

Rape Culture in UK Schools



In what is being referred to as education's #metoo moment, recent weeks have seen an [outpouring of sexual abuse stories posted online](#), mostly detailing sexual misconduct in the British school system. For most people, these “shocking and abhorrent” allegations will come as no surprise, as they remember school as a toxic environment from which many young women emerge sexually traumatised. The online platform [“Everyone's Invited,”](#) curated by Soma Sara (who identifies as a survivor), now contains 13,004 recently published testimonies from girls as young as nine. These testimonies are disturbing descriptions of “rape culture,” and they detail stories of abuse/assault which occurred inside schools, at house parties, or students homes. These stories describe sexual harassment, misogynistic jokes and abuse, groping, child pornography, and rape. Many survivors claim they reported the abuse and received little to no support, and some were even pressured to stay silent. The environments that are described here, in which the threat of sexual violence is so common that it becomes normalised, constitute a “rape culture.” Experiencing this culture has been traumatic for many, and often dangerous, as this kind of behavior in teenagers can be a gateway for [“more extreme criminal acts”](#) in

adulthood. Of course, anybody of any background can be a target of sexual abuse, but the majority of those coming forward online identify as women.

The published testimonies are difficult to read, and demonstrate how often the trauma of sexual abuse is followed by the equally traumatic experience of being shamed/disbelieved by peers. The accusations do not include names, and are simply stories, they have not been investigated for legitimacy, and there is no burden of proof on Everyone's Invited. It is simply a platform for survivors to speak their truth. Still, the brilliance of the website is that it allows victims to identify the schools in which safeguarding has failed. Some schools in particular were named many times, making it difficult for representatives to continue ignoring the attention this story is getting. "Everyone's invited" has pushed some very prestigious private schools into the limelight, forcing them to confront these issues within the public eye. [A new survey from Plan International UK claims that 58% of girls aged 14 to 21 have been publicly sexually harassed in an education setting](#). It's overwhelmingly clear that in the most elite British schools, unchallenged misogyny allows sexual violence to perpetuate in an endemic fashion. It is simply a part of the culture.

Britain's Private schools remain a mystery to most people, except for the select few families who can afford to spend tens of thousands of pounds a year on their children's education. Steeped in traditions built by financial privilege and power, they bear many remnants of the past inequalities of British society. The [British school system was built](#) on patriarchal principles, and male-only public schools remain influenced by false impressions of female academic inferiority to this day. Many mixed schools have only admitted female students in recent years, and have struggled in adapting the classroom environment to keep girls safe and offer an equal education. Perhaps one of the reasons that abusive behavior has prevailed in these schools, which mostly educate children from affluent backgrounds, is that privileged students feel protected by their parents' money and influence. [Dulwich](#) College, a four-hundred-year-old boarding school for boys (with some of the most expensive fees in the UK) has received an open letter from a former pupil. It contains 250 testimonies from girls who attended neighboring schools, all of whom were abused by Dulwich pupils in the 90s and early 2000s. For so many women to come forward about students from this particular school, there must have been a culture that was permissible to acts of sexual violence. The headteacher has reported some former students to the police, but as much time has passed, there is little the school can do to offer justice and undo this damage. It's concerning to think that these teenagers, who got away with this abuse, have used their position of privilege and good education as leverage to enter some of Britain's most elite universities and

workplaces. The girls from the neighbouring state schools that they traumatised, may not have had such an easy time moving on into successful careers.

Dulwich is not the only elite school that has been forced to acknowledge mass claims of abuse that were not investigated properly; Westminster, Latymer School, and Eton have made similar headlines over the last few weeks. Some prominent right-wing speakers have been eager to remove blame from the schools and suggest that parents hold sole responsibility for students' bad behavior. Although misogynistic attitudes do sometimes originate at home, it is the responsibility of the education system to challenge patriarchal culture in the classroom and to educate boys about appropriate sexual behavior and consent. Instead schools pressured victims to keep silent about the abuse, protecting their male students and avoiding negative publicity.

Soma Sara has pointed out that although certain prominent schools have been thrust into the limelight, the website demonstrates clearly that sexual abuse occurs in every kind of school, in every constituency and sector of society across the country. Throughout March, the number of testimonies from victims who had attended state schools rose, showing a [33% increase](#). There was also a 44% increase in stories from British Universities, where inappropriate comments and unwanted touching are experienced by roughly two-thirds [of students](#). The focus on private schools should not distract us from the wider issues in society as a whole. The tragic death of Sarah Everard, and the national discussion it has triggered about violence against women, shines a light on the culture of victim blaming and police failures. The [Office for National Statistics](#) has revealed this month that girls aged between 16 and 19 are the most common victims of sexual assault, and that girls of colour are more likely to experience abuse. The most vulnerable in society are the least protected by the school system and by [misogynistic and racist police](#).

As prosecution rates for rape and sexual assault remain so low, how can we work together to protect children and bring justice to perpetrators? How can we be sure that schools educate children on consent and take complaints seriously? In many cases, years have passed and the victims will not consider pressing charges when the likelihood of conviction is so low. Additionally, a large proportion of the testimonies do not detail any crime having been committed, so the victims could never have appealed to the police in the first place. Although there are cases of rape and sexual assault, the majority of survivors describe their experience

as being subject to continuous unwanted comments and touching, incidents that fall under the purview of school administrators to provide disciplinary action.

Parents and politicians are quick to place blame onto online pornography. Children are now able to witness ever more disturbing content on their devices, in which women are abused and degraded, normalising these behaviors for the millions of teenagers that are exposed to it. Although this is a serious driver of young mens behavior, porn remains a scapegoat for authority figures that have failed to properly educate children. Changes in technology constantly create new challenges for teachers in terms of safeguarding. A [2020 survey of over 300 school children discovered that 32% had received inappropriate and unwanted pictures](#) over the internet (known as "[cyberflashing](#)" and breaking child pornography laws if the sender is under 18). It is particularly difficult for safeguarding staff to monitor or punish this behavior, especially as it often goes unreported. New challenges like this need to be addressed as part of sex education classes at school, which often fall short of tackling the big issues. Misogyny, consent, and LGBTQ+ sex and relationships are not always covered in detail, with curriculums focusing instead on safe sex practices for heterosexual couples. My own school's sex education classes involved outdated videos from the 1990s, which we collectively struggled to take seriously. Nearly all of the lessons were about condom use and STDs, and I don't remember the teacher ever using the word consent in class. The curriculum needs a complete overhaul in this area with a new focus on progressive discussion, looking to target misogyny from a young age.

In response to this scandal, teachers are working with the Home Office and the Department of Education, as well as Ofsted, the Independent Schools Inspectorate, and the Police, to launch a [Whitehall inquiry](#). The Metropolitan Police has also launched an investigation and phone helpline, encouraging survivors to come forward. The management of 'Everyone's Invited' is working with police and government representatives, and some of the schools named online will be subject to random inspections to assess the depth of the problem. It is a national response, and a testament to the power of online organising to make headlines and attract attention. What Soma Sara has achieved so far with Everyone's invited is truly impressive, but will the inquiry lead to changes of practice inside schools when it comes to challenging rape culture?

The shadow minister for domestic violence, [Jess Phillips MP](#), questions how the government can be shocked by the revelation of mass abuse in schools, when a conservative report on the

topic was published in 2016. She accused ministers of having very obviously “dropped the ball,” as no effort was made to act on the report and the issue was neglected for five years.

The British justice system is completely ill equipped for persecuting abusers. Firstly, only [15% of those who experience sexual violence go to the police](#). When there is so little prospect of the perpetrator being brought to justice, reliving the trauma of abuse often seems pointless, and it exposes victims to the humiliation of being disbelieved or shamed by peers. From personal experience, I know that going through that process to be told that there is not enough evidence for a charge, is heartbreaking. It is what happens in [94.3% of cases](#). In any case, a conviction cannot necessarily repair the emotional damage, especially as rape charges are often met with lenient punishments. The only way to remove this burden of collective sexual trauma from the shoulders of women and girls across Britain is to address rape culture at the roots, and for schools to protect girls and offer them a safe environment for children to learn and grow.

If you or someone you know has experienced sexual violence, please know that support is available. Here are some organisations that can help:

- **Rape Crisis England & Wales** – www.rapecrisis.org.uk | Call 0808 500 2222 for free, confidential support.
- **SurvivorsUK** – www.survivorsuk.org | Support for male survivors of sexual violence.
- **Victim Support** – www.victimsupport.org.uk | Free, confidential help for all crime victims, including sexual violence.
- **The Survivors Trust** – www.thesurvivorstrust.org | A network of support services for survivors across the UK.

If you are in immediate danger, call **999** or contact the **National Domestic Abuse Helpline** at **0808 2000 247** for 24/7 support. You are not alone—help is available.

