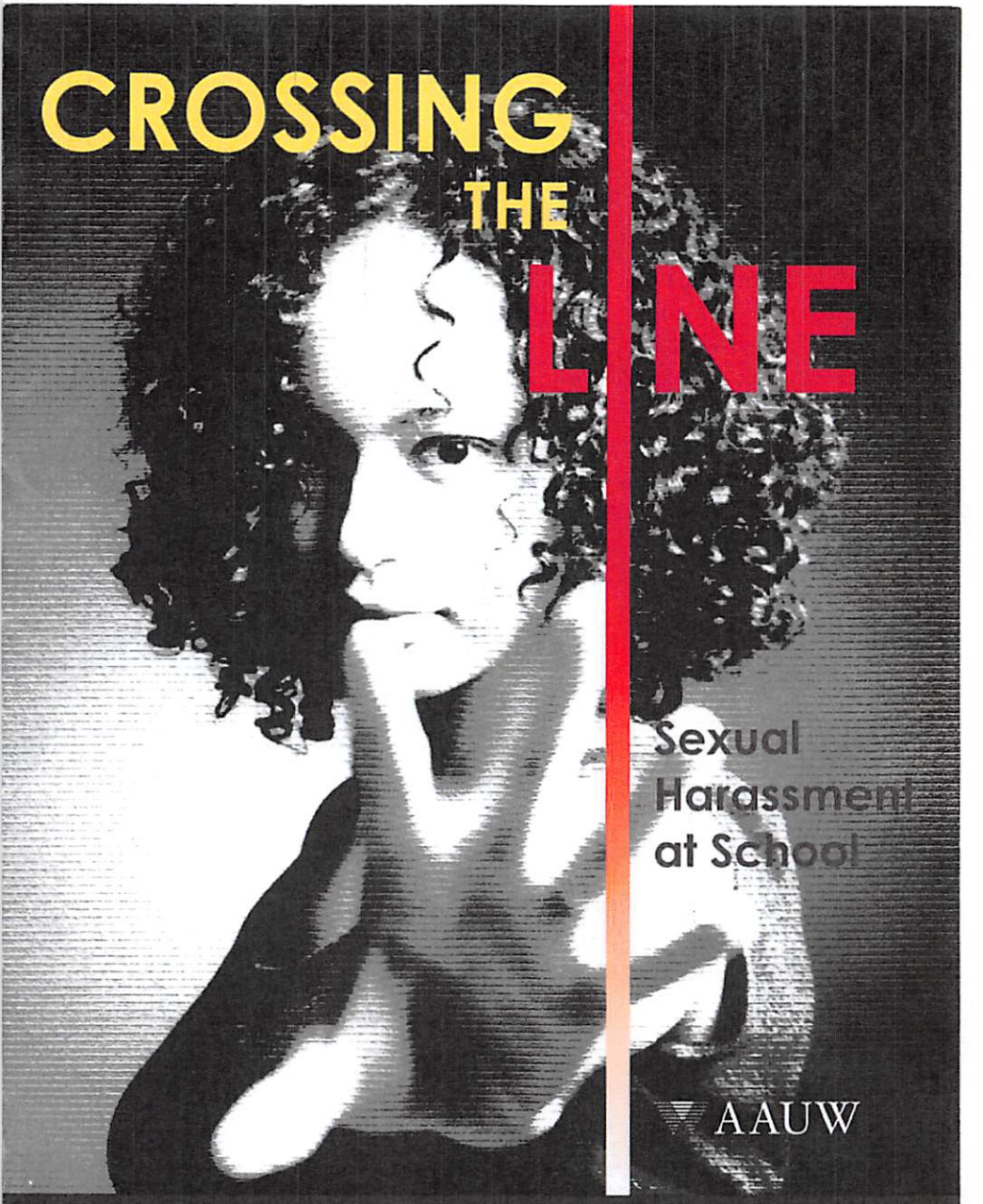
CROSSING THE LINE



Sexual Harassment at School

AAUW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sexual harassment has long been an unfortunate part of the climate in middle and high schools in the United States. Often considered a kind of bullying, sexual harassment by definition involves sex and gender and therefore warrants separate attention. The legal definition of sexual harassment also differentiates it from bullying.

Based on a nationally representative survey of 1,965 students in grades 7–12 conducted in May and June 2011, *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School* provides fresh evidence about students' experiences with sexual harassment, including being harassed, harassing someone else, or witnessing harassment. The survey asked students to share their reactions to their experience with sexual harassment and its impact on them. It also asked them about their ideas for how schools can respond to and prevent sexual harassment.

JUST PART OF THE SCHOOL DAY

Sexual harassment is part of everyday life in middle and high schools. Nearly half (48 percent) of the students surveyed experienced some form of sexual harassment in the 2010–11 school year, and the majority of those students (87 percent) said it had a negative effect on them.[1] Verbal harassment (unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures) made up the bulk of the incidents, but physical harassment was far too common. Sexual harassment by text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means affected nearly one-third (30 percent) of students. Interestingly, many of the students who were sexually harassed through cyberspace were also sexually harassed in person.

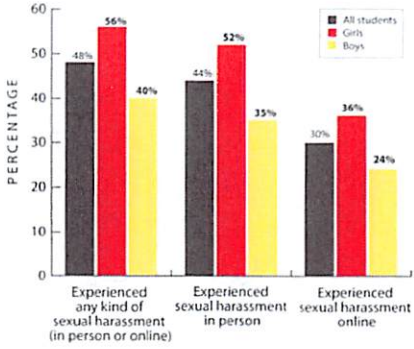
Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed, by a significant margin (56 percent versus 40 percent). Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed both in person (52 percent versus 35 percent) and via text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means (36 percent versus 24 percent). This finding confirms previous research showing that girls are

[1]Of students who said that they were sexually harassed, 13 percent chose "none" when asked which experience of sexual harassment had the most negative effect on them.

sexually harassed more frequently than boys (Sagrestano, 2009; Ormerod et al., 2008; AAUW, 2001) and that girls' experiences tend to be more physical and intrusive than boys' experiences (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). Being called gay or lesbian in a negative way is sexual harassment that girls and boys reported in equal numbers (18 percent of students).

Witnessing sexual harassment at school was also common. One-third of girls (33 percent) and about one-quarter (24 percent) of boys said that they observed sexual harassment at their school in the 2010–11 school year. More than one-half (56 percent) of these students witnessed sexual harassment more than once during the school year. While seeing sexual harassment is unlikely to be as devastating as being the target of sexual harassment, it can have negative effects, such as reducing students' sense of safety. Witnessing sexual harassment at school may also "normalize" the behavior for bystanders.

Figure 1. Students Who Experienced Sexual Harassment during the 2010–11 School Year, by Gender

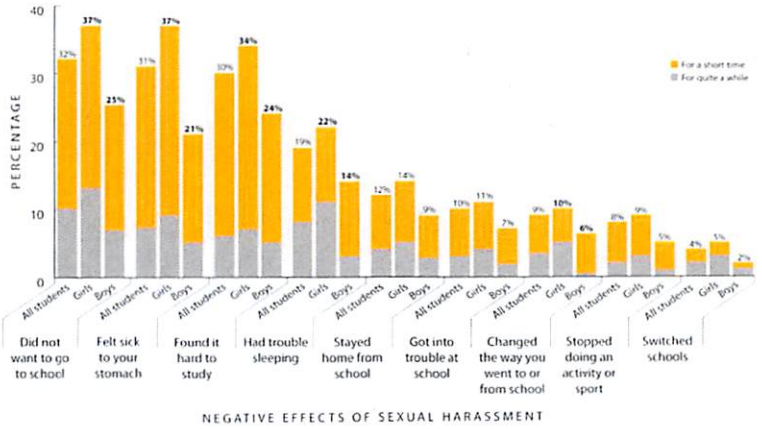


Notes: Students were asked if they had experienced any of 10 types of sexual harassment since the beginning of the school year. **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents (n=1,965 students), 1,002 girls and 963 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

The prevalence of sexual harassment in grades 7–12 comes as a surprise to many, in part because it is rarely reported. Among students who were sexually harassed, about 9 percent reported the incident to a teacher, guidance counselor, or other adult at school (12 percent of girls and 5 percent of boys). Just one-quarter (27 percent) of students said they talked about it with parents or family members (including siblings), and only about one-quarter (23 percent) spoke with friends.[2] Girls were more likely

[2] These estimates of the number of students who talked with their parents about a sexual-harassment incident may be higher than other estimates because the referenced event was the experience that had the most negative effect on the student. In other surveys, students were asked to recall the most recent experience.

Figure 7. Student Reactions to Sexual Harassment, by Gender



Notes: **Bold** numbers indicate statistically significant gender differences at the 95 percent level. Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had experienced a negative impact from being sexually harassed since the beginning of the school year (n=804 students), 484 girls and 320 boys in grades 7–12.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

than boys to talk with parents and other family members (32 percent versus 20 percent) and more likely than boys to talk with friends (29 percent versus 15 percent).[3] Still, one-half of students who were sexually harassed in the 2010–11 school year said they did nothing afterward in response to sexual harassment.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT NEGATIVELY AFFECTS GIRLS

Girls were more likely than boys to say that they had been negatively affected by sexual harassment—a finding that confirms previous research by AAUW (2001) and others. Not only were girls more likely than boys to say sexual harassment caused them to have trouble sleeping (22 percent of girls versus 14 percent of boys), not want to go to school (37 percent of girls versus 25 percent of boys), or change the way they went to or home from school (10 percent of girls versus 6 percent of boys), girls were more likely in every case to say they felt that way for "quite a while" compared with boys. Too often, these negative emotional effects take a toll on students' and especially girls' education, resulting in decreased productivity and increased absenteeism from school (Chesire, 2004). Thus, although both girls and boys can encounter sexual harassment at school, it is still a highly "gendered

[3]Respondents could select more than one category. For example, a student could say that she or he spoke with a parent and talked with a friend.

phenomenon that is directly and negatively associated with outcomes for girls" (Ormerod et al., 2008).

"THAT'S SO GAY"

Gender harassment is a significant part of the sexual-harassment problem in schools. In this type of harassment, students are targeted for failing to follow norms that are typical for their gender. For example, a boy who wears colorful clothing might be called gay, and a girl who plays sports might be called a lesbian. In this type of harassment, students police other students' behavior and enforce gender stereotypes.

Boys were most likely to identify being called gay as the type of sexual harassment most troubling to them. Reactions varied, however, with some boys saying that they laughed it off, while others expressed embarrassment, sadness, or fear as a result of the experience. For girls, being called a lesbian was also a common occurrence, particularly for female athletes. Reactions to this form of sexual harassment varied as well, with some students undisturbed but others upset by the experience.

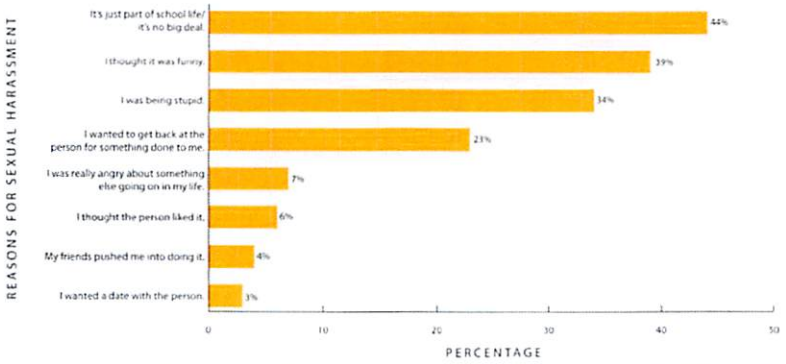
A VICIOUS CYCLE

Harassers come in all shapes and sizes, but the AAUW survey revealed overarching patterns. Nearly all the behavior documented in the survey was peer-to-peer sexual harassment. Boys were more likely than girls to say they sexually harassed other students (18 percent versus 14 percent). Most students who admitted to sexually harassing another student were also the target of sexual harassment themselves (92 percent of girls and 80 percent of boys). Almost one-third (29 percent) of students who experienced sexual harassment of any type also identified themselves as harassers. Only 5 percent of students who had never experienced sexual harassment identified themselves as harassers.

"NO BIG DEAL"

Many of the students who admitted to sexually harassing others didn't think of it as a big deal (44 percent), and many were trying to be funny (39 percent). Only a handful of students who harassed others did so because they wanted a date with the person (3 percent) or thought the person liked it (6 percent). Thus, sexual harassment does not usually appear to be a misunderstanding. Few

Figure 4. Why Students Sexually Harassed Other Students



Notes: Base=survey respondents who indicated that they had harassed someone in person or online since the beginning of the school year (n=290 students), 135 girls and 155 boys in grades 7–12. Categories were not mutually exclusive, and students could choose more than one reason.
Source: AAUW sexual harassment survey, May–June 2011.

harassers see themselves as "rejected suitors," and many appear to be misguided comedians or simply students who are unaware, or unwilling to recognize, that their actions may bother others. These findings suggest that prevention efforts need to address when humor crosses the line and becomes sexual harassment. Moreover, for some students, understanding that sexual harassment can indeed be a big deal for other students is a necessary first step.

STUDENTS SPEAK OUT

Students offered ideas for reducing sexual harassment in their school, including designating a person they can talk to (39 percent), providing online resources (22 percent), and holding in-class discussions (31 percent). Allowing students to anonymously report problems was a top recommendation (57 percent), as was enforcing sexual-harassment policies and punishing harassers (51 percent). These suggestions should spur strategies and approaches for responding to and preventing sexual harassment in schools.

This report concludes with a discussion of promising practices that are making a difference in schools, along with recommendations for how administrators, educators, parents and other concerned adults, students, and community groups can contribute to efforts to make middle and high schools free from sexual harassment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Today, too many students feel sick to their stomach, have trouble sleeping, or have trouble concentrating on their schoolwork as a result of sexual harassment. The AAUW survey findings challenge everyone to tackle sexual harassment in schools. AAUW makes the following recommendations based on the survey and on the work of researchers in the field:

Schools that do not have a sexual-harassment policy must create one, and all schools should make sure that the policy is publicized and enforced.

Schools should notify parents of the policy and give them advice on how to discuss the implications of the policy with their children. Many students want this kind of information posted on the school's website and taught to them in workshops and in-class discussions. They also want to see policies enforced and harassers punished and an anonymous way to report harassers.

Schools must ensure that students are aware of and educated about what sexual harassment is, what their rights are under Title IX, and how to respond if they experience or witness sexual harassment.

Most students do nothing when they experience or witness sexual harassment, in large part because they do not know what to do or do not think doing anything will help. Since most student harassers reported that they were sexually harassed themselves, teaching students appropriate responses is crucial in ending the cycle of sexual harassment.

Schools must train their staff and faculty to recognize and respond to sexual harassment, to know how to help students who come to them, and to know their obligations if they witness sexual harassment.

Most harassed students do not turn to anyone for help—especially not to their teachers, counselors, or other school staff. Some students stated that they did not ask because those educators were unhelpful. Staff and faculty

training can help build students' confidence in the ability and willingness of school personnel to assist them.

Schools must work to create a culture of respect and gender equality.

Girls are sexually harassed more than boys are, especially in upper grade levels. Girls face more forms of physical harassment, and overall, sexual harassment has a greater negative impact on them. Therefore, girls especially should be taught how to respond assertively to sexual harassment and where they can find help.

Schools must teach all students that sexual harassment is not funny.

While both girls and boys can be harassers, boys are most often the harassers of both girls and boys. Many male harassers claimed they were just being funny. Teaching kids that sexual harassment crosses the line and is not humorous could be a crucial lesson.

Schools must create a culture of acceptance and tolerance for all, without regard to gender presentation or sexual orientation, and must reinforce that culture by the attitudes, words, and actions of school officials, faculty, and staff.

Incidence rates remain high for sexual harassment based on a student's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender expression. Boys in the survey particularly reported being negatively affected by this type of sexual harassment.

Schools must recognize and address how the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation can cause some students to fare worse than others when they experience sexual harassment.

Schools should offer targeted help for these more vulnerable groups. Surveyed students from nonwhite racial-ethnic groups and those from families

of lower socioeconomic status reported more negative effects from sexual harassment than did students in other groups.

Schools must teach students about cyber-harassment, what their rights are, and how to respond to or report instances.

Students who are sexually harassed both online and in person are much more negatively affected than students who face sexual harassment only online or only in person. While much cyber-harassment does not take place on school grounds, it can affect students' ability to learn, thereby falling under the school's Title IX responsibilities.

By undertaking these efforts, all individuals concerned with creating a harassment-free school climate can collaboratively achieve a more equitable learning environment for all students.

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