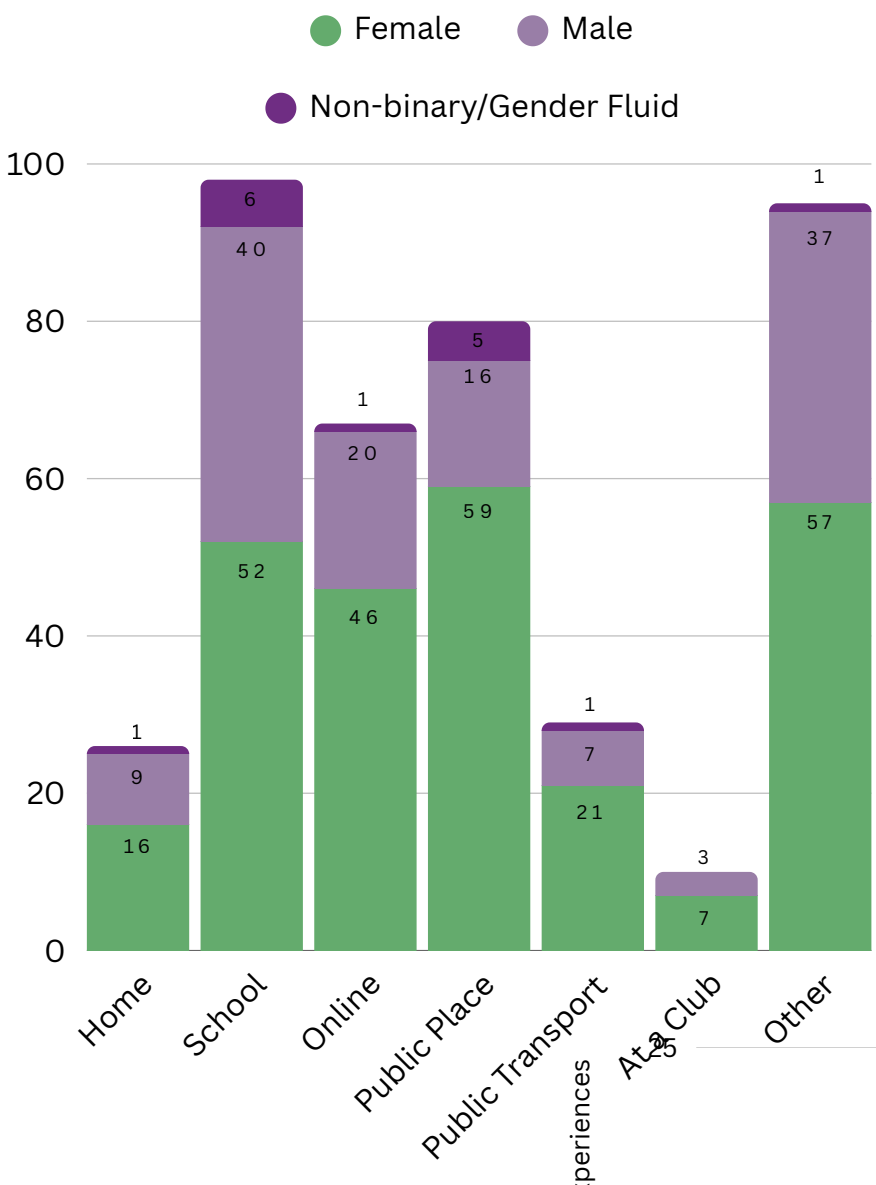
A significant number of students, particularly girls, reported instances of unwanted physical contact.
“disgusted with myself and a want to change what I look like or hide under hoodies and baggy clothes”
Some students felt trapped between discomfort and social or relational expectations.

Students also reported receiving unsolicited sexual messages or images, patricularly on Snapchat. These ranged from suggestive texts to explicit content, sent without warning or consent.
“uncomfortable and unsafe in my environment, it makes me feel insecure and distrusting in others”
Female students were disproportionately affected by this form of harassment, and several reported pressures to reciprocate, such as being asked to send images in return or pressured to react positively.

Though less frequently reported, some students shared experiences of being pressured to participate in sexual activity.
“Pressured to send something or show something that I don’t want to, but it makes me feel like they would like me more if I did.”
These experiences were often nuanced and sometimes took place within romantic relationships.
“I feel bad cuz when it happened it was my bf and idk if it counts but I didn’t wanna do it but since he was my bf it doesn’t matter idk.”
This response is indicative of several that suggest consent is still poorly understood among some students, and that coercion is often minimised, expected or not recognised by those affected.

Where did students experience the uncomfortable behaviours?

Figure 8 - Locations of uncomfortable experiences



School was the most prevalent source of uncomfortable experiences, which fits with the national picture of high levels of harmful sexual behaviour amongst peers. With so many responses of "other" we would be interested to hear from students where they experienced discomfort. Unsurprisingly, online is a common feature as is public places. This data also highlights that female students had more uncomfortable experiences in all locations than their male counterparts.

Students who had uncomfortable experiences at school was most prevalent in year 9 with 24% of respondents from that year group reporting at least one instance.

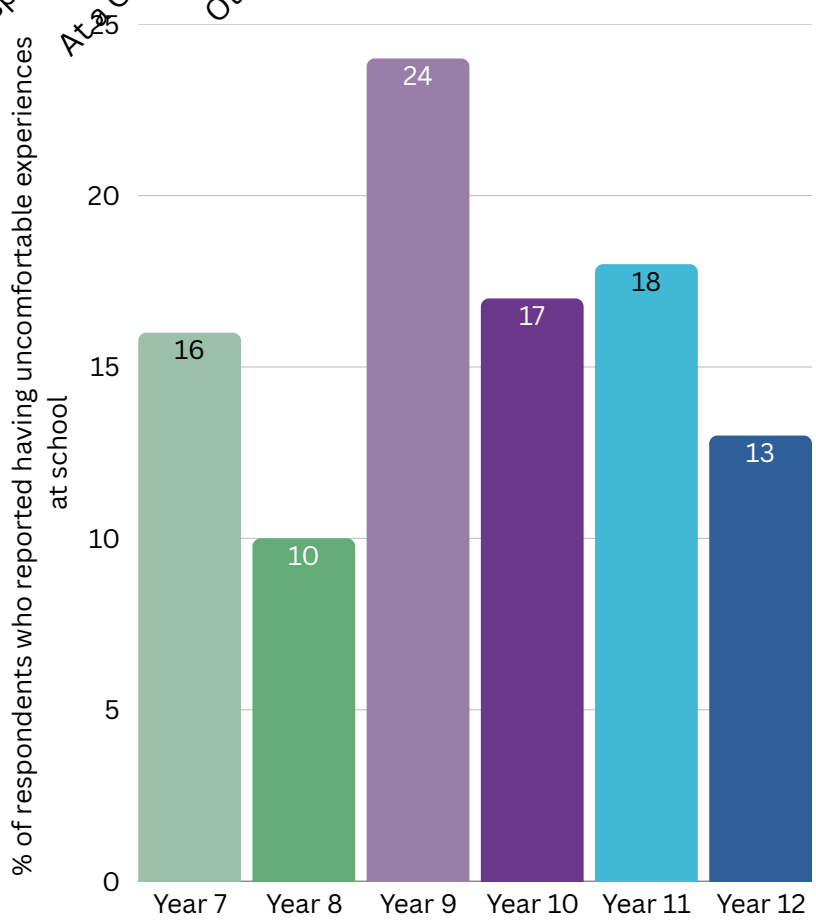


Figure 9 - Reported uncomfortable experiences at school by year group

Support Seeking

Students were asked “Who would you be most likely to turn to for support around something like this?”

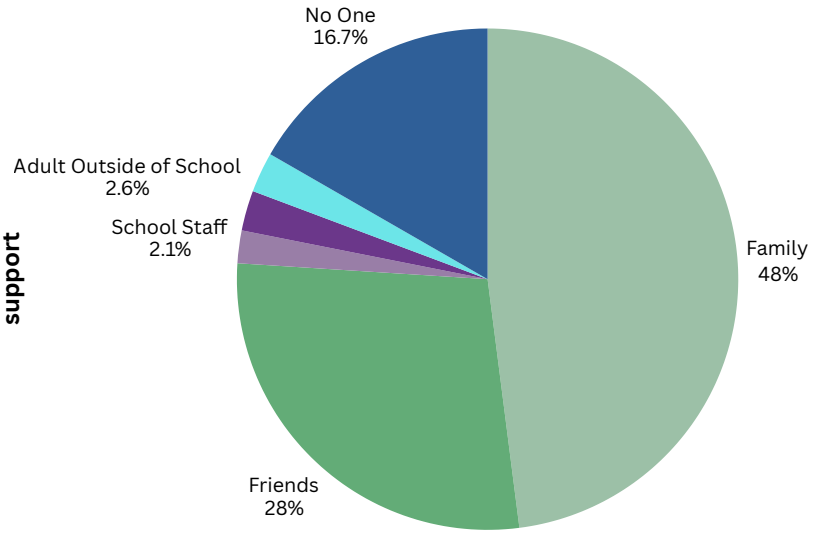


Figure 10 - Where respondents would turn for support

Respondents were asked where they would be most likely to seek support and were only able to select one option, so the data doesn’t capture instances where students would reach out to multiple sources of support.

Unlike female and male respondents, non-binary and gender fluid respondents were twice as likely to turn to friends rather than family for support.

Interestingly, there was a difference in responses from those who HAD had uncomfortable experiences, and those who HADN’T and were just imagining who they would turn to. It suggests that perhaps in theory it’s easy to imagine turning to family (54.4%), but in practice this drops to 32.6% with friends more often providing that support (35.9%). It’s worth noting that in practice the percentage accessing support from school staff increases from 1.6% to 3.3%.

Figure 11 - Students who felt they HAD NOT had uncomfortable experiences

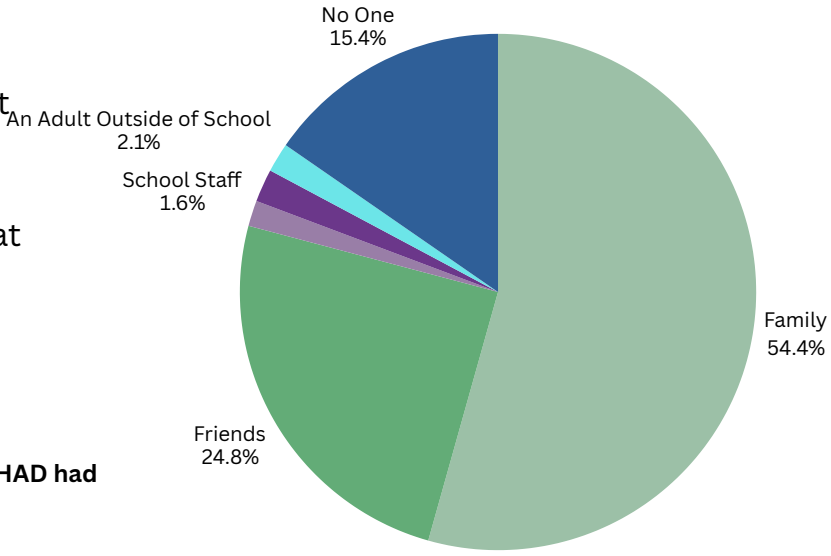
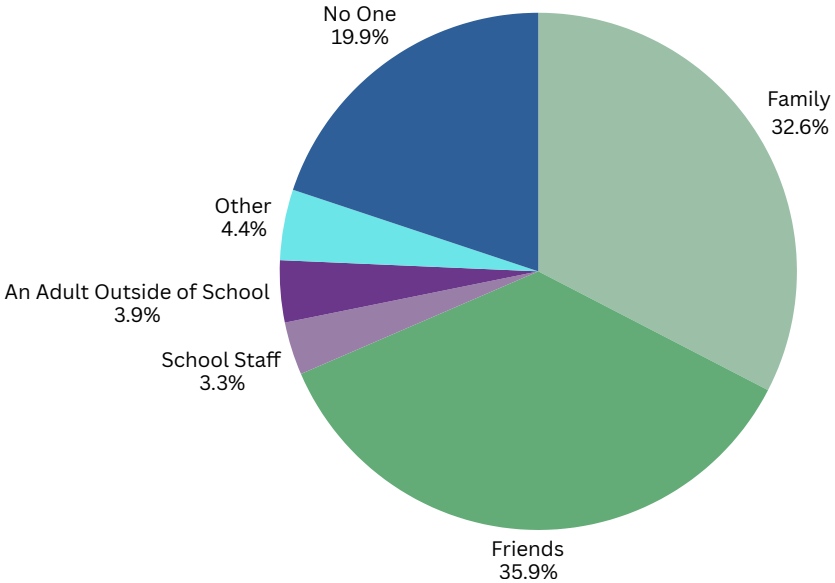


Figure 12 - Students who identified they HAD had uncomfortable experiences



Of the 105 students who reported having uncomfortable experiences at school, only 4 identified school staff as where they would be most likely to turn to for support.

Impact

Respondents were asked to describe, in their own words, how uncomfortable experiences as highlighted above, made them feel.

Whilst there was a lot of overlap, female students frequently described feeling scared, worried, sick and upset, while male respondents tended to report feeling annoyed or angry.

In addition to closed question data, students were invited to describe, in their own words, how experiences of discomfort made them feel. The open responses range from fear and shame to confusion and emotional detachment. Even among those who had not directly experienced harm, many imagined themselves feeling anxious, unsafe, or ashamed if such a situation were to occur.

Anxiety, Fear, and Emotional Distress
Many students reported feeling overwhelmed, unsafe, or anxious in response to the behaviour,whether experienced directly or not.
“Uncomfortable and unsafe in my environment, it makes me feel insecure and distrusting in others.”
“Out of place, wanting to leave, feeling sick.”
“Foul. Makes me feel like there is a heavy weight on my chest.”
“It makes me feel extremely upset.”
“None of these things have happened to me, but if they did, I would have felt very anxious and scared to tell anyone about it.”

Internalised Shame and Self-Blame

Several students expressed feelings such as disgust, embarrassment, and a desire to hide. These responses highlight how experiences of rape culture often lead to personal shame rather than empowerment to speak out.

“Disgusted with myself and a want to change what I look like or hide under hoodies and baggy clothes.”

“I feel bad cuz when it happened it was my bf and idk if it counts but I didn’t wanna do it but since he was my bf it doesn’t matter idk.”

“They make me feel terrible and like I’m the guilty one but I haven’t experienced anything like this, this is just how I think I’d feel.”

Empathy and Anticipated Discomfort

Even students who had not personally encountered these behaviours shared empathic projections of how such experiences might affect them.

“If they actually happened to me then they would probably make me feel self-conscious about myself and probably uncomfortable altogether.”

“I don’t experience any of the uncomfortable experiences above. However, it would make me feel unsafe and anxious if it were to happen.”

Frustration with Normalisation

Some students expressed anger or discomfort at the normalisation of harmful behaviours by others, indicating awareness of the wider societal context.

“It makes me feel uncomfortable because it’s frustrating to know that people find enjoyment in taking advantage of other people especially in this way. Also to know that this happens daily is scary to know.”

“Depends on the severity of it but usually it’s on my mind for the rest of the day/week—especially being a woman it makes me sort of feel like I’m inferior to those around simply for my femininity.”

Avoidance and Detachment as Coping Mechanisms

A smaller number of responses reflected emotional distancing, resignation, or uncertainty—potentially as defence mechanisms.

“Just move on.”

“Wouldn’t like to say.”

“I get creeped out and don't want to be there.”

“I don’t care, it’s just people having a carry on.”

“Not very, it's just stupid teenagers being immature and thinking they’re ‘hard’.”

Summary

These reflections reveal that the impact of rape culture is not limited to those who experience direct acts of harm. Even imagined or observed instances shape young people’s experiences, sense of safety, and self-worth. The range of responses from shame to avoidance demonstrates the need for interventions that address not only behaviour but also the direct and indirect impact it has.

National Context & Comparison

Prevalence of Harmful Sexual Behaviours

National data consistently reveals that sexual harassment and violence disproportionately affect girls and young women. According to a 2021 report by the National Education Union, 24% of girls in mixed-sex schools reported experiencing unwanted physical touching, while only 4% of boys did.[1] Similarly, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee found that 59% of girls aged 13–21 had faced some form of sexual harassment in the previous year, with 29% of girls aged 16–18 reporting unwanted touching in school settings.[2]

Our findings align with these trends. Among female respondents who reported discomfort, 24% cited unwanted physical touch, and over 45% described experiencing sexual comments or remarks about their bodies or clothing. This congruence suggests that the experiences reported in this local school context reflect a much wider cultural pattern of gender-based harassment.

School as a Primary Site of Exposure

Multiple national investigations—most notably Ofsted's 2021 review prompted by the 'Everyone's Invited' movement—identified school environments as key sites where sexual harassment and misogynistic behaviour are normalised. Ofsted reported that nearly 90% of girls had been sent unsolicited explicit images or experienced name-calling and sexist language in school settings.[3] The Plan UK report similarly highlighted the prevalence of abuse and the perception among students that such behaviour is a normal part of school life.[4]

In our data, school was the most frequently cited location for uncomfortable experiences across all gender groups, with a particularly high incidence among Year 9 students.

Online Harassment and Digital Risk

Across the UK schools and organisations are struggling to respond to the increasing role of online platforms in facilitating bullying and sexual violence. The Department for Education and police reports have cited a 40% rise in sexual offences overall and an 81% rise in incidents occurring on school premises between 2019 and 2023.[5] Much of this increase is linked to the proliferation of smartphones, unsupervised digital environments, and access to violent or degrading content online.[6]

Our study echoes this shift: online platforms were among the top three locations where students reported experiencing harmful behaviour.

Underreporting and Distrust in Support Systems

Underreporting remains a persistent and troubling issue. The Commons inquiry revealed that nearly half of girls who experienced sexual harassment did not tell anyone, and many believed that teachers would not take their reports seriously.[2] Similarly, Ofsted's 2021 findings highlighted a widespread lack of confidence in school safeguarding procedures.[3]

This lack of trust is reflected in our data. Although school staff were named as a potential support source by only 2.6% of students overall, students more frequently turned to friends or reported seeking support from no one at all.

Emotional and Psychological Impact

National research consistently highlights the emotional toll that sexual harassment takes on students, particularly girls. Plan UK's studies have documented links between exposure to harassment and increased anxiety, reduced attendance, and lower academic confidence.[4] Our open-ended responses mirrored this emotional landscape, with students using terms like 'scared,' 'disgusted,' 'unsafe,' and 'ashamed' to describe their feelings.

Summary

In comparing our findings with national data, it is clear that this school is not an outlier. The trends observed are emblematic of a much wider cultural pattern in which gendered violence is normalised, underreported, and inadequately addressed. However, this also presents an opportunity: school communities can take concrete steps—guided by national research and local voices—to challenge these patterns and foster safer, more equitable environments.

Footnotes

1.National Education Union (NEU). *It's Just Everywhere: A Study on Sexual Harassment in Schools*, 2021.
2. House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee. *Sexual Harassment and Violence in Schools*, 2016.
3. Ofsted. *Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges*, 2021.
4. Plan International UK. *The State of Girls' Rights in the UK*, 2020.
5. BBC News. *Sexual Offences on School Premises Rise by 81%*, March 2023.
6. HM Government. *Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy*, Home Office, 2021.

Recommendations

1. Whole-School Culture Change:
Implement education practices that actively challenges rape culture, reinforces respect and consent, and addresses peer norms like 'snitching.' Work proactively to address the imbalance in how different genders are viewed, and identify and challenge rape myths that exist within the school culture.

2. Staff Training:
Equip all school staff with training to identify and respond to harmful sexual behaviours with an awareness of the role that gender plays within this. Ensure an awareness of the impact that "lower level" behaviours have in normalising and "allowing" "more serious" incidents.

3. Reporting and Support Pathways:
Co-design confidential and accessible reporting systems with students, ensuring all genders feel safe to disclose and can identify potential barriers to accessing this support.

4. Consent & Boundaries Curriculum: Integrate a comprehensive PSHE programme including consent, online safety, the impact of pornography and healthy relationships, starting from Year 7.

5. Education & Support for Parents/Carers
Provide education and support to parents in understanding the cultural context in which their children are growing up, and the challenges they may be facing.

6. Policy Integration:
Align school policies with DfE's 2021 guidance on sexual violence and harassment, ensuring regular review and accountability.

7. Promotion of Signposting options:
As friends and family are most likely to be told about uncomfortable experiences, they need to be equipped to respond appropriately and signpost to support.