

#MeToo in British schools: Gendered differences in teenagers' awareness of sexual violence

European Journal of Cultural Studies

1–20

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DOI: 10.1177/13675494231191490
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**Tanya Horeck** 

Anglia Ruskin University – Cambridge Campus, UK

Jessica Ringrose**Betsy Milne**

University College London, UK

Kaitlynn Mendes

Western University, Canada

Abstract

This article explores how British secondary school students responded to and made sense of the rising public awareness of sexual violence in British society that emerged during lockdowns for COVID-19. Based on the findings from a 2021–2022 study conducted in five secondary schools, the article explores the gendered discrepancies in girls' and boys' awareness of violence against girls and women. In particular, it examines how the youth participants in this study responded to two related media stories during lockdown: the news of Sarah Everard's kidnapping and murder by a police officer and the viral spread of sexual abuse testimonies on the 'Everyone's Invited' Instagram page and website. The article demonstrates how girls were more likely to experience, recognize, and discuss sexual violence, in part due to feminist consciousness raising during lockdown via digital technologies like Instagram and TikTok. Although some boys did recognize the problem of violence against women, in general, they were much less aware of Sarah Everard's murder and Everyone's Invited and were prone to absorbing manosphere-like discourses around false rape accusations. In focus groups, some boys deployed a defensive masculinity and

Corresponding author:

Tanya Horeck, Anglia Ruskin University – Cambridge Campus, East Road, Cambridge, CB1 1PT, UK.

Email: tanya.horeck@aru.ac.uk

adopted a discourse of male victimhood, which denied the scale and scope of violence against girls and women. However, through involving boys in focus group discussion with both us and their male peers about power and privilege, progress was made in challenging and counteracting rape myths and anti-feminist male victimization narratives.

Keywords

#MeToo, British schools, COVID-19 lockdowns, Everyone's Invited, gender, Sarah Everard murder, sexual violence, social media, teenagers

Introduction: the Shadow Pandemic

Violence against girls and women increased dramatically during the COVID-19 crisis. Social isolation and the economic insecurity of lockdown life were contributing factors in the intensification of gender-based and sexual violence, which a UN study called a 'shadow pandemic' (UN Women, 2021b). Among the stark statistics released by the UN: one in two women reported that they or someone they know experienced violence since the pandemic (UN Women, 2021a). Launching a campaign to raise public awareness of violence against women, the UN called for 'a global collective effort to stop it' (UN Women, 2021b). This article is written in the spirit of heeding this call to action by advocating for better ways of educating young people about violence against girls and women and the broader cultures that enable it. In what follows, we present findings from a research study conducted on young people's experiences of (tech facilitated) sexual harms and gendered violence during the COVID-19 crisis. This study took place in the context of a wider public discussion of sexual violence in UK schools. While not a new problem, the issue of sexual violence in UK schools and universities came to fresh public attention during the lockdowns. In March 2021, following public grief and outrage over the kidnapping and murder of 33-year-old Sarah Everard by police officer Wayne Couzens, the Instagram page and website 'Everyone's Invited' was inundated with testimonies from girls about their experiences – both current and past – of sexual harassment and abuse in school contexts. Set up in 2020 by 23-year-old Soma Sara as a space to share experiences of rape culture and to call out sexism in schools, colleges and universities, Everyone's Invited went viral following Everard's murder. To date, there are over 50,000 accounts of sexual violence and over 3000 schools and universities listed on the site. As noted on the Everyone's Invited website, the list of schools and universities exist not to single out individual schools but rather to demonstrate the 'prevalence of sexual violence in all schools' (<https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/schools-list-2022>).

The Everyone's Invited testimonies of peer-on-peer abuse in school cultures – and the accusation that educational institutions often do nothing to stop it or to support survivors – received extensive media attention. Headlines declared that it was a 'moment of reckoning' (Topping, 2021), and police chief Simon Bailey was widely quoted as saying that this was the '#MeToo movement for schools' (Makoni, 2021). In the same month as Sarah Everard's murder, UN Women published a report on the 'Prevalence and Reporting of Sexual Harassment in UK Public Spaces' (2021), which found that most young women

aged 18–24 had experienced some form of public sexual harassment in the United Kingdom. The report also found that girls and women had little faith that the abuse would be dealt with by authorities. In response, thousands of young women began posting videos on TikTok and other social media platforms, stating that they were ‘part of the 97 percent’ who experienced sexual harassment (Bain, 2021).¹

Shortly after the mass mainstream media coverage of Everyone’s Invited and the public outcry over the ‘97 percent’ statistic, the Department for Education and the educational regulatory body Ofsted (2021) released a ‘rapid response review’ which pointed to the high occurrence and normalization of sexual harassment and abuse in state and independent schools and colleges. The review findings confirmed what experts on sexual violence in schools had been saying for decades (Oldenbring and Johansson, 2021; Phipps, 2018; Renold, 2018; Stein, 1994; Sundaram, 2013; Sundaram and Jackson, 2020; Ringrose, 2013; Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Mendes et al., 2022; Variyan and Wilkinson, 2022) – that abusive practices (both online and offline) – are normalized and commonplace. For example, the Ofsted report found that ‘90% of girls, and nearly 50% of boys, said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happens a lot or sometimes to them or their peers’ (Ofsted, 2021). The review also demonstrated gendered differences, with girls reporting much higher levels of sexual harassment and abuse, as well as greater awareness of these harms, than boys.

Around the same time as the Ofsted review and the media coverage of Everyone’s Invited were gaining traction, concerns were being raised about the rise of incel culture, and the susceptibility of young men to masculinist ideologies during social distancing and isolation for COVID-19. Digital media studies scholar Kaitlyn Regehr (2020), for example, suggested that increased isolation and ‘more time online can also mean more time spent on some of the darker forms’, creating an ‘echo-chamber effect’, in which ‘high dosages of violent content are consumed regularly and become normalised and established as a fixed belief’. The rise of incel culture is tied to the manosphere, defined by Debbie Ging (2019) as a ‘loose confederacy of interest groups’ online that communicates misogynistic ideas in the promotion of men’s rights (pp. 639–640).

This is the climate in which our study took place. Drawing upon our research, we aim to answer the following question: How do young people respond to and make sense of the rising public awareness of sexual violence in British society? We share our findings that some girls in our study were more likely to experience, recognize, and discuss sexual violence, in part due to feminist consciousness raising during lockdown via digital technologies like Instagram and TikTok, while some boys were less aware of news and discourse around sexual violence and more prone to absorbing manosphere-like discourses around false rape accusations which appeared to target them through social media algorithms. In pointing to this difference, we do not mean to suggest a strict binary opposition between genders; indeed, we spoke to teens who complicated this picture and our study also included young people who do not conform to the gender binary. Nonetheless, it is important to investigate the reasons for the notable gendered disparity in how young people in our study perceived and processed the problem of sexual violence against girls and women. Building on Sarah Banet-Weiser’s (2018: 38) theorization of the complex ‘mirroring effect’ between networked popular feminism and popular misogyny in contemporary digital culture, we suggest that the struggle between feminism and misogyny

is apparent in teenagers' responses to online news and sexual violence discourses. If we are to use this period of 'heightened visibility' brought about by #MeToo (Alcoff, 2018) and intervene in the 'complex of beliefs' (Buchwald et al. cited in the work of Rentschler, 2014: 66) that normalize and perpetuate cultures of violence, it is crucial to understand the entanglement of feminism and misogyny as manifested in the digital lives and social interactions of young people. Our research shows that the increased screen time during lockdown intensified the ongoing struggle between networked popular feminism and popular misogyny, producing a newfound critical recognition of the problem of sexual violence as well as some gender backlash among the young people in our study. We explore the gendered dynamics of these responses as we proceed.

The study

The research for this study was conducted from May to July 2021 immediately following the three major UK lockdowns. Working with a sex education charity that delivers in school educational workshops on consent, sexual health and relationships, we obtained special permission to enter schools in line with COVID protocols. In some cases, schools that were on the Everyone's Invited 'list' reached out to our charitable partner for help in addressing issues around sexual violence.

This article is drawn from a larger project, carried out across five secondary schools in England, in which we conducted 17 focus groups with 65 young people and 29 individual follow-up interviews. Data was drawn from eight of these focus groups and 14 follow-up interviews with 40 young people across four of the five secondary schools (see Table 1). The young people were in Years 9–12, including 19 girls, 20 boys and one non-binary student.² Three schools were co-educational (mixed gender) with one state-funded 'single sex' all-boys school. The schools were located in five regions across England and all the schools except for the 'single sex' boys school had higher than average proportion of students receiving free school meals. In England, this is seen as an important marker of income deprivation. At the beginning of each focus group, we asked the young people to fill in a demographic survey. Due to time constraints in one focus group, we were unable to collect the demographic data for three participants. Of the 62 respondents, 53.2 percent ($n=33$) were boys, 45.2 percent ($n=28$) were girls and 1.6 percent ($n=1$) were non-binary. In addition, 80.6 percent ($n=50$) identified as heterosexual or 'straight', 12.9 percent ($n=8$) identified as a sexual minority (including lesbian, gay, bisexual or pansexual) and 6.4 percent ($n=4$) responded 'I don't know' or 'prefer not to say'. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 17 year olds, with the majority in Year 9 (i.e. 13–14 years old). Most of our sample was white (90.34 percent, $n=56$), with 4.8 percent ($n=3$) identifying with mixed/multiple ethnic groups, 3.2 percent ($n=2$) other ethnic groups and 1.6 percent ($n=1$) identifying as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British.

All focus groups and interviews were conducted in schools, were approximately 1 hour in length, and explored young people's experiences of online sexual risk and harms during and after COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.

The individual follow-up interviews ranged between 10 and 60 minutes in length. The interview protocol involved asking focus group participants if they would like to volunteer for a follow-up individual interview to continue discussing themes raised there. These

Table 1. Snapshot of all focus group data collected.

Name	Type	Location	Focus group	Year	Participants	Gender	Total interviews	Sub-sample interviews
School 1	Mixed state secondary	South East	14	10	3	Boys	3	0
			15	10	2	Girls	2	2
					1	Non-binary	1	1
School 2	Mixed state secondary	South West	16	11	3	Boys	1	0
			17	11	2	Girls	2	0
			2	9	4	Girls	3	0
			3	9	2	Boys	1	0
			4	10	6	Girls	3	3
			5	10	2	Boys	1	0
School 3	Mixed state secondary	East of England	6	12	6	Girls	3	2
			7	12	4	Boys	1	1
			8	10	5	Girls	2	2
			9	10	4	Boys	2	1
			10	9	4	Girls	2	1
			11	9	3	Boys	0	0
			12	9	6	Boys	3	1
School 4	Single-sex state secondary	London Suburb	13	9	5	Boys	2	0
School 5	Mixed state secondary	Yorkshire	1	9	1	Girl	0	0
					2	Boys	0	0
Total					65		29	14

Bolded data is that used in this analysis.

individual interviews were contingent on their school schedules and their inclination to participate further. Depending on school protocols and safeguarding procedures, teachers were present for three of the focus groups and four of the individual interviews. Teachers tended to sit out of the eyeline of students and busy themselves with their laptops. While it is difficult to measure the impact of having teachers in the room, their presence did not appear to deter young people's engagement, as most readily shared their views and experiences.

The focus groups were led by a feminist research team of three women academics, which consisted of two senior researchers and a junior research assistant. We were mindful of how our gender could potentially deter the boy participants from speaking candidly. However, not all scholars agree on the extent to which the researcher's gender impacts expressions of hegemonic masculinity in focus group situations. For instance, Louisa Allen (2005) has argued that the researchers' gender does not necessarily influence focus group work in predictable ways. In her research on performances of adult male sexuality and identity in focus group settings, Allen (2005) found that the 'identity work' performed by the men – both in front of their peers and in front of her as a female researcher – produced key data about their 'presentation of self' (p. 35). Allen (2005) further suggests that what seemed most important was that she demonstrated 'sensitivity about what [the men] were saying' and created 'an environment in which they could speak freely' (p. 52). She argues 'that it was this style of investigation which was more conducive to the emergence of less traditional male sexualities than these qualities being a direct consequence of simply being female' (p. 52). We also strove to create an inclusive environment based on listening and respect for the diversity of views being shared with us.

To ensure confidentiality, we invited students to come up with pseudonyms for themselves for the purposes of the audio recording; sometimes, they requested that the researchers come up with pseudonyms for them and this proved to be an unexpectedly useful icebreaker, initiating laughter and creating a sense of camaraderie before moving on to more difficult topics. After obtaining informed consent, discussions and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The focus groups were organized according to friendship groups with two to six participants per group; the participants tended to self-select into largely single gender groupings, with the exception of one mixed gender group. Allowing young people to choose whom they are most comfortable with to discuss sensitive issues such as gender and sexual violence is important, and we prioritized our participants' voices and experiences throughout our research (Renold, 2002, 2007).

Focus groups began by providing participants with social media templates, asking them to write a list or draw things they like and dislike about social media (including gaming platforms). Template options included blank display screens of Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Yubo, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter and PS5. After 5–10 minutes, participants took turns describing their work to the group, before moving on to questions on topics relating to young people's experiences and knowledge of (technology facilitated) sexual violence as well as the gendered dynamics of these experiences. Focus group questions included probes around the topic of sexual and gender-based violence; for

example, we asked if they think some young people have more negative experiences online based on gender (e.g. girls vs boys). If yes, how so?

Data analysis and findings

NVivo qualitative software was used to organize the data. The research team collectively analyzed the data by reading through all focus group transcripts to generate a list of key themes. These themes were entered into NVivo as ‘top nodes’. From this, the researchers identified an overarching theme of young people’s responses to Sarah Everard’s murder and Everyone’s Invited, which captured distinct sub-themes relating to the gendered disparities in teenagers’ thoughts and views on gender and sexual violence. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach, we conducted a theoretical thematic analysis, by explicitly engaging with data that fit this analytic interest. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, thematic analysis involves researchers actively identifying key patterns and themes, with ‘the “keyness” of a theme . . . not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question’ (p. 82).

This thematic analysis identified a clear discrepancy between girls’ and boys’ responses to Sarah Everard’s murder, Everyone’s Invited, and awareness of sexual violence more generally. Significantly, this gendered division of perspectives was consistent across all four school settings, pointing to larger societal trends of how young people are currently making sense of sexual violence in the United Kingdom. Although we are hesitant to generalize findings beyond these four schools, our results are seemingly reinforced by Ofsted’s (2021) recent review that noted girls’ and boys’ understanding of sexual violence were often different, with the report stating ‘boys were much less likely to think these things happened’, including perceptions of unwanted touching, sexual assault, sexist name calling and pressure to engage in sexual activities.

Sub-theme 1: girls’ awareness/feminist consciousness raising through digital engagement

In the focus group discussions, girls in four of the focus groups and 14 of the follow-up interviews demonstrated awareness of Everyone’s Invited and/or Sarah Everard. When asked how they came to know about these issues, girls told us they commonly came across Everyone’s Invited through TikTok and Instagram when they were scrolling at home during lockdown. In focus groups, many girls either agreed that their schools deserved to be named on Everyone’s Invited list of schools, colleges and universities as a site where sexual violence had taken place, or if it was not listed, that it should be. For example, Danielle stated: ‘I know our school wasn’t on there and I feel like it probably should have been’ (Year 10, School 2). Emily similarly stated: ‘I think most schools are on there, but the schools that aren’t on there, maybe people haven’t opened up, because it’s a hard thing to talk about’ (Year 11, School 1). The latter quotation illustrates the participant’s awareness of the systemic nature of sexual violence within schools, as she assumes that the reason why all schools are not listed is because of a lack of reporting, rather than a lack of sexual violence happening in these contexts.

Another significant finding is that engaging with the Everyone's Invited website and associated social media posts encouraged critical discussions among the girls about sexual violence. In individual follow-up interviews after the focus groups, we learned more from the girls about how, during lockdown, they bonded over Everyone's Invited and shared their concerns – via social media messaging and texting – about how their school managed sexual violence. As Daphne stated: 'The girls, we definitely talk about [Everyone's Invited] a lot and we read the stories that have been put up on there, and we talk about them, and how our school wouldn't do anything' (Year 10, School 3). Likewise, Rachel was asked whether she discussed Everyone's Invited with her female friends, she responded: 'Yes, definitely 100% I talk to them . . . we just talk about it and discuss certain things about it' (Year 9, School 3). This increased dialogue and awareness, brought on by Everyone's Invited and the Sarah Everard case, encouraged girls (in both the focus groups and the individual interviews) to reflect on their past experiences and reconceptualize them as problematic forms of gender-based sexual violence:

I only opened up about one of my sexual assaults because another girl in my year opened up about hers, and then I realised it was wrong. Because at the time I didn't know that it was wrong and I was just like, 'Oh, they're just messing about'. No. It was like very wrong (Emily, Year 11, School 1, focus group).

Importantly, the girls explained how this dialogue with other girls about sexual violence fostered a sense of solidarity. For example, in her interview, Rachel explained that talking to her friends about the Everyone's Invited testimonies and sexual violence 'definitely makes you feel better that you're not the only one who does go through these things' (School 3, Year 9). This relates to Sandra Bartky's (1975) work on second-wave feminism and consciousness-raising groups in which she explains that a step towards developing a feminist consciousness is coming to a 'realization that others are made to suffer in the same way I am made to suffer' (p. 431). These findings also resonate closely with our own and others' previous work on teens' digital feminist activism, where it was found that popular social media campaigns generate both feminist solidarity and consciousness raising (Sills et al., 2016; Taft, 2017; Jackson, 2018; Retallack et al., 2016; Ringrose et al., 2021a). Rachel went on to state: 'It's so sad that it is so common that these things happen. I feel like the world does need to make a change on equality for girls and men'. Here, we can observe a feminist politicization of her experiences, by turning a 'fact' – that is, the prevalence of gender-based sexual violence – into a 'contradiction', that these widespread, 'common' experiences are 'sad' and wrong and need to be radically transformed (Bartky, 1975: 429).

While the girls in our study spoke of the significance of social media platforms for amplifying reports of sexual violence, it is important to reflect on some of the limitations of social media as a consciousness-raising tool in the #MeToo era. There is robust feminist debate over the potential of #MeToo to raise cultural awareness and to serve as a form of 'public education' (Sanin, 2019: 122). For example, feminist theorist Tamara Metz argues that 'if #MeToo is a feminist awakening or movement, it is certainly a neo-liberal feminist one' in so far as it individualizes the problem of sexual harassment and abuse and largely fails to connect gender to other structural social inequalities (cited in

the work of Sanin, 2019: 126–127). Similarly, Catherine Rottenberg (2019) points to the need to ask whose voices are being amplified, and to what ends, and notes the criticism that the #MeToo campaign tends toward the ‘individualistic’ by ‘ultimately placing the onus on women to come forward and speak their pain’, thus holding ‘individual women responsible if not for the problem of sexual abuse then for its solution’ (p. 45). This latter suggestion that the onus is put on individual girls and women for solutions is interesting in terms of how the girls in our study responded to *Everyone’s Invited*. There is a complicated tension between, on the one hand, girls using *Everyone’s Invited* to make important connections between different stories of sexual harassment and abuse and, on the other hand, internalizing their suffering and feeling responsible for solution-finding.

For example, Elizabeth described sitting next to someone in class who would touch her leg without consent. She described feeling both ‘uncomfortable’ but unwilling to speak up because ‘people might say something’ about how she should take it as ‘complimentary’ (Year 10, School 2, interview). It was not until she read through the *Everyone’s Invited* testimonies and saw a similar experience identified as ‘harassment’ that she realized it ‘wasn’t right’ and that she ‘should have said something’. Rachel described being touched ‘inappropriately’ while on the school bus; ‘I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but now I think back on it I’m like, I should have stood up for myself and said something’ (School 3, Year 9, focus group). For Rachel, like several of the other girls we spoke to, there was educational value in reading the stories on *Everyone’s Invited*, even though she put the responsibility on herself for making sure such situations did not occur in the first place: ‘I want to know how bad the situation is and how the situations happened to a certain extent so that I can prevent myself from going or doing these things so I’m not putting myself in a vulnerable position’. These formulations gesture toward neoliberal notions of responsibility, in which girls are encouraged to ‘empower’ themselves and find solutions through altering their individual behaviors (Rottenberg, 2019: 43) rather than focussing on how perpetrators and the wider structures that enable them should change.

However, this is not to say that critical reflection on wider social structures was absent. On the contrary, in many of the discussions with girl participants, there was a strong desire to hold schools accountable and a fierce acknowledgment of how school cultures produced conditions for collective harms. *Everyone’s Invited* provided the girls in our study with the opportunity to identify their personal experiences not as isolated incidents, but as part of a broader, structural rape culture in schools that works to dismiss and downplay sexual violence as ‘not serious’, or as something that is inevitable or incontestable. In the focus groups and interviews in the schools we visited, girl participants often reflected on the connections between the harms they suffered and the gender inequalities of the school as an institution. For example, girls told us of a school culture in which their bodies were policed around school uniform policy. Angel (Year 12, School 3, interview), for instance, told us of the male headteacher pulling her aside to tell her that her school uniform was ‘distracting to the boys’. She expressed anger and frustration at a culture of sexualization, which was supported by the male senior leadership team’s outdated gendered attitudes around girls’ bodies and uniforms. For Angel, and other girls, issues around uniform were part of a wider culture of victim-blaming, which meant that female students would not be likely to look to the school for support in cases of

sexual harassment or abuse. As part of the conversation about Everyone's Invited, other girl participants also expressed strong feelings about the need to transform the 'victim-blaming' culture of schools. As Rachel said in the focus group:

School is a place that you should be protected . . . I'd hope that our school was a school that would protect people and look after people, and the fact that it's happened at this school {that there were incidents of sexual abuse from her school listed on the Everyone's Invited site and victim-blaming rhetoric}, and that . . . I feel . . . like I've got to constantly watch myself and what I'm doing. . . .

In addition to pointing out the failings of the school, girl participants had useful ideas of how schools could take a more proactive approach, including more openly addressing issues around consent, ethical behavior and nude-image sharing.

Sub-theme 2: boys' defensiveness and denial

Compared to the girls' acute awareness of public discussions on sexual violence, and of the failings of the school as an institution, we found that boys in only two focus groups were aware of Sarah Everard's murder, Everyone's Invited, and the viral statistic that 97 percent of women have experienced sexual harassment. The few boys that had heard about Everyone's Invited, explained that they learnt about it through school assemblies and from discussions with their peers upon their return to school after lockdown.

The boys in one of the focus groups from School 3 (Year 9) discussed how even though their school had been listed, they were surprised that sexual violence was happening because they had not witnessed or experienced anything themselves.

Marcus: I think it's quite weird to know that it does actually happen, because you hear stories about it, but I have never come across it close to me, so I don't know. But it's quite sad to know that people do do that around here to other people.

Bob: But it probably happens most areas, which makes me feel a bit more like comfortable about it, that it isn't just our school, it's the majority of schools around the UK (Year 9, School 3).

Here, the boys in a co-educational setting struggle to accept their school being listed on Everyone's Invited page because they haven't personally experienced or heard of sexual assault in the school. The gendered differences in responses to the prevalence of sexual violence is evident here, when Bob describes feeling 'comfort' in knowing this is a systemic issue, which is in direct contrast to the girls' responses of feeling 'sick' and 'disappointed' by the number of testimonies on the website.

Entangled with the boy's denial was the persistent and troubling notion of 'false rape accusations'. Several of the boys in one of the focus groups strongly believed, and felt aggrieved by, the idea that girls and women falsely accuse men of rape. Although discourses of 'false rape accusations' are not new, scholars have noted their increased circulation on social and mainstream media after #MeToo (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Budgeon,

2021; Ging and Siapera, 2019). Sarah Banet-Weiser notes how regardless of whether violence was committed or not, men deploy discourses of ‘ruined lives’ propped up by the myth of ‘lying women’ (Banet-Weiser, 2021: 64) seeking revenge, punishment or fame. Some of the boys in our study deployed similar discourses; as noted by Gareth:

People use rape accusations as like insurance for them, like you see people do it with cars and stuff and like loads of people have accused famous people like [Cristiano] Ronaldo, like Justin Bieber, of rape accusations and then it’s just stupid because it’s just trying to get a bit of money off them (Year 9, School 4).

The boys in this focus group discussed how people who have made false rape accusations should be criminally prosecuted because an accusation can ‘ruin somebody’s life’ (Jamal, Year 9, School 4). Ronaldo stated that when it comes to gendered hierarchies, boys are actually ‘more vulnerable’ because girls can make claims about a boy sending a ‘dick-pic’ and there’s nothing that the boy can do about it (Year 10, School 3).

Finally, participants from the all-boys school offered another frequent rebuttal to mass disclosures of sexual violence from women – that ‘not all men’ are sexual predators. Such claims obscure and naturalize gendered hierarchies (Nicholas and Agius, 2017). Several boys immediately turned to these defensive claims when the topic of sexual violence and Sarah Everard was broached. In one focus group, the boys responded with the notion that male perpetrators are quite rare. For example, Gareth stated: ‘I think it’s such a few amount of people that are rapists and it creates such a big stigma around boys’ (Year 9, School 4). In the same focus group, John stated that women are scared to talk to all men, when ‘you’ve got like a select few, not even more than 1000 probably, rapists’ (Year 9, School 4). These boys further discussed how they found it unfair that all men and boys are punished for the actions of a select few.

Boys in one focus group and one follow-up interview, brought up #KillAllMen, which trended online during lockdown in response to the Sarah Everard murder. Sam describes this trend as ‘ridiculous’ because the number of men who are perpetrators are ‘just, like a few, barely any really’ (Year 9, School 4). Jeff stated: ‘I feel like a lot of guilt just because I’m a man’ and ‘I feel like I’ve been blamed for things that I haven’t done, it’s just because some people have done stuff that every man is being blamed and being punished’ (Year 9, School 4). Here, Jeff suggests that society has unfairly made him feel guilty, enabling him to identify as a victim of an unjust society. Furthermore, by focusing on the fact that *he* does not perpetrate sexual violence, he individualizes and decontextualizes the wider societal trend of gender-based sexual violence (Messner, 2016; Nicholas and Agius, 2017). Similarly, John claimed: ‘Obviously I would like more to protect women but I’m not going to apologize for something that someone else did because it’s nothing to do with me’ (Year 9, School 4).

There are several discursive threads at play here around masculinity. First, John said he would like to ‘protect’ girls, a patriarchal stance that understands girls and women as needing male protection. But then, he used a highly individualizing logic to contradict this claim, and say it has nothing to do with him. John denies the social hierarchies that structure his position of privilege, as well as the ways in which rape culture is pervasive and affects everyone. Other boys made similar claims about feeling unfairly ‘blamed’

and held accountable for other men's actions. For example, Gareth stated: 'we're not responsible for someone else's actions, so we don't have to apologise for it' (Year 9, School 4).

While the most overt demonstrations of this defensive masculinity were in two focus groups in the all-boys school, there were also examples of it in School 3 when the boys discussed an incident involving a testimony on *Everyone's Invited* from their school. In this instance, a male teacher in a leadership position publicly blamed a girl from their school for her own sexual victimization. The boys in the focus groups unanimously defended the male teacher, claiming that he chose the wrong words, that he 'slipped up' and that his victim-blaming comment was a 'genuine mistake' (Year 9, School 3). Ronaldo claimed that his take-away from this incident is that the boys need to be taught 'what you are allowed to say, with racism, homophobia. Just so no-one makes a mistake, and accidentally offends someone. It's so difficult right now, to find out what it is acceptable to say' (Year 10, School 3). These quotes point to a general attitude that progressive politically correct or 'woke' culture is to blame for this scandal, rather than the pervasive rape culture that this teacher's comment contributed to.³ Though it is beyond the scope of this article, worries over the idea of 'cancel culture', defined by Eve Ng (2020) as the 'withdrawal of any kind of support . . . for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying and related issues' (p. 623), ran throughout our discussions with teens. In this particular example, the rhetoric of 'cancel culture' is used as a way of absolving the male teacher for his problematic comments.

Contrastingly, the girls from this school claimed that the teacher's comment made them 'lose a tad bit of faith in the school' and reduced the chances that they would come forward to the school if they experienced sexual violence, because 'they're just going to say it's [the girls'] fault' (Year 9, School 3). As noted above in relation to Angel's remarks, several girls reflected on an overall school culture of victim-blaming, such as regulating their bodies with harsh disciplinary measures for uniform violations as has been seen in international research literature documenting struggles over gendered uniform policies across UK schools (Bragg and Ringrose, 2023; Friedrich and Shanks, 2023). The girls also discussed the defensive response from some boys in relation to the topic of gender-based sexual violence. One focus group reflected on the motivations and implications of this defensive reaction:

Elizabeth: I think what they're trying to say is that not all men are like that as well, and then they might be trying to stick up for themselves and prove that they're not like that by coming up with justifications.

Jane: But it kind of takes attention away from the conversation.

Elizabeth: Yeah, and then that can be seen to women as them invalidating our experiences (Year 10, School 2).

In this discussion, the girls emphasized that by 'sticking up for themselves', the boys are in fact taking the spotlight away from the serious societal issue of sexual violence against women and girls, and the underlying gender inequalities at play (Jackson et al., 2019).

Boys' vulnerability and acknowledgment of gender inequality and sexual violence

While the section above describes the trend of defensive masculinity, it is important to note that some boys from Schools 3 and 4 demonstrated an awareness that girls and women are more at risk of sexual violence. Importantly, we noted that this awareness emerged in response to some of our discussions in the focus groups regarding complex social inequities and power relations, and how this created different experiences of sexual violence for people based on their gender. Indeed, the focus group setting, in which the boys were able to work through issues together with their male peers and with us as feminist researchers, played a key role in helping them come to recognize the gender inequality in sexual violence. For example, in School 4, we witnessed the following discussion:

- Sam: I think girls do have more or less the same risk as boys when they're online, however I feel like they're more likely to be pressured for nudes and stuff like that, not saying it doesn't happen to men but it's just I feel like it's more known that men want it from the girls more than they want it from boys.
- Int: Why do you think a girl's more likely to be pressured?
- Sam: I'm not really sure to be honest, I think it just is really.
- Int: What does anyone else think?
- Kenny: Yeah, I think when you hear of like rape cases, you rarely hear of a boy being a victim, it's usually a girl that's the victim so . . .
- Gareth: I guess it's just, I don't know, it's just boys trying to like . . . yeah, they're just more likely to, it's just how it is I think.
- Kenny: They get that cat-calling and stuff like that, you'll rarely see it happen to a man. I think women are just more sexualised, I guess.
- John: I think also what happens to girls is if boys could see it, I think boys watch pornographic content way more than girls do, and also Porn Hub, it's very unrealistic, like how it happens.
- Int: How sex happens?
- John: Yes, and it's seen as like kind of a transaction sort of thing, where a lot of the time that isn't the case and so the boy thinks that the girl wants it, the girl really wants him to do it and so they think that's . . . like asking for nudes . . . (Year 9).

In this discussion, the boys recognize that girls are sexualized more than boys, face (hetero)sexual pressure, are 'catcalled', and experience higher levels of sexual violence (Ofsted, 2021; House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). They even entered into a complex discussion with one another about the transactional nature of porn and boys lacking insight into what 'girls want' – a conversation that touched on issues of consent and sexual objectification. These discussions demonstrate the potential to break down boys' defensiveness and address the complexity of sexual violence through supportive, facilitated discussions.

Another illustration of boys' potential to demonstrate empathy toward women and girls' experiences of gender-based sexual violence emerged through discussion surrounding whether a boy or man should cross the road for a woman to make her feel safer. This discussion emerged through focus group discussion of the Sarah Everard murder and provoked strong reactions from the boys, including a certain degree of defensiveness. For example, Kenny stated:

So about the Sarah Everard situation, I feel like obviously, the woman would be scared but I don't feel like it should just be women, I feel like it should be everyone in that situation because it was a policeman and you should trust policemen and policewomen because they're employed to protect civilians like us, and when we hear a story about a policeman kidnapping a woman, that just scares you but I don't feel it should just be women, it should be everyone (Year 9, School 4).

In using a gender-neutral frame of 'it happens to everyone', the gendered power relations and the disproportionate harm that girls and women experience is glossed over. Feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004) has long sought to challenge notions of 'impartiality' and 'neutrality' by showing how such ideals are shot through with power relations that benefit hegemonic structures. Debates over the apolitical nature of neutrality have taken on even more complexity following Black Lives Matter, when counter calls of 'all lives matter' have revealed the entrenched problematics of a so-called neutral stance that glosses over inequalities and racialized and gendered hierarchies.

In statements claiming that violence can 'happen to anyone', the boys emphasize their potential victimhood over women and girls' lived experiences of sexual violence and express a certain degree of defensiveness over the focus on violence against women. However, what was revealed through the focus group interaction, is that this defensiveness is often bound up with boys' feelings of vulnerability.⁴ Significantly, over the course of the focus group discussion about gender-based sexual violence in public spaces some boys, such as Jeff, began to work through a different positioning in which they drew from their own feelings of vulnerability to express empathy for girls and women:

I remember a lot of people talking about this sort of stuff and I asked my parents and they said that I should always, if I'm going out at night, if there's a woman in front of me walking down the road, I should always cross the road when going past them just so they don't feel like threatened and stuff like that . . . So I was very confused about it at first but now I sort of understand how it could be quite scary because when I was younger, I was walking home at night from school or something and it was like a massive person, someone who was quite tall compared to me, I always feel quite scared and I wouldn't really want to be, even though the chance of it being threatening is really low, it's just like I don't feel like just in case, I wouldn't want to be . . . so I understand that point of view (Year 9, School 4).

Jeff described how he was initially confused about why a woman or girl would perceive him as a threat, but then by discussing this with his parents and reflecting on his past experiences of feeling unsafe when he was younger, he was able to empathize with women and girls' fears and discomforts when walking alone. In opposition to some of the other boys in the group who became defensive and individualized the problem, claiming

that they shouldn't have to change their actions because of the actions of a few, Jeff was able to understand his positioning in a larger societal trend of violence against women and girls, rather than fixating on whether he himself was a perpetrator of sexual violence. This articulation of vulnerability, based on empathy, is very different to the male vulnerability as 'aggrieved victimhood' analyzed by Banet-Weiser (2018) in "Ruined" lives: Mediated white male victimhood' (p. 16). Rather than the appropriation discussed by Banet-Weiser (2018), in which the white man assumes 'the mantle of victimhood as their own in earnest', here, we see a striking example of a more 'productive vulnerability' which works to dislodge rather than shore up 'power relations and privilege' (p. 3).

Conclusion

Through foregrounding young people's voices, this research study reveals the differing and often gendered ways young people understood, made sense of, and discussed violence against girls and women. In the girl focus groups, we witnessed consciousness raising via social media platforms, facilitated by lockdown conditions during the COVID-19 crisis, around the gendered nature of sexual violence. While many of the girls' personal stories about sexual harassment and abuse were disturbing, we were also uplifted to see these framed by them in a politicized way, indicating a coming to consciousness about the structural nature of sexual violence, harassment, and rape culture.

In the boy focus groups, we were struck by the defensive masculinity exhibited by some who denied gendered differences of this phenomenon and who in some cases seemed to adopt the online discourses of the manosphere. In certain instances, this involved attempting to hijack attention from the structural nature of violence to point to the 'unfairness' of the situation for men. Through our analysis, we document a lack of understanding about the scale and scope of sexual violence among some of the teen boys in our study. Because they have not empirically witnessed or experienced such violence, and because they are living in a society that invisibilizes and delegitimizes victims' experiences and rights, many boys were able to disavow sexual violence and articulate a defensive position in relation to privileged masculinity (see also Banet-Weiser, 2021). The ferocity of rape myths and the increased normalization of men's rights activist (MRA) discourses is a trend that needs much further consideration in schools. Indeed, since we conducted this research project, concerns over online misogynies and the rise in popularity of social media influencers, such as Andrew Tate, has intensified.⁵ While schools and the media have singled out Tate as a problematic figure, the so-called 'Andrew Tate effect' goes far beyond any one individual, and it is crucial to continue to look at the wider – and long-standing – gender issues at stake in the entanglement of online and offline misogynies.

Moving forward, it is essential to continue to find ways to involve young people, especially boys, in the conversation about how to prevent sexual violence. The experience of running the focus groups for this study left us feeling hopeful because we witnessed that, through providing boys with the space and time to talk in a safe, non-judgmental environment, they were able to think critically about these issues and demonstrate the ability to shift their understanding and recognize gendered hierarchies. This fits with other recent research that suggests the importance of ensuring that boys

feel heard, and acknowledging that certain ‘attitudes often reflect deeper-rooted uncertainties and anxieties that are not being meaningfully recognised or addressed’ (Setty, 2023). Providing young people with a space for guided discussion of issues of sexual violence created awareness of a wider spectrum of experiences as we saw some boys engage in critical discussion of gender and sexual power relations, such as explaining that girls are more ‘sexualized’, subject to cat-calling, and pressured to send nudes, all of which was recognized as inequitable. The focus groups therefore emerged as a valuable setting for the boys’ ‘identity work’ around masculinity and gender-based violence (Allen, 2005; Flood and Burrell, 2022; see also Ringrose et al., 2021b).

There are limitations to this study, which are important to acknowledge. First, the participants in our sample were predominantly white, which can be attributed to the demographic profile of the schools we visited. Future research is consequently needed to explore the ways in which young people with diverse racial and ethnic identities experience and make sense of sexual violence in the United Kingdom, and the ways in which experiences of racism specifically intersect with young people’s experiences with gender norms and patterns of violence. Second, our sample was predominantly cis-gendered and heterosexual. There is consequently a need to explore in further detail whether and in what ways discourses on sexual violence in the United Kingdom are experienced differently for sexual and gender minorities. Third, time constraints meant that we could not do follow-up interviews with all focus group participants, meaning we were unable to delve into all the young people’s experiences in more depth. Finally, many of our participants, both boys and girls, told us of experiences of homophobia and racism online and at school. In future publications stemming from our larger study, we hope to analyze the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation among other intersecting identity factors impact young people’s experiences and perceptions of gender-based sexual violence. This will allow us to interrogate how racist and homophobic language is connected to gendered harassment in both on- and offline spaces.

In conclusion, as the world works to recover post COVID and social isolation, it is essential that we find ways to retain the ground that has been gained in public recognition of the structural conditions that enable violence against girls and women – in schools, on the streets, and in digital spaces. We must hope that the focus is not diverted away from young people’s voices at a moment when they are finally finding spaces to be heard.

Funding

The author (s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research on which this article draws was supported by the UK Research and Innovation/Arts and Humanities Research Council Covid-19 Rapid Response call (grant number AH/W000423/1) ‘Combatting gendered, sexual risks and harms online during Covid-19: Developing resources for young people, parents and schools’.

ORCID iD

Tanya Horeck  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9147-7469>

Notes

1. Although the commonly touted figure on social media was that 97 percent of young women have experienced sexual harassment, the actual statistic was 71 percent of women of all ages and 86 percent of women aged 18–24 (Prevalence and Reporting, 2021). Nevertheless, the ‘97 percent’ statistic was frequently reported (see Thompson, 2021) and it was this statistic that went viral.
2. Because our sample included only one non-binary person, we are hesitant to make broader generalizations about their experiences.
3. For a discussion of the weaponization of ‘woke’, please see Staci M. Zavattaro (2022).
4. This feeling of being at risk is particularly acute for Black boys, who are disproportionately likely to experience abuse from the police (see Dodd, 2020).
5. There is rising concern about extremism in UK schools (see Weale, 2022a). There are also reports of high rates of teachers facing sexual harassment and misogyny (see Weale, 2022b).

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Biographical notes

Tanya Horeck is a Professor of Film and Feminist Media Studies at Anglia Ruskin University. She is the author of *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (2004) and *Justice on Demand: True Crime in the Digital Streaming Era* (2019). She has published widely on gender, violence and media cultures.

Jessica Ringrose (she/her) is a Professor of Sociology of Gender and Education at University College London. She is an internationally recognized and widely cited expert on gender and sexual equity in education and youth digital sexual cultures. She has worked with a wide range of global and UK stakeholders to shape policy and practice in areas of gender, media cultures and online safety.

Betsy Milne is a PhD candidate in Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University College London Centre of Multidisciplinary and Intercultural Inquiry. Her research interests include: masculinities, anti-feminist backlash, gender-based violence and post-digital youth cultures.

Kaitlynn Mendes is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Western University. She is co-author (with Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller) of *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*. She has published extensively on #MeToo, feminism and the harms and benefits of media technologies.