

SHoT

Sexual Harassment of Teachers



**“It’s out of control...it’s insidious
...it’s not okay!”** (Female teacher)

Collective
Shout



Maggie Dent

Acknowledgement of Country

Collective Shout and Maggie Dent acknowledge the people of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung land, the Wodi Wodi peoples of the Dharawal nation, the Ngunnawal people and the Darug people on whose lands this report was produced. We respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Custodians and their Ancestors of the lands and waters across Australia where Collective Shout and Maggie Dent undertake their work.

Contents

Foreword	5
Background	8
Key Findings.	9
About the Report	12
Survey Respondents	13
Sexual Harassment of Teachers	16
Peer-to-Peer Sexual Harassment	20
Barriers to Reporting.	22
Contributing Factors	25
The Rise of Misogyny in Schools	26
The Internet and Social Media	28
Pornography	31
The Impacts	34
What Needs to be Done	36
Take the Issue Seriously.	37
Provide Education and Training.	38
Training for Staff.	38
Education for Students	39
Education for Parents.	40
Make Schools Safer	42
School Leadership	42
Policy and Procedures	42
Social Media Policy	43
Code of Conduct	43
Provide Therapeutic Responses	46
More Research is Required	47
Recommendations	48
References	50
Acknowledgements	54



Foreword

TWO YEARS AGO, WE FOUND ourselves swapping stories from teachers about rising rates of sexual harassment and other sexualised behaviours in schools. Female teachers and students were sharing distressing accounts which seemed to be getting worse. We thought this deserved more attention.

So, between 2022-2023, we joined forces to conduct a national survey of teachers to gain a better understanding of the prevalence of sexual harassment in Australian schools.

More than 1000 responded. And the findings were sobering

Teachers – almost all female – reported being subjected to routine sexual harassment.

They were propositioned, threatened with rape, subjected to sexist slurs and mimicking of sex acts seen in porn, and called the ‘c’ word. While trying to just do their jobs, they were sexually moaned, groaned, and grunted at, asked for nudes and intimidated. Many said they did not feel safe at work.

In a large majority of cases, the survey responses indicated it was male students engaging in these behaviours towards female teachers. Survey responses also indicated that teachers were dealing with widespread harmful sexual behaviours by male students directed at female students.

While much of the behaviour was exhibited by boys in Years 9-10, a number of teachers reported children in kindergarten displaying inappropriate sexual behaviours toward other children and even toward teachers.

Teachers expressed despair with the rapid rise of sexualised behaviours which they attributed to early exposure to pornography, the malign influence of social media influencers such as Andrew Tate, and broader societal sexist attitudes. They were dealing with multiple disclosures from students subjected to harmful sexual behaviours, including Image Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA). They referred to disclosures by girls in Years 5 and 6 coerced into sending sexual images, and instances of children as young as Year 2 accessing and sharing pornographic content through personal devices or social media.

Teachers also expressed exasperation about the lack of appropriate action taken in response. Many were weary of seeing inappropriate behaviours dismissed as “It’s just a joke”, “banter” and “boys will be boys”.

Many respondents felt there was a lack of understanding of the legal definition of sexual harassment. They believed there were major gaps in policies, procedures and codes of conduct. Many pointed out their schools lacked a sexual harassment policy that applied student-to-student and student-to-teacher.

As a result, teachers felt that their safety, and the safety of mostly female students, was under threat. As one respondent wrote: “The safety of very large portions of the school community is at risk, not just physical safety but mental and emotional wellbeing.”

A number reported significant mental health decline as a result. Many took long-term leave, some changed schools, still others decided to quit the profession.

One teacher stated:

“[As a teacher I have] never felt so drained, mentally and emotionally, in the past two years dealing with the increase of this behaviour with no school supports in place.”

This was consistent with sentiments expressed by teachers across the survey responses.

The situation is at crisis point.

Without radical action and intervention - and collective effort - the teaching profession will be decimated. Female teachers cannot tolerate turning up to school to be sexually harassed on a daily basis. It’s not what they signed up for.

We thank all the teachers who took part in our survey. Their experiences inform our recommendations. And, hopefully, will also inform a radical reassessment of what is happening and how it should be dealt with. Afterall, without strong and direct intervention, boys engaging in harmful sexual behaviours at school will go on to hurt more women and girls when they leave it.

If we can’t address this issue in our schools, everyone will suffer.



*Melinda
Tankard Reist*

*Movement Director,
Collective Shout*



*Maggie
Dent*

*Parenting author and
educator*

The Data

We
analysed

1012

Australian Teachers'
Responses

—

2143

Comments

—

The Findings

What we
found

46.9%

Experienced sexual
harassment within a
school environment

—

80.6%

Of teachers who
experienced sexual
harassment at school,
were harassed by a
student

—

58.9%

Reported feeling unsafe
in the classroom/school
grounds following sexual
harassment

—

79.9%

Reported an increase in
sexualised behaviours in
schools

—



Background

IN MUCH OF THE RESEARCH AND reporting on sexual abuse in schools, attention has focussed on teachers as the perpetrators. More recently, attention has turned to the rising tide of harmful sexual behaviours with students sexually harassing and abusing teachers and their fellow students. However, teacher-targeted sexual harassment is often overlooked or under-investigated.

Teacher-targeted sexual harassment has been documented sporadically for decades (Coulter, 1995; Jones, 1989; Robinson, 2000). However, a growing body of contemporary research, media reports and firsthand accounts suggest that the behaviour is intensifying, and it is mainly carried out by male students (Adams, 2021; Hiatt, 2022; Variyan and Wilkinson, 2022; Wescott & Roberts, 2023; Sparrow, 2024; Ketchell, 2024).

It is difficult to ascertain the true extent of teacher-targeted sexual harassment. There is a general underreporting of incidents (NASUWT, 2019; Robinson, 2000). Studies that do explicitly explore teacher-targeted sexual harassment tend to group sexual harassment with other forms of harmful behaviour, including bullying and physical violence. This disguises the magnitude of the issue (for example, see Astor et al.,

2023; Li et al., 2023; Santor et al., 2021). The Sexual Harassment of Teachers in Schools Survey was initiated to bridge this gap in the research.

The idea for the survey grew out of conversations between Collective Shout Campaign Strategy Team members and author and educator Maggie Dent. These discussions were sparked by shared concerns over anecdotal accounts from teachers that suggested an intensification of sexual harassment and sexualised behaviours exhibited by students in Australian classrooms. Designed collaboratively by Maggie Dent and the Collective Shout team, the survey was distributed widely through networks, social media posts, email campaigns, and news outlets. The survey went live in November 2022, and responses were collected until the survey closed in June 2023.

The purpose of the survey was to gain a general indication of the pervasiveness of sexual harassment by students, the kinds of behaviours displayed, and how sexual harassment is being dealt with by schools. The survey aimed to catalyse serious discussions on the necessary measures to address this growing problem. It was envisaged that responses might be useful in guiding schools to improve policies and processes for the prevention of and response to sexual harassment in schools.

A total of 1,012 teachers responded to our survey. What they have to say is compelling. Survey respondents reinforce what has been identified in research and reported by mainstream media. Their invaluable suggestions based on their expertise and direct experience inform the recommendations we provide in this Report.

Key Findings

Prevalence of sexual harassment

According to the Sexual Harassment of Teachers Survey (SHoT survey), **46.9% of respondents have experienced sexual harassment within a school environment.** 47.9% of women (93.9% of respondents) indicated that they had personally been sexually harassed. Overall, 80.6% of teachers who personally experienced sexual harassment at school were harassed by a student.

Respondents reported students mimicking sexual acts they had seen in pornographic content, making sexual propositions, and making rape jokes and threats.



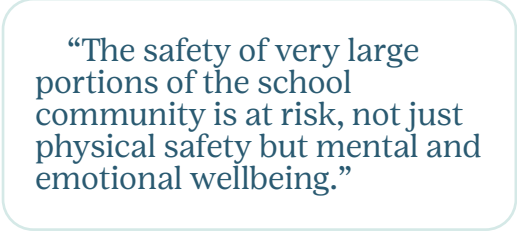
“I had a student tell his girlfriend about his rape fantasies involving me. He also threatened to rape his girlfriend if she told anyone.”

In addition to personal experience of sexual harassment, **49.1% of respondents witnessed the sexual harassment of a colleague within the school environment.** In 62.9% of these incidents, respondents reported that it was students who had engaged in the sexually harassing conduct.

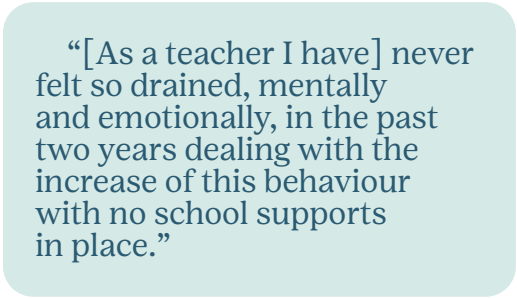
Sexually harassing behaviours appear to be perpetrated most frequently by male students, with sexual groaning, sexually suggestive gestures and sexual name calling being the most frequent forms of sexual harassment. Male students in Years 9-10 were identified by respondents as the primary aggressors in over half of all incidents reported against teachers.

Teachers don't feel safe

A total of **58.9% of survey respondents reported feeling unsafe in the classroom/school grounds following incidents of sexual harassment.**



“The safety of very large portions of the school community is at risk, not just physical safety but mental and emotional wellbeing.”



“[As a teacher I have] never felt so drained, mentally and emotionally, in the past two years dealing with the increase of this behaviour with no school supports in place.”

Almost **8% of survey respondents have changed schools as a result of being sexually harassed**, and close to 2% of respondents have left the teaching profession.

Peer-to-peer sexual harassment

A total of **66.6% of survey respondents reported witnessing the sexual harassment of a student by another student.** In addition, 57.4% reported receiving at least one disclosure from a student about being sexually harassed. Notably, 39.1% of teachers reported receiving between one and five disclosures from a student that they had been sexually harassed.

Increasing reports of sexualised behaviours

A total of **79.9% of respondents reported an increase in sexualised behaviours in schools.** Survey data indicates that sexual moaning has become a widespread and deeply concerning issue in schools. Respondents reported sexual noises being made at them by children as young as kindergarten to Year 3.

“Moaning is a big problem. Even ‘good’ kids are doing it to win favour with others... The moaning I’ve heard was from boys.”

Teachers also reported an increase in Image Based Sexual Abuse (non-consensual creation, sharing or threatened sharing of nude or sexual images).

“Students in grade 7 are coercing girls into sending child exploitation material.”

Younger students engaging in sexual harassment

Survey responses indicate that 12.7% of reported sexual harassment incidents were perpetrated by students in Years 4-6, and 3.2% of incidents were perpetrated by students in kindergarten to Year 3.

“It is definitely happening at a younger age more and more!”

“Year 5 and 6 students sending nudes after being continually asked to do so - photos then being passed around to other boys.”

“Parents need to acknowledge their child’s behaviour as it is by the law - sexual harassment. But they often ignore or excuse.”

Survey respondents reported instances of children as young as Year 2 accessing and sharing pornographic content through personal devices or social media.

Ignored, dismissed, excused: Inadequate responses

Many teachers reported that students often frame sexual harassment as “jokes” or “banter,” failing to recognise that making sexual jokes is a form of sexual harassment.

“Too many times I’ve seen male students get away with a warning for really inappropriate sexual behaviour towards female students because ‘they’re too young, just boys being boys...’”

Survey respondents emphasise the crucial role of parental involvement and proactive educational measures to address the behaviour and counter influences such as pornography and social media.



About the report

This Report sets out the most compelling quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the SHoT survey alongside relevant findings from academic research and media reports.

Terminology

Throughout this Report, we refer to survey respondents as ‘**survey respondents**’ or ‘respondents’; they are also referred to as ‘teachers’. The SHoT survey questions used the term ‘**sexual harassment**’. Respondents were provided with the following definition of sexual harassment:

Sexual harassment can be defined as unwelcome sexual behaviour which you find offensive, humiliating or intimidating. This may happen in person or online and it may be written, verbal, visual or physical.

It may include (but not be limited to):

- **touching, grabbing** or other **physical contact** without consent
- making **sexual comments**
- **asking you for sex** or sexual favours
- **leering** and **staring**
- **displaying rude** and **offensive material** so that you or others can see it
- **making sexual gestures** or suggestive body movements towards you
- **cracking sexual jokes** and comments around or to you
- **questioning** you about **your sex life**
- **insulting you** with **sexual comments**
- behaviour on a **phone call** that **makes you feel uncomfortable**
- **someone indecently exposing** themselves to you.

In two instances, survey questions referred to ‘sexualised behaviours’, and in two other instances, questions referred to ‘harmful behaviours’. These terms, used with reference to student conduct, encompass sexually harassing behaviour.

In this Report, we have referred to ‘**peer-to-peer**’ **sexual harassment or abuse** to describe behaviours of children and young people towards other children and young people in school contexts. In some cases, research and media reports discussed in this Report

refer to such behaviours more broadly – that is, behaviours both in and outside school contexts.

We have also used the term ‘**harmful sexual behaviours**’ in this Report. This term is now widely used by researchers to describe the types of student behaviours reported by survey respondents. Where we use the term in this Report, we are referring to sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old, which are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person, or adult (Hackett et al., 2019).

While we have used the various terms noted above, where relevant for the purposes of discussion in the Report, we have maintained consistency with the terminology used in specific SHoT survey questions in the collation and breakdown of responses to those questions.

We also note that some survey respondents used the terms ‘problematic sexual behaviour’, ‘harmful sexualised behaviour’, ‘sexual harassment’, and ‘harassment’ interchangeably in their responses. Where we have included quotes from survey responses in this Report, these are direct and unchanged.

Teachers’ accounts of their experiences and observations

SHoT survey respondents were asked about their own experience of sexual harassment, as well as their observations of colleagues or students being sexually harassed, at school.

This Report’s description of the SHoT survey results is based solely on the experiences and observations of respondents as reported in survey responses. The Report is not informed by or reflective of any investigation or findings by relevant responsible authorities. For this reason, while behaviours referred to in survey responses may, in some cases, amount to misconduct, unlawful sexual harassment or criminal conduct, we have not framed our discussion in these terms.



Survey respondents

Of the 1012 survey respondents, 93.9% were women, 5.6% were men, and the remaining 0.5% indicated they identified as non-binary/non-conforming or preferred not to say. According to 2023 data, women comprise over 74% of the teaching workforce, indicating that women are over-represented in this dataset (ACARA, 2023). While there may be a number of factors contributing to this over-representation it is important to note, as sexual harassment disproportionately impacts women. The topic of the survey likely resonates more strongly with female teachers when compared to their male counterparts, leading to a higher response rate from this cohort.

Of the women respondents, over 70.1% were aged 45 years or younger, with most of the respondents reporting having taught for 10-20 years. These figures indicate that the issue of sexual harassment is being observed by experienced teachers.

The majority of survey respondents reported working at or having worked at public schools, followed by independent schools and religious schools. Survey respondents also reported working at rural or regional schools more frequently than urban or inner-city schools.

Middle school teachers (Years 7-10) were represented most frequently in the dataset. This may be due to the fact that these teachers are more likely to encounter issues of sexual harassment more frequently or severely, given the age of middle schoolers and onset of puberty, leading to higher participation rates than their peers teaching other age groups.

Figure 1

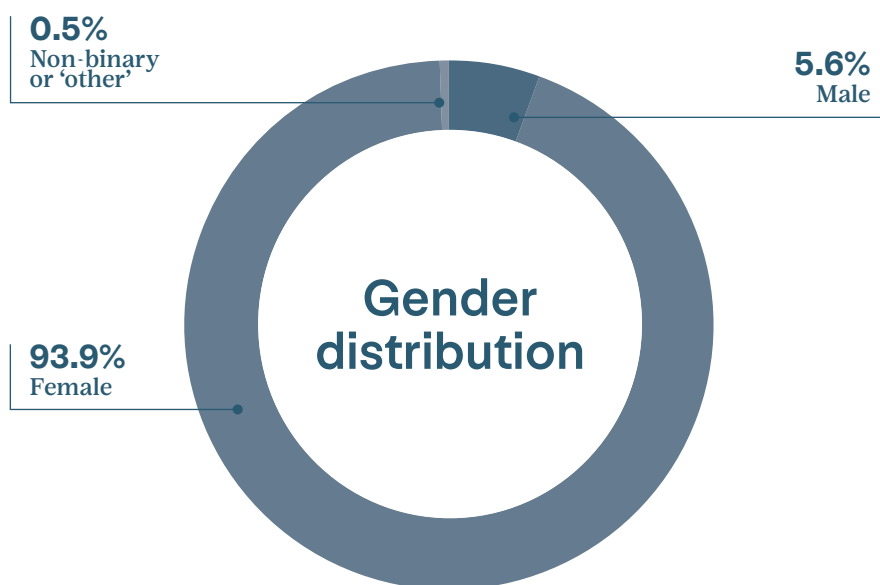


Figure 2

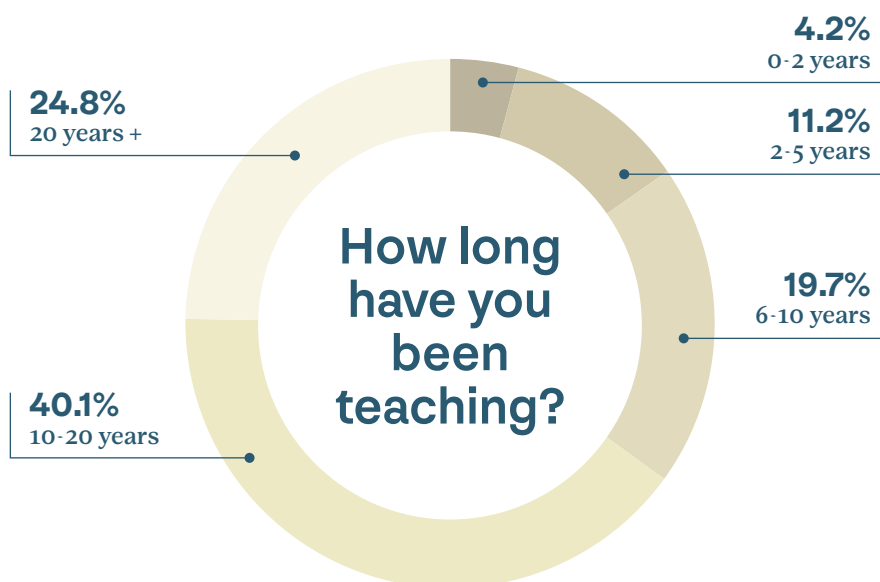
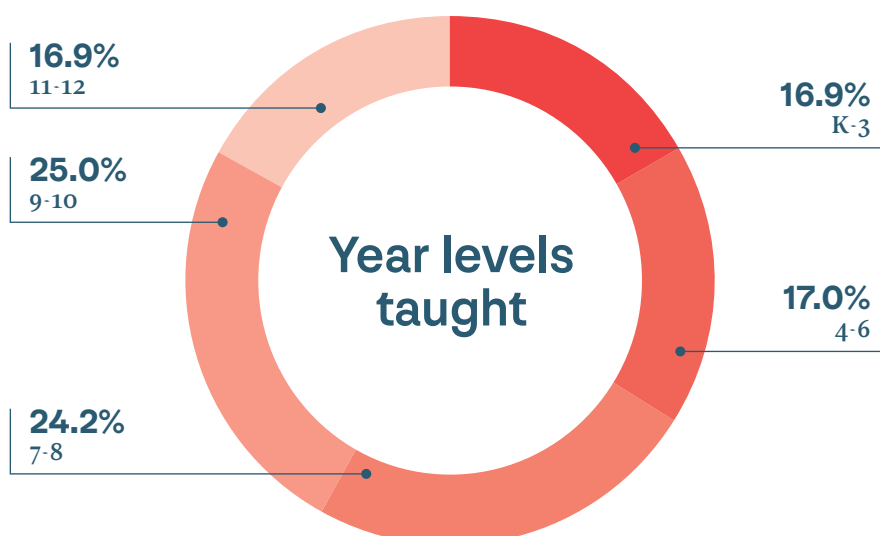


Figure 3



Identification

Sexual harassment
in schools

47.9%

of female teachers indicated
they've been sexually harassed
at school

**Witnessed sexual
harassment of a student**

Yes	66.6%
No	26.5%
Unsure	6.9%

**Personal experience of
sexual harassment**

Yes	46.9%
No	53.1%

**Witnessed sexual
harassment of a colleague**

Yes	49.0%
No	45.5%
Unsure	5.5%

Behaviour

Sexualised
behaviour

79.9%

reported seeing more
sexualised behaviour in
schools

**Is there an increase in
sexualised behaviour?**

Yes	79.9%
No	9.2%
Unsure	10.9%

**Do you agree [sexual
harassment behaviour,
particularly from students, in
schools] has become a more
common or concerning
problem for schools/staff/
students in general?**

Yes	73.2%
Yes, but not in my school	15.1%
No	2.5%
Unsure	9.2%

Experience

Personal experience of sexual harassment

80.6%

of teachers who were sexually harassed were harassed by a student

Perpetrator status

Student	69.7%
Colleague	19.4%
Both	10.9%

Perpetrator gender

Male	97.1%
Female	2.9%

Place incident occurred

Classroom	52.6%
School grounds	45.3%
Online/SMS	1.7%
School transport	0.4%

Sexual harassment of teachers

The SHoT findings

A total of 46.9% of survey respondents reported being sexually harassed at school, and 49.1% reported witnessing the sexual harassment of a colleague. Among those who reported being sexually harassed, 69.7% reported being sexually harassed by a student, 10.9% reported being sexually harassed by a colleague and a student, and 19.4% reported being sexually harassed by a colleague. Overall, **80.6% of teachers who had been sexually harassed at school were harassed by a student.**

Women teachers were one-and-a-half times more likely to experience sexual harassment in the school setting than their male counterparts. A total of 47.9% of women indicated they had been sexually harassed at the school where they worked, compared to 35.6% of men. (No respondents who identified as 'non-binary' reported personal experience of being sexually harassed at school.)

Consistent with broader societal patterns of sexual harassment, the majority of those engaging in sexual harassment, as reported across all categories, were male. The survey results indicate that a total of 97.9% of sexual harassment is happening in the classroom and on school grounds. It is also taking place online and on school transport.

Teachers are witnessing a considerable negative shift in the behaviours of students. An overwhelming majority of respondents - 79.9% - reported seeing more sexualised behaviour in schools.

Sexually harassing behaviours appear to be perpetrated most frequently by male students in Years 9 and 10. A total of 12.7% of reported sexual harassment incidents were perpetrated by students in Years 4-6 and 3.2% by students in kindergarten to Year 3.

Sexual groaning noises, sexually suggestive gestures, and sexual name calling are the most frequently reported types of sexual harassment. Survey respondents also reported unwanted physical contact such as touching and groping. **Respondents reported 35 incidents of rape threats and 148 incidents of rape jokes.** Respondents indicated that students from kindergarten to Year 12 had engaged in these behaviours.

Sexual harassment by colleagues

A total of 19.4% of survey respondents reported that they had been sexually harassed by a colleague, and 10.9% reported they had been sexually harassed by both a student and a colleague. In total, 30.3% of respondents who reported being sexually harassed at school have been sexually harassed by a colleague. Both male and female teachers reported being sexually harassed. The vast majority of perpetrators were reported as being male colleagues - 93.1%. The harassment included rape threats, rape 'jokes', sexual name calling, sexual propositions, sexual groaning noises made at them, receiving unwanted sexual images, sexually suggestive gestures, touching and groping.

When asked, "How would you describe the school's response/action following your report of sexual harassment?", all those who responded "no action at all" reported the sexual harassment to their school principal. The issue of principals and executives not taking sexual harassment reports seriously, dismissing sexual harassment or contributing to the issue was highlighted in comments made by survey respondents:

"Independent schools have a significant number of males in leadership who think things are 'just a joke'."

"We have a male toxic culture here among executives."

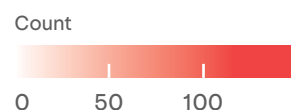
"To be honest, the culture in our school is revolting. Women are treated with disrespect by male leaders, male staff and many male students."

"Usually have to report to white male in a position of leadership who has never experienced such harassment, therefore will gaslight your experience."



One female respondent who was subjected to sexual harassment from a male colleague, reported being subjected to sexual propositions, sexually suggestive gestures (i.e oral sex gestures), sexual behaviours, touching and groping. After reporting the behaviour to the principal, she reported that no action at all was taken despite the severity of the behaviour. In fact, she reported that she "was blamed for it, he was totally excused." She felt unsafe and uncomfortable in the school grounds following the harassment, but received no on-going support. As a result of the sexual harassment she ended up changing schools.

Relationship between Year of Perpetrator and Type of Sexual Harassment



Harrassment type	Year of perpetrator				
	K-3	4-6	7-8	9-10	11-12
Touching	5	12	25	45	19
Sexually suggestive gestures	6	33	63	133	60
Sexual propositions	2	10	31	72	33
Sexual name calling	6	27	52	113	52
Sexual groaning noises made at you	7	40	73	145	54
Sexual behaviours	5	12	25	45	19
Receiving unwanted sexual images	1	1	4	15	3
Rape threats	2	2	10	15	6
Rape 'jokes'	1	8	38	74	27
Other	5	12	25	45	19
Groping	5	12	25	45	19
Demanding sexual images	0	1	3	7	4
Choking	5	12	25	45	19

Research & Media

PUBLISHED

It is widely acknowledged that sexual harassment is an issue that disproportionately affects women. Sexual harassment is unique among other types of violence in schools. The overwhelming majority of teachers subjected to sexual harassment are female, with those who engage in sexual harassment being predominantly male (Astor et al., 2023; Robinson, 2000). A survey conducted by USA-based Education Week Research Centre found one in five educators had personally experienced sexual harassment during their careers, with female teachers four times more likely to experience assault or harassment than their male counterparts (Kurtz et al., 2018).

According to the Australian Education Union's (AEU) National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian Public Education Workplaces, 51.7% of educators had witnessed, experienced, or supervised someone who had been sexually harassed during their career. 80% of respondents who reported personally experiencing sexual harassment were women (AEU, 2019).

Experiences of sexual harassment are diverse in form and severity, ranging from being subjected to derogatory sexual remarks online and in person, to vulgar gestures in class and in the playground, and unwanted physical contact (Gråstén and Kokkonen, 2022).

The results from more general harassment studies are also heavily gendered. An exploratory study of teacher-targeted violence in Western Australian schools found female teachers were five times more likely than their male counterparts to be intimidated or threatened by students. (Lowe et al., 2020). Another Australian study found female teachers were more likely than male teachers to experience students standing over or invading their personal space, as well as students harassing them through phone calls or text messages (Billett et al., 2019).

The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), a UK-based trade union, stated in a parliamentary inquiry submission that it had “evidence that strongly suggests sexual harassment of teachers and pupils in schools is commonplace and that the majority of incidents remain largely unchecked” (NASUWT, 2018). Research also found that one in six female teachers had suffered sexist abuse at a school or college in the preceding two years, compared to one in 17 male teachers (NASUWT, 2018).



In the Media

‘The Complex Storm- Harmful Sexual Behaviours & P#rn’

In Kelly Humphries’ Off the Cuff podcast, Melinda Tankard Reist shared:

“Girls should be able to go to school to learn, to socialise with their friends. Instead, they are subjected to routine sexual intrusion, sexual intimidation, sexual harassment and the same for female teachers...I have had more female teachers this year telling me they are leaving the profession because of what they are subjected to. Young female teachers, three this year, telling me they did not go into teaching to face sexual harassment...being propositioned, being subjected to rape so called ‘jokes’, and they are leaving the profession en masse. We are going to lose more good female teachers because of the entrenched sexually harassing behaviours, the sexual aggression that female students and female teachers are experiencing in every school in this country, without exception, every day.” Humphries (2024b)

Peer-to-peer sexual harassment

The SHoT Findings

A total of **66.6% of survey respondents reported that they had witnessed the sexual harassment of students by other students.** One respondent said they heard Year 7 students “making rape ‘jokes’ towards girls.” Others reported:

“Children showing other children pornography, sexual noises, children choking other children in the playground, children simulating sex from behind on other children from the age of 4.”

“I’ve had to deal with an increase in sexual assault threats online, sexual images being shown and girls being pushed to do sexual acts.”

In addition to witnessing these incidents, 57.4% reported receiving at least one disclosure of sexual harassment from a student. About 39.1% reported receiving between one and five disclosures, and 10.4% reported receiving more than 10 disclosures. Some of the sexual harassment behaviours include:

“Groaning. Pressuring girls to send nudes, “accidental” touching of breasts during sport, commenting on appearance.”

Some respondents believe that children are desensitised to unacceptable behaviour while others believe younger children do not fully comprehend that their behaviour is harmful as they are just mimicking what they have seen in pornography or social media. However, as one respondent highlighted, some children know their behaviour is inappropriate and are hiding it.

“Becoming more covert, deviant and expressed digitally using graphically violent and pornographic videos on simple group chats that start as homework groups and descend as the year wears on.”

A total of **68.7% of respondents believe that peer-to-peer sexual harassment is happening at younger ages.** A number of respondents reported that older children are teaching younger children sexually harassing behaviours. They reported:

“Groaning, grunting, watching inappropriate content, name-calling, exposure in younger years by older students about things such as porn and fisting.”

Some teachers commented that “conversations about consent and appropriate talk are reducing prevalence of sexual harassment,” however, the majority indicated that consent education is not enough or inadequate to combat the issue.

“Consent, or a lack of, is a major issue.”

Research & Media

PUBLISHED

National and international research demonstrates that children and young people experience and display sexual behaviours in education settings (Ey & McInnes, 2020). Some of this sexual behaviour is developmentally normal and age appropriate; however, there is an increase in peer-to-peer sexual harassment, child sexual abuse by adolescents (Mathews et al., 2024) and harmful sexual behaviour in school settings.

A small-scale study of educators in Australian government, independent and Catholic schools, preschools and after-school-hours care found that 41% of educators reported they had observed children displaying harmful sexual behaviour (Ey & McInnes, 2018). Educators reported harmful sexual behaviours such as, touching and mouthing others' genitals, simulating intercourse and sending sexual images of themselves. Another Australian study found that between 30-60% of all experiences of childhood sexual abuse are carried out by other children and young people (El-Murr, 2017).

Harmful sexual behaviour is being seen globally. Clear et al. (2014) conducted research with 18,090 American students in Years 9-12 and found that 29.9% reported being a victim of sexual harassment. In the UK, End Violence Against Women (2024) reported that girls and young women are facing sexual harassment and assault on an alarming scale. Almost a third of the girls they surveyed did not feel safe from sexual harassment in school. In 2022, police in England and Wales "received reports of 14,800 rapes and sexual assaults against children aged 10 to 17 where the suspect was classed as a child, the overwhelming majority being boys" (Taylor, 2024).

Harmful Sexual Behaviour

Harmful sexual behaviour is a term that acknowledges the seriousness of the behaviour together with the impact it has (Queensland government, 2023). The trauma impacts and behavioural outcomes for children who have been sexually abused by another child are not significantly different from those who have been abused by an adult (Shaw et al., 2000). Research has identified a wide range of adverse effects such as internalising and externalising disorders, impacts on neurobiological development, interpersonal relationships, connection to culture and sexual identity, and harmful behaviour or conduct problems later in life (Shlonsky et al., 2017).

In the Media

'Humphries' (2024b) Off the Cuff podcast explored this phenomenon, with lawyer and child safeguarding expert Maha Melhem stating:

"What we now know is that ...the rate of child sexual abuse by other children and young people has been increasing, and in fact that category of child sexual abuse by other or another known child or adolescent is by far the single largest category we have now of offending against children... We also know that adolescent males have previously been identified as the cohort with the highest rate of sexual offending, and we also know that girls are about 2.4 times more likely to be the victims of child sexual abuse."



Barriers to reporting

The SHoT findings

Survey respondents reported that incidents of sexual harassment of teachers are typically “swept under the rug,” while “harassment festers in silence.” Sexual harassment is a taboo topic - teachers are generally not comfortable talking about it. When asked the question “If you did not report the sexual harassment, can you say why not?”, 19.0% of respondents said they “did not think any action would be taken.” A total of 4.8% said they were “unsure how to report/who to report to.”

Teachers noted that students see sexual harassment as “funny” or “jokes” and do not understand how serious it is, even when explained to them. Survey respondents were sometimes “laughed at” when they called it out. In line with research, survey respondents described a range of attitudes that excuse, minimise, or ignore sexual harassment.

“It’s just a joke.”

“It’s a rite of passage.”

“Boys will be boys.”

“Don’t you have a sense of humour?”

“That’s what kids are like these days.”

“The younger generation of teachers can’t take a joke.”

In line with what research shows, insufficient training about what constitutes sexual harassment is leading to behaviour being normalised and therefore not reported or taken seriously. Survey respondents reported that teachers and students are “dismissed” or “insulted” for being upset by or reporting the behaviours. Typical comments from students, parents, other teachers and leaders include: “It’s just poor behaviour choice”; “It’s a phase”; “You’re over-reacting”; and “There’s not enough proof”.

“Too many times I’ve seen male students get away with a warning for really inappropriate sexual behaviour towards female students because ‘they’re too young’, ‘just boys being boys’, ‘just being silly’ and ‘didn’t know what they were doing’.”

“The boys think it is a joke and the girls are made to think that they need to just accept it as nothing will be done about it.”

“A Year 7 [boy] was harassed by a Year 11, when he ‘joked’ about inviting [him] to suck his ‘lollipop’ while gesturing to his penis. After a week’s suspension, the dad defended his 16yo son at his re-entry interview saying it wasn’t sexual harassment and that it’s just ‘boys being boys’.”

Respondents indicated feeling unsafe after reporting sexual harassment - **58.9% of teachers who reported sexual harassment felt unsafe afterward**. This data highlights the pervasive impact of sexual harassment on teachers’ sense of security in their work environment. Among those who did not report their experience, almost half still felt unsafe after the incident.

How would you describe the school’s response/action following your report of sexual harassment?

9.3%

Very satisfactory / a good resolution

24.9%

Adequate

42.8%

Not adequate

23.0%

No action at all

Among those who did report internally, an adequate response was generally lacking. For example, it was reported that “no action at all” was taken in 23.0% of cases where a respondent reported being sexually harassed. A total of 42.8% of respondents described the school’s response as “not adequate”, while only 9.3% felt the response was “a good resolution”.

Another barrier to reporting was that survey respondents were unsure of their school’s reporting processes. When asked the question “what measures are currently in place to ensure students and teachers are aware of reporting processes?” a total of 36.4% answered either “unsure”, “none” or “not sure”. One survey respondent highlighted the barrier to reporting for relief teachers. They reported “probably a number of [measures] but as I work across multiple schools, I’m not always familiar with the processes.”

Research & Media

PUBLISHED

In their submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission's National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces, the AEU highlighted that the majority of teachers do not report experiences of sexual harassment in their workplace (AEU, 2019). The AEU submission did not identify whether those engaging in sexual harassment were students or colleagues, however it did provide information about barriers to reporting in a broader sense. The AEU noted that the primary reason respondents to its survey cited for not reporting was that they "did not feel comfortable", followed by "worried it would make the situation worse". A total of 10% reported "fear of not being believed".

The AEU also noted that teachers who did report sexual harassment said that reporting resulted in adverse impacts to their employment conditions, including reduced hours or non-renewal of contracts (AEU, 2019). The majority (78%) of those who reported felt the matter was not resolved to their satisfaction (AEU, 2019).

The sexual harassment of teachers by students is complicated by conventional understandings of power and authority that characterise this relationship (Goldschmidt-Gjerløw and Trysnes, 2020; Robinson, 2012). For some teachers, experiences of sexual harassment can rouse feelings of failure or disempowerment and concerns that the broader school community will perceive them as a 'bad teacher' (Goldschmidt-Gjerløw and Trysnes, 2020; Robinson, 2000). Robinson (2012, p. 91) suggests that:

"For some women teachers, the experience [of sexual harassment] is internalised as their failure to adequately deal with boys' behaviours and their inability to maintain their culturally legitimised and expected position of power."

The demeaning nature of sexual harassment, paired with the compromised authority of the teacher by a student, can not only lead to a deep sense of humiliation and shame for

victims (Lahelma et al., 2000). It can also lead to avoiding filing a report or taking disciplinary action out of fear or embarrassment (NASUWT, 2019).

For some female teachers, physical and verbal aggression of male students was seen to represent a considerable barrier to speaking up about sexual harassment (Kor et al., 2023, p. 2727). Insufficient training as to what constitutes sexual harassment has also been identified as a barrier to reporting (Kor et al., 2023). For women teachers, the issue is often dismissed by other adults accepting boys' excuses that 'it's a joke,' or staff believing it's just 'boys being boys' (Sparrow, 2024).

Evidence around teacher-targeted sexual harassment remains limited in part due to limitations in sexual harassment data collection and reporting within schools. This includes a minimisation of reporting due to concerns about damaging a school's reputation, or teachers fearful for their own safety (Kor et al., 2023).



Evidence suggests that in some cases, experiences of sexual harassment may be misclassified or misreported as something less serious. For example, Astor and colleagues (2023), in examining teacher victimisation, classified the experience of receiving obscene remarks and gestures (experienced by over two-thirds of respondents) separately from sexual harassment (experienced by around 7%).

Contributing factors

Factors that contribute to teacher-targeted sexual harassment are complex and varied. To date, research has focused on individual young people who engage in sexual harassment. However, there are factors within school environments that may be conducive to different forms of harm (Lloyd, 2019). Schools are learning institutions and harmful sexual behaviours are often learned (Ey & McInnes, 2020). Behaviours can escalate when not quickly addressed.

Research conducted with male students in Years 7 - 9 showed that children who sexually harassed others tended to be friends with others who did so, and that peer influence places them at higher risk of continuing behaviour (Sanders & Kendall, 2024). Social dynamics within peer groups play a significant role in normalising behaviours. Teachers reported that sexualised behaviour is often used as a means of fitting in or gaining attention from peers. One SHoT survey respondent noted, “students seem to think the comments/actions are normal and appropriate in any setting,” indicating the extent to which such behaviours are becoming embedded and normalised within student social circles and in school culture.

The following sections outline common factors contributing to the sexual harassment of teachers - the rise of misogyny in school culture, the malign impacts of popular online influencers such as Andrew Tate, exposure to harmful content online, exposure to pornography, sexist societal attitudes more broadly and (as previously identified) a lack of appropriate responses compounding the problem.

These factors have been identified in current academic research, media reports, firsthand accounts and data from our survey.



The rise of misogyny in schools

The SHoT findings

Survey respondents reported displays of misogynistic attitudes, from male students and male staff. One said, “The misogyny has gotten so much worse”, another that male students were “becoming increasingly misogynistic”.

“Often women are spoken over, overruled etc. when it comes to disciplining the boys. I believe that this then allows the boys to think that it is okay to behave inappropriately to women educators because we are constantly undermined (sic) by male staff...In our school, the boys wouldn’t dare moan or make inappropriate comments to male staff it is 99% of the time targeted to women.”

“To be honest, the culture in our school is revolting. Women are treated with disrespect by male leaders, male staff and many male students. I hear how students talk about female students from other schools.”

The use of degrading language towards female students was frequently raised, with boys employing sexist slurs and objectifying remarks. One respondent observed a “male pack mentality,” indicating these behaviours are often reinforced within peer groups.

Some teachers see the rise in misogynistic behaviour as a result of a broader school culture of disrespect towards women.

“Our school is run by males. Often women are spoken over, overruled etc. When it comes to disciplining the boys. I believe that this then allows the boys to think that it is okay to behave inappropriately to women educators because we are constantly undermined by male staff.”

A total of 14 survey respondents specifically named Andrew Tate as influencing or being very popular among male students. One commented that Andrew Tate “has definitely caused a rise in toxic masculinity in schools.” Another said students “often quote Andrew Tate’s views of women,” and another respondent that “a lot of the sexual behaviour comes from the same students who openly praise and defend anti-women public figures like Andrew Tate.”

Research & Media

PUBLISHED

In a recent study, teachers describe “an escalating culture not only of sexual harassment, but of language and behaviours expressing a belief in male superiority and other misogynistic views among boys” (Wescott and Roberts, 2023). Similarly, a study by Monash University found “teachers were facing a rise in misogynistic behaviour” (Miles, 2024). An unpublished study of teachers in South Australia found “an alarming increase in misogynistic, homophobic, racist, and sexist language and behaviours, mostly by boys and young men targeting girls and young female teachers (Ketchell, 2024).

Teachers have reported remorseless attitudes that correlate with boys’ emotions, particularly hostility towards women and girls (Connell 2005). Boys’ hostility has manifested in their disrespectful behaviours and attitudes and the use of sexually aggressive languages (Zhao, 2024). Dr Helen Cahill, lead author of the Victorian Education Department’s respectful relationships curriculum, believes that boys are “partly using teachers as a prop...to really up the ante of the power play because they’re showing they can do it against an adult who’s an authority over them.” (Sanders & Kendall, 2024).

Bec Sparrow, author and blogger, identifies that misogyny has grown “in the dark shadow of social media personality Andrew Tate and other anti-feminist or anti-women content influencers” (Sparrow, 2024). These personalities are sending a message that “feminism has taken power from men, and that women are now their oppressors...so they actually feel slighted by women and angry at them.” (Sparrow, 2024).



In the Media

‘Andrew Tate: A-Grade Poison. What parents and teachers need to know about his indoctrination of boys’

Writing about Andrew Tate’s “fantastical mix of lawlessness and self-righteous God-complex”, Izaakson examines Tate’s toxic influence and the reasons for his widespread appeal for young men and boys as young as thirteen:

“One suggestion is that Andrew Tate offers men a model of success through dominance and control that dissuades them from attempting to achieve many of the traditional goals out of reach for most young people: marriage and starting a family in a secure home. Tate preaches non-monogamy for men and being your own boss through ‘hustling’ (making money by any means). For the unemployed, or precarious worker, or the young person who cannot conceive of being able to afford a deposit for a home, this hyper-individualistic message of the rootless ‘rise and grind’ lifestyle has the potential to resonate...As the ability to have a stable home and start a family slip further from view for most young people, Tate provides this sad alternative specifically for young men: his message is raising children is women’s business and stable jobs are designed to grind you down and force you to support governments through taxes” (Izaakson, 2022).



The internet and social media

The SHoT findings

“...Social media is playing a huge role in corroding the quality of interactions and systematically undermining the attention of our young people. I believe there is an increasing disconnect between women as human beings, and women as objects.”

The influence of the internet and social media emerged as a dominant theme across survey responses. Many drew a connection between increased sexual behaviours in schools and students' social media usage. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram were often cited as having a major influence in shaping the unhealthy and often developmentally inappropriate sexual norms, behaviours and expectations observed among students. One teacher reported:

“Social media is our number 1 behavioural issue at Year 7.”

Multiple teachers observed an increasing trend of male students pressuring female peers for sexual images. This was linked to the normalisation of and overexposure to sexual imagery on social media platforms. One Year 7 teacher observed this happening at younger ages:

“Students in grade 7 are coercing girls into sending child exploitation material.”

The pressure to share sexual images isn't confined to secondary schools. One primary school teacher reported:

“Year 5 and 6 students sending nudes after being continually asked to do so - photos then being passed around to other boys.”

The extent of this issue was highlighted by another respondent who described an increase in reports that involve “image-based abuse e.g. revenge porn, threatening to share nudes.” One respondent commented that:

“Kids in ‘relationships’ (including female friendships) ... these then turn bad so they ‘expose’ each other with bad/embarrassing/ sexually explicit pictures they have of each other.”

Another teacher commented:

“It is definitely happening at a younger age more and more! They have access to anything on the Internet now, and if they are curious, they just look it up.”

Research & Media

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The internet and social media play a key role in shaping attitudes and understanding of the world we live in. McHale et al. (2009) argue that young people engage with media as part of their daily activities in learning and practicing skills, identity development, and building social connections. As a flow on, the internet and social media have a profound impact on the sexual attitudes and behaviours of young people.

Due to the popularity of large numbers of social media influencers, Longbottom et al. (2024) report that more children are becoming influencers and vying for attention on social media, with one in three children wanting to be YouTubers when they grow up. Haidt (2024) has compellingly described how the transition to a smart phone-based childhood in recent years has disrupted the healthy development of children.

In addition, research suggests that the sharing of sexually explicit images online has become so pervasive that both teachers and students are becoming desensitised to the issue (Kor et al., 2023). A new trend is the creation of AI-enabled ‘deepfakes’ in which the images of girls and female teachers are being morphed into pornography with media reporting a number of cases in Australian schools recently.

Melinda Tankard Reist has commented:

“AI is being weaponised against women and girls...It is acting, essentially, as an accelerant for more sexual harassment, more intimidation, more control of women... We are seeing this emerge with even Australian school boys creating so-called deep fake, nudifying images of their female peers at school... this is happening across the country.”

(Humphries, 2024a)

Easily available tools, including undressing/ nudifying apps, are contributing to a rise in this practice (Collective Shout, 2024b).



Harmful sexual socialisation

In a submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee on the Criminal Code Amendment (Deepfake Sexual Material) Bill 2024, Collective Shout highlighted that “the growing popularity of deepfake sexually explicit images/forges provides new ways of degrading, debasing and intimidating women” and “they normalise non-consensual sexual activity.”

Collective Shout noted that “there are currently 127 nudifying/undressing apps on the market, some attracting views in the millions”, and that “more sexually explicit deepfake videos were uploaded to the internet in 2023 than any other year...More than 100,000 individuals use the ‘Undress AI’ website every day” and the “apps are advertising openly on social media platforms.”

Collective Shout also highlighted that “almost 100 percent of individuals targeted in deepfake pornography are women”, and “it is often men known to the victim who create the sexually explicit images.” In some cases, the males creating the sexually explicit images are the victim’s students. Professor of Law at Durham University, Clare McGlynn, has observed: “I have seen boys request fake nudes of their teachers and mothers online” (McGlynn, 2024). McGlynn comments that the ease of access to nudifying/undressing apps “means men and boys can see anyone they desire naked” and raises concern “about the entitlement over women’s bodies that could spill over into our physical world.”

Sharing this concern, Collective Shout’s submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee observed that “AI-generated pornography, nudifying/undressing apps and face swap apps contribute to harmful sexual socialisation especially in adolescent males contributing to more peer-to-peer abuse and sexual harassment of female teachers.”

Collective Shout (2024a)

Pornography

The SHoT findings

The SHoT survey responses point to a deeply concerning trend of early exposure to pornographic material. Teachers reported children as young as Year 2 accessing and sharing pornographic content through personal devices or social media. One teacher commented: “I’ve had boys in Year 7 confess to me they are addicted to pornography,” indicating that pornography addiction is becoming a real issue even among very young teenagers.

In line with research that pornography is a primary source of sexual education for young people, one teacher indicated they were aware of “students accessing porn hub to ‘learn about sex’.”

Teachers reported students mimicking sexual acts they’ve seen in pornographic content, using explicit language inappropriate for their age, and developing unrealistic and potentially harmful expectations about sexual relationships.

“Children [are] showing other children pornography, sexual noises, children choking other children in the playground, children simulating sex from behind on other children from the age of 4.”

Teachers also reported that children are accessing pornography on their “school iPad” and on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.

Survey data indicates that sexual groaning has become a widespread and deeply concerning issue in schools. Teachers reported this behaviour as one of the most frequently occurring forms of sexual harassment witnessed in their classrooms. A total of 53.5% of survey respondents who had personally been sexually harassed at school said they experienced sexual groaning noises made at them.

“Moaning is a big problem. Even ‘good’ kids are doing it to win favour with others.”

The extent of the issue of sexual groaning and moaning in schools represents a significant challenge for teachers. Respondents described how this behaviour disrupts the learning environment, normalises inappropriate sexual behaviour, and often goes unchecked due to inadequate responses from school leadership.

“The sexualised noises are the worst because nobody seems to take it seriously! Yet my classes are constantly interrupted by moaning/ groaning/ choking/ gagging noises.”

“The moaning I’ve heard was from boys... The worst recent event was when one student paired their device to another student’s Bluetooth headphones and sent a sound clip of explicit moaning to the headphones at full volume. The headphones were confiscated, and the student referred to the Dean.”

Research & Media

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In an Australian study of 15–29-year-olds, 100% of boys and young men and 82% of girls and young women reported that they had viewed pornography. The median age for first exposure to pornography was 13 years for boys and 16 for girls. Male participants were much more frequent consumers, with 39% reporting viewing pornography daily in the last 12 months and a further 46% weekly, compared with 4% and 19% of female participants reporting daily and weekly viewing respectively (Lim et al., 2017). For young people whose first exposure to pornography was unintentional, the most common exposure method was via an internet pop-up or web search.

Children who are exposed to pornography acquire information about sexual activity which may normalise violent or coercive behaviours as part of sexual expression (Ey & McInnes, 2020). Exposure to pornography is widely associated with acceptance of rape myths and increased risk of committing or becoming a victim of sexual offences. Most popular genres include common themes of male aggression and degradation of females, often displayed as consensual and pleasurable for the women (Tankard Reist, 2021). Mainstream pornography involves a “fairly homogeneous script involving violence and female degradation” (Sun et al., 2016).

Pornography consumption “is associated with a range of harmful attitudes, behaviours, and experiences, including risky sexual behaviours, more sexually objectifying and stereotypic gender views of women, rape myth acceptance, sexual coercion, and aggression, and sexual and dating violence victimisation.” (Crabbe, Flood & Adams, 2024). The role of pornography in fuelling attitudes which drive violence against women is acknowledged by Our Watch and in the National Plan to Address Violence Against Women and Children. It is for these reasons that, in September 2023, women’s safety and child protection experts called on the Australian Government to trial a system of age verification to help prevent children’s exposure to pornography online. (Collective Shout, 2023).

In the Media

Collective Shout Movement Director, Melinda Tankard Reist has previously stated that:

“Pornography is moulding and conditioning the sexual behaviours and attitudes of boys” (Tankard Reist, 2016), and “there is a growing body of literature testifying to the way that boys who take their sexual cues from porn develop sexist attitudes and aggressive behaviours, which then have ‘trickle down’ effects on women and girls” (Tankard Reist, 2018).



Frontline service providers have observed a rise in pornography-fuelled injuries in women and girls seeking help. In correspondence to Collective Shout Movement Director Melinda Tankard Reist, Di McLeod, director of the Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence (GCCASV), shared what she was witnessing:

“In the past few years, we have had a huge increase in intimate partner rape of women from 14 to 80+. The biggest common denominator is consumption of porn by the offender. With offenders not able to differentiate between fantasy and reality, believing women are ‘up for it’ 24/7, ascribing to the myth that ‘no means yes and yes means anal’, oblivious to injuries caused and never ever considering consent. We have seen a huge increase in deprivation of liberty, physical injuries, torture, drugging, filming and sharing footage without consent.

“There is a cost in the trickle down effect that some of us bear witness to every day ... GCCASV has experienced a 56% increase in referrals from emergency departments of local public hospitals in the past year. Women have been hurt, sustained vaginal, anogenital and other physical injuries in the perpetration of forced sexual contact ... It is rare for us to have a recent rape presentation that involves only vaginal penetration. Porn inspired sex signature acts of anal, deep throating, the money shot accompanied by choking and strangulation are the new ‘norm’.”

Relationship and consent education is widespread across Australia, however such lessons are no match for the power and influence of the global pornography industry. As lead author of the Victorian Education Department’s respectful relationship curriculum commented, “This kind of normalisation of violence [in pornography] is teaching storylines around entitlement, about who women are, what they’re there for and what real men do” (Sanders and Kendall, 2024).



The impacts

The SHoT findings

Survey respondents were asked whether their experience of being sexually harassed had led them to take stress leave, change schools, resign, leave the teaching profession or other action. 1.9% of survey respondents reported that they left the teaching profession, 6.2% of respondents reported taking stress leave, and 7.6% reported that they had changed schools because of sexual harassment. In response to this question, some respondents simply made comments:

“Less confidence managing a class; even more dissatisfied with my job.”

“Avoided public places such as the local gym and functions where the student was present in fear of being photographed.”

“Hate teaching older grades.”

“I took two days off after two senior boys pretended to have sex in front of me...where would this be acceptable in any other industry?”

“Avoid certain areas of the school...the students sit in at break time.”

Other survey respondents highlighted the impact on their mental health, reporting depression and anxiety. Others reported sleep issues, psychological stress, and feelings

of fear, vulnerability and humiliation. One respondent said they “threw up in the staff toilets” after a sexual harassment incident.

Of those respondents who had not left the teaching profession, many reported they are considering leaving or applying for other jobs. Others reported they are actively looking for work outside teaching, with one respondent commenting that working towards leaving teaching is one of their stated professional development goals.

In addition to taking stress or sick leave, respondents are using various types of leave – extended maternity leave and long service leave – to avoid being in the school where they were harassed. Some reported that they have lost trust in the executive staff and the system itself.

“My school does not support teachers, and many have left for this reason. We are about in crisis mode, and it all feels a bit hopeless sometimes.”

Respondents reported that sexual harassment creates an environment where teachers do not feel safe. 58.9% of the respondents reported feeling personally unsafe in the classroom/school ground following sexual harassment. One respondent highlighted that physical and mental safety is an issue in schools.

“The safety of very large portions of the school community is at risk, not just physical safety but mental and emotional wellbeing.”

Research & Media

PUBLISHED

The repercussions of sexual harassment against teachers extend far beyond mere discomfort. Sexual harassment can erode the confidence of female teachers, both in their professional and personal capacities (Robinson, 2000). It can lead to burnout and low job satisfaction, which are not only undesirable states for employees in themselves, but... are associated with teachers' consideration of leaving the profession, and thus with high turnover (Moon et al., 2019, p. 518). Incidents of sexual harassment perpetrated by boys against women teachers result in women teachers feeling humiliated and fearful (Ey & McInnes, 2020).



Teachers have reported PTSD, hospitalisation from trauma, suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and sleeplessness as a result of the profound psychological impact of sexual harassment (AEU, 2019). Professionally, these can manifest in significant and sustained effects like diminished professional confidence, dwindling motivation, reduced work performance, and limited opportunities for growth or advancement (AEU, 2019, p. 7). After experiencing incidents of sexual harassment, teachers report fewer effective outputs in professional and personal spaces and lower self-efficacy (Ey & McInnes, 2020).

Former teacher and principal, Adam Voigt, says the impacts are concerning. According to Voigt, there is “a really marked and alarming spike in the way that male students are treating females...that’s having a significant impact on their mental health and their likelihood of staying in the profession” (Miles, 2024).



In the Media

‘Sexual Violence is Pushing Girls Out of School’

In the UK, Agenda Alliance has highlighted that girls “face an incredibly hostile environment at school” and that girls are citing sexual violence as the reason for their school absenteeism.

Amongst other sources, Agenda Alliance refers to Ofsted’s 2021 Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, which concluded that “sexual abuse and harassment had become ‘normalised’, with 9 out of 10 girls having received unsolicited sexual images and been subject to sexist name calling at school.”

Agenda Research also notes that sexual harassment and violence “can lead to lower school engagement, anxiety, alienation from teachers and poor academic achievement” (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). Agenda Alliance has called for ‘professional curiosity’ from staff as to the reasons for the girl’s absence, rather than simply resorting to punishment (Agenda Alliance, 2024).

What needs to be done

WE RECEIVED HUNDREDS OF comments from survey respondents in response to the question, **“What do you think needs to happen to change this harmful behaviour in schools?”**

Responses highlighted that a multi-faceted approach is required to combat sexual harassment of teachers in schools:

“More needs to be done about verbal harassment or requests. More needs to be done about bosses or colleagues harassing peers and a clear reporting path given where the victim is believed. Counselling offenders should be mandatory. Education of all from a young age needs to focus on what sexual bullying is, with a zero-tolerance approach.”

“Students that are witnessed engaging in these behaviours need to have interventions, counsellor sessions, outside agency assistance.”

“Change teacher workload so they don’t feel outnumbered and ganged up on in the classroom. For example, a female teacher in a room of 30 plus young men can be a very threatening environment if they decide to turn on you. Mob mentality among young men is increasing, and a lack of moral upbringing influenced by porn culture and social media.”

“The attitude around teaching being a profession and schools being a workplace needs to be driven home. It is unacceptable that we are exposed to this behaviour. We need protection from our workplaces.”

“Understanding from all that is actually happening and for the consequences to be made clear and be REAL - not just a slap on the wrist and do this ‘training program’ or take a day off to think about your behaviour.”

The following section is a condensed summary of responses that identify what needs to happen to change harmful behaviours in schools.

Take the issue seriously

Teachers want schools to be transparent about how they are dealing firmly and fairly with teacher-targeted sexual harassment and associated behaviours. School leadership needs to demonstrate how they are supporting teachers and students to be safe and able to focus on learning.

Teachers highlight that minimising sexual harassment leads to an environment where teachers (and female students) do not feel safe or valued in their schools. Some note that “low-level” behaviours are indicative of an escalation of harmful sexualised behaviour.

“Sexualised behaviour like making sexualised noises and gestures are often taken lightly by school administrators but in my experience many of those students end up continuing this behaviour and sometimes escalating to more physical forms of sexual abuse or explicit behaviours.”

Minimising attitudes also mean that, as one teacher pointed out, female students are groomed into accepting these behaviours without realising that they are unlawful.

Respondents noted that taking sexually harassing behaviours seriously would have a deterrent effect:

“If students know that their behaviour will be dealt with (sure and swift), not only should we see a drop in this type of behaviour, but victims will not feel ashamed to report this behaviour. This behaviour will not be tolerated in schools and, therefore, not tolerated in the wider communities.”



“Consequences” was the word used most often by respondents when asked what should be done. Teachers need students and staff to understand that sexual harassment is not acceptable, and they should not have to put up with it. Zero tolerance and a clear and direct policy driven from the top down were the preferences of respondents.

“Students need to start having consequences for their actions like they would in general society. If they assault someone at school they ‘might’ get suspended if they do it in public they can be charged. If they sexually harass someone at school they ‘might’ get put on a level or get a warning of suspension if they do it at work they can get fired and charged. It needs to be made clearer that this behaviour has serious consequences for them, not just the other person.”

Teachers want behaviours to be called out directly and immediately and addressed in accordance with applicable laws. They expressed a need for explicit processes and consequences for the students who display these behaviours.

Provide education and training

Teachers expressed a need for education to explicitly define what constitutes sexual harassment. They called for expert training on what is developmentally appropriate/inappropriate behaviour and how to identify it. Teachers also requested help with language to respond to and report what is not appropriate.

“It’s never expected. It takes us off guard. In that moment of shocked, speechlessness and discomfort shown by the teacher, the students achieve their intention. Then comes the gaslighting; ‘I was just yawning, Miss - you’re over-reacting’, etc...I would love for someone to please write a script - some kind of guideline of school appropriate responses for teachers that will have a significant and meaningful impact on the student then and there in the classroom. There are no Professional Learning Support opportunities that I’m aware of to address this behaviour.”

Teachers are in favour of ongoing, repeated, whole school education, including for parents, for students, and for teachers.

“Everyone needs to teach this every year.”

Training for staff

Many teachers indicated they did not know what to do when faced with sexually harmful or harassing behaviours in the classroom or yard. They requested more training in understanding and responding to sexual harassment.



“More training for staff, especially graduates...It needs to be explicit rather than a few lines in a staff handbook. Also, clearer processes in independent sector re: follow through on both staff and student misconduct. [Currently it’s] Open to interpretation which can create/magnify issues. Too vague.”

“More education and workshops on sexual behaviour - right and wrong and what to do when this happens to students or teachers.”

Teachers requested professional training and resources to deal with sexual harassment effectively in the classroom and at the management level. Scripts are needed for addressing these behaviours as soon as they occur. Teachers recommended that training should include:

- How to clearly identify sexual harassment and its nuances
- How to handle situations in the moment
- How to report
- How to respond to a report

Education for students

Teachers see the curriculum itself as failing to adequately address issues. Some teachers said that sex education and respectful relationship programs are insufficient or implemented too late to effectively counter the influences of social media and pornography. One teacher commented, “We are responding to problems, not providing education and preventative support.” Teachers request:

“Education of all from a young age... to focus on what sexual bullying is, with a zero-tolerance approach.”

Teachers want students to be taught positive behaviours, beyond consent education. Topics such as “honour,” “kindness”, “empathy”, and “etiquette” were suggested. In addition, teachers want students to be taught about “appropriate boundaries” and “acceptable behaviour.” They also want education that explicitly defines what constitutes sexual harassment, including perceived “low level” behaviours.

“Teach children the consequences and make them aware that their actions can be extremely detrimental to the person involved.”

Teachers commented that this should be carried out in a way that doesn’t sexualise students too early, shame or scare them. They want students to know how to seek assistance and how to disclose information properly.

Outside experts were highly recommended to address these problems, with teachers wanting more education from those who are unafraid to tackle the issue.



“Educational packages created for schools for free, for every age bracket and easily accessible and a course not a single lesson... Without being “on trend” with terminology but focusing on the law, the consequences and the why morality matters.”

Survey respondents pointed out that current education interventions almost never address sexual harassment directed at teachers, or peer-to-peer sexual harassment.

“During personal development and health lessons students are made aware of unwanted touching or harassment by adults but not by other students or children. They need education so they understand it’s not acceptable from ANYONE at ANY AGE.”

Teachers were conflicted about whether it would be effective for schools to address this in curriculum, but there was clear agreement that students need more help than they are currently receiving:

“It’s hard to say. How much more can we squeeze into our curriculum. When do we get to the point where we are no longer teaching the fundamentals (literacy and numeracy) well enough?”

“The whole anti-bullying policies need to be re-written in a way that kids can respond to and relate to. Years ago, the only thing kids learned in Sex Education was ‘don’t do it’. Now we’re more aware... We need to teach much more explicitly about emotional intelligence, how to deal with petty conflict, how to de-escalate conflict, how to use self-control in positive ways.”

Education for parents

“The children need to undergo education with parents present.”

Teachers emphasised the crucial role of parental involvement in addressing sexual harassment in schools. Many teachers express frustration over what they perceive as inaction or dismissiveness from some parents regarding their children’s inappropriate conduct. One teacher observed: “Students see sexualised behaviours online and in video games and movies and parents often seem to be oblivious or think it’s ‘cute’ that their child is ‘so grown up’.”

Teachers highlighted the potential legal implications of some of the behaviours they’re observing in their classrooms, with one respondent stating:

“Parents need to acknowledge their child’s behaviour as it is by the law - sexual harassment. But they often ignore or excuse.”

One teacher commented, “The elephant in the room is parental supervision and parenting skills.” This comment reflects broad agreement among respondents. With regard to sexually inappropriate behaviour, some teachers viewed parent engagement with their child as more important than providing education through the school. Prevention of inappropriate sexualised behaviours is a key target, but parents also have an extremely important role in rehabilitating offenders once incidents have occurred.

Teachers agreed on the necessity for the inclusion of integrated strategies in the curriculum that include media literacy, clear policies on digital conduct, and collaboration with parents to establish consistent messaging on these topics.

Many suggestions were made on how schools can help upskill parents on this critical matter.



“Run parent workshops on the behaviours that teachers are seeing, and what they are doing to combat it.”

“Talk to parents about exposure to pornography and communicate clear expectations about acceptable behaviour in a school setting.”

“Establish shared language and expectations between parents and schools... work together to create programs to address it.”

“Provide parent education to fully understand the impacts on children when they are exposed to sexual content.”

“Engage fathers to model positive behaviours - ‘Provide the role models our youth desperately crave’.”

Make schools safer

Teachers want more respect, training, and protection, and noted that community attitudes towards teachers need to improve. They desire a safe working environment and a culture of respect. This is one contributing factor to the high attrition rate of teachers.

School leadership

Teachers want principals and leaders to hold parents accountable and offer stronger responses to parents who don't believe their child has done anything wrong. They want support to stand firm when they are confronted by aggressive parents who fuel this behaviour and behave in a confrontational manner with schools when their children are managed for such behaviour.

“The leadership of schools and organisations need to take these reports seriously. The governing boards of schools need to act. They only seem to act if it is from one of ‘those families’ or the threat of legal or media involvement. Women and girls do not feel safe in their own schools from the ‘jokes’ and belittling behaviour that is supported by inaction by others. I have seen female colleagues indirectly bullied and lose promotion opportunities when they have tried to take a stand on this issue. If you want to advance your career as a woman in education, you don’t speak up!”

“Leadership teams need to take things seriously. Many leaders have been out of the classroom for a significant period- they have no idea what a classroom is like now.”

Policy and procedures

Teachers called for more effective policies, both preventative and responsive, at all levels that address the reality of their situation. They want:

“An acceptance and agreement within schools and departments of what sexual harassment is and that it is not tolerated at any level.”

Teachers see a need for clear policies on how to investigate incidents and when to involve police.

“Police have a lot to do already but we should be able to take out AVOs on offenders. The boys that harassed me got expelled, thankfully. This should be automatic. More needs to be done about verbal harassment or requests.”

Teachers highlighted that incidents are not always investigated, instead being dealt with by various policies and procedures, and sometimes only at the discretion of the principal or leadership.

Several teachers advised that because of unclear policy on consequences for behaviour “students know there’s no real repercussions.”

A common suggestion was the need for clearer reporting procedures. Teachers want “instructions and clear steps to take (that don’t involve union involvement).”

“More detailed explanation of procedures. Can often be overwhelming or difficult to ascertain how to correctly follow procedures.”

Social media policy

An overwhelming number of teachers want phones banned on school grounds at all times. This was widely recommended by teachers.

“Get phones and devices out of schools. It is an experiment gone awry.”

“Total ban on devices on school grounds.”

Social media was mentioned many times as the means by which students access inappropriate content. Teachers also reported that sexual harassment is taking place via social media.

“Limit student’s access to social media and place stronger security measures on devices.”

Code of conduct

Teachers were asked if their school has a code of conduct, if they were satisfied with the code, and if any changes needed to be made. 89.3% of respondents reported that their school had a code of conduct in place. It was not clear from these responses whether the code of conduct was one which addressed student conduct, staff conduct or both. However, only 48.1% were satisfied with their school’s code of conduct, 18.2% were not satisfied, and 33.7% were unsure or did not respond.

A total of 32.3% of teachers commented that their code of conduct needed changes, and from those respondents 30.3% highlighted that the code needed to be clearer and more explicit. Teachers also expressed a desire for inclusion of concrete examples of sexual harassment to facilitate a whole school community understanding, including the consequences of engaging in sexual harassment. They commented that addressing sexual harassment simply as “bullying” or “inappropriate behaviour” is inadequate.

“Explicitly [identify] types of sexual harassment and consequences including police involvement.”

“Recognition of what gaslighting is, including what it looks like.”



“Explicit acknowledgement of sexual harassment and the process of reporting it.”

“Needs to be spelled out in black and white, the serious legal consequences made completely clear and an absolute zero tolerance policy for behaviour of this type.”

Many teachers described problems associated with the current code of conduct, or with its execution. Some commented that it is not an “active document”, and it is not “enforced” or “implemented”.

“It needs to be followed! The school does not adhere to it or follow correct procedures.”

“It’s not an active document. It has been created because it is something that has to be done...Not because it’s helpful in the workplace.”

“Show that the Code is something the school values, and make sure teachers feel safe, particularly after a report is made.”

In some cases, the code of conduct was perceived as “useless” as staff and students were not held to account.

“It is a piece of paper.
No action is ever followed
unless the union steps
in with a threat.”

Many teachers recommended that student behaviour should be addressed by the code of conduct, and with language that is more accessible to students.

“There are no references
to instances where students
(particularly older students)
are the perpetrators, or how to
handle that situation.”

“It’s not relevant to kids.
It’s too policy based and not
appealing to kids to take
seriously.”

Many teachers pointed out that parents are crucial in reinforcing healthy behaviours and should be included in a school’s code of conduct. It was noted that students with “difficult” parents can get away with more antisocial behaviours, and parents may even be intimidating, abusive, or enabling/reinforcing of their child’s behaviours.

“There needs to be a
level of consultation and
accountability of parents in
the code of conduct.”

“Parents need to understand
and support the consequences
for their children when they
engage in these behaviours.”

“The changes [need to
be] more about how to
manage parents that don’t
want to hear it or deal with
it...what happens is often
the school is left with little
options but to tell parents,
who then are abusive or have
no consequences.”

Teachers reported that there needs to be more awareness and “visibility” of a code of conduct. They suggested that it could be posted on walls, so it is visible at all times and that at the least, it must be more accessible, with a training and education piece to accompany it.

“Include in induction
for new staff or
casual teachers.”

Teachers acknowledged that barriers exist when it comes to writing an appropriate code. They cited time, resourcing, and the availability of qualified and informed personnel (such as trauma-informed psychologists and counsellors) as barriers.

Provide therapeutic responses

Teachers believe that students engaging in sexual harassment of teachers need counselling. In their survey responses, some teachers acknowledged that counselling was part of school protocols, but many suggested that counselling should be on-going and offered at critical points.

“Counselling of offenders should be mandatory.”

“Counselling upon return to school - to prevent repeat behaviour, and possibly to make sure a student is not subject to abuse at home or is not being groomed.”

Teachers agreed that a student engaging in sexual harassment is an indication that the student needs help, but they noted that assistance is not always forthcoming.

“More support for individual students with problematic sexual behaviours - most of our students don’t meet the criteria for referral to local health services for this concern.”

“Students that are witnessed engaging in these behaviours need to have interventions, counsellor sessions, outside agency assistance.”

Survey responses indicated that the impacts of sexual harassment are devastating to teachers. Some received ongoing support in the form of counselling; however, the vast majority are not receiving any ongoing support. When asked “What ongoing support have you received,” 83% of respondents said ‘nil’, ‘none’, or ‘nothing’.

“Better supports need to be put into place to support victims.”

Teachers responded that support needs to go further than offering access to the Employee Assistance Programs. They said that they need access to counsellors and psychologists who understand the current school context and have experience providing therapy to clients who have been sexually harassed in schools.



More research is required

The initial goal of the SHoT survey was to begin mapping the scale of teacher-targeted sexual harassment within school environments and to gain insight into whether sexual harassment of teachers and the sexualised behaviour of students was escalating.

While recognising the limitations of our survey and its analysis, we believe the survey responses credibly indicate that teacher-targeted sexual harassment is a major issue in schools - with close to 50% of teachers stating they have either personally experienced sexual harassment in their school.

More research is required to further define the scale of the problem and analyse trends and patterns. It is recommended that research is conducted into the prevalence, nature, and impacts of sexual harassment experienced by teachers in school settings. Research into the contributory and risk factors for sexual harassment and the intersection of sexual harassment of teachers and of students would also be beneficial.

Suggestions for further research are set out in Recommendation 6 (see over).



Recommendations

THE FOLLOWING HIGH-LEVEL recommendations are based on the SHoT survey data and the research conducted as part of this Report.

Recommendation One

1. School leaders and school governing authorities should ensure that their schools have effective policies and procedures in place that:
 - a. **Clearly define sexual harassment**, including with reference to applicable laws
 - b. **Explicitly identify** the sexual harassment of teachers as a form of sexual harassment
 - c. **Provide clear direction** and guidance for the prevention of sexual harassment of teachers
 - d. **Provide clear direction** on the process for reporting the sexual harassment of teachers, including when to involve police
 - e. **Provide clear direction** and guidance for responses to allegations and incidents of sexual harassment of teachers, including safety plans, punitive measures and therapeutic responses

Recommendation Two

2. School leaders and school governing authorities should ensure that their schools have a student code of conduct endorsed by the school principal and signed by students (and their parents). The student code of conduct should outline:
 - a. **A zero-tolerance policy** for the sexual harassment of teachers
 - b. **Behaviours** that constitute sexual harassment
 - c. **The therapeutic and disciplinary response** to violations of the code of conduct

- d. **Relevant laws and policies** that inform the overall student discipline procedure.

Recommendation Three

3. School principals should roll out a comprehensive education and training program for school staff and students that is mandatory and conducted on a yearly basis. The education and training should address:
 - a. **Issues of gender** and stereotypes and how this can lead to sexual harassment
 - b. **What constitutes sexual harassment**, including definition and examples
 - c. **Key aspects of relevant laws** applying to sexual harassment in school settings
 - d. **Rights and responsibilities** in a school setting
 - e. **How to address sexual harassment** as soon as it takes place, with confidence
 - f. **How to report sexual harassment** (for teachers and for students)
 - g. **How to respond to a report** of sexual harassment (for teachers).

Recommendation Four

4. School principals should seek specialist advice on how to engage parents/guardians and the wider school community in addressing the issue of sexual harassment, including:
 - a. **Issues of gender and stereotypes** and how this can lead to sexual harassment
 - b. **The impacts of social media**, internet influencers and pornography
 - c. **The prevalence of sexual harassment** against teachers
 - d. **The prevalence of peer-to-peer** sexual harassment and abuse
 - e. **How to address and respond** to concerning sexualised behaviours.

Recommendation Five

5. School leaders and school governing authorities should ensure provision of ongoing, funded and trauma-informed therapeutic responses for:

- a. **Teachers who have been subject** to sexual harassment
- b. **Students who have been subject** to sexual harassment and abuse
- c. **Students who have engaged** in the sexual harassment/abuse of a teacher or student.
- f. **Whether the sexual harassment of teachers** is being correctly identified, reported, and addressed in accordance with relevant legal and ethical obligations
- g. **Whether educational programs**, for students and staff, about sexual harassment in schools are appropriate and effective
- h. **Whether parents are appropriately engaged** in addressing the problem of sexual harassment against teachers.
- i. **The quality of school leadership responses** to sexual harassment of teachers.

If schools do not provide internal therapeutic responses, school leaders and school governing authorities should provide clear and up-to-date information about providers and how to access their services.

(2) implement evidence-based measures to improve responses to the sexual harassment of teachers, considering existing research, data from the SHoT survey, and further research as recommended in recommendation 6(1).

Recommendation Six

6. State/territory departments of education and other school governing authorities should:

(1) support and fund further research into:

- a. **The prevalence and nature** of sexual harassment across school types (for example, public, independent, faith-based, single sex), including how the sexual harassment of teachers may intersect with the sexual harassment of students
- b. **The contributory and risk factors** for sexual harassment in school settings
- c. **The impacts of sexual harassment** experienced by teachers, including the financial impacts (for example, lost productivity, medical costs and criminal justice activities)
- d. **The preventative strategies** and frameworks that schools are implementing, and should implement, to address the sexual harassment of teachers.
- e. **Whether school policies and codes of conduct** accurately define sexual harassment and explicitly address the sexual harassment of teachers

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