



**‘Storm and Stress’  
An Exploration of  
Sexual Harassment  
Amongst Adolescents**



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Dr. Michelle Walsh completed her PhD 'An Exploration of Sexual Harassment among Irish Adolescents: Experience and Understanding' upon which this report is based within the Unesco Child and Family Research Centre in NUI Galway. She now works as the Clinical Project Lead for RCNI's Clinical Innovation Project, evaluating supports and developing training for those working with survivors of sexual violence. Michelle holds a Master's degree in Clinical Supervision and Professional Practice and is also a fully accredited psychotherapist and clinical supervisor. She has trained trainers on the Foróige REAL U youth personal development training for several years, delivering the training on the module on Sex and the Law, in addition to delivering training on sexual violence and consent to a wide variety of audiences. A former Board Member of Rape Crisis Midwest, Michelle works there as a volunteer counsellor, and counsellor trainer.

Additionally, Michelle has trained support workers for the Sexual Assault Treatment Unit in Limerick. She is aware of the many issues faced by Clinicians who work with, and Survivors who have experienced, sexual violence. Since the onset of Covid 19, Michelle has been using a hybrid approach to working with clients and colleagues – and is, therefore, aware of the challenges faced by those in a similar situation. Michelle is passionate about preventing, and ameliorating, the harm of sexual, domestic, and gender-based violence, listening to survivors and improving our practice.

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## **Acknowledgments**

This report is derived principally from a distillation of Dr Michelle Walsh's PhD Thesis. In addition, we would like to thank the RCNI team who worked to translate these 631 pages into this 30 page report and develop the RCNI recommendations, particular credit goes to Elaine Mears from the team for her work on this report.

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**Early intervention in children’s lives is the strongest commitment we can make to prevention and protection from sexual violence. Understanding the experience of adolescents is the first step to shaping interventions that work. This report addresses a critical gap in our knowledge regarding adolescent experiences of sexual harassment.**

In 2013 Rape Crisis Network Ireland published our first statistical report on children’s experiences of sexual violence, *Hearing child survivors of sexual violence – towards a national response*. We noted that the knowledge and understanding of the extent of sexual harassment perpetrated and experienced by Irish adolescents, was extremely limited. Ireland’s most complete prevalence study Sex and Violence in Ireland (SAVI) report (2002) did not include people under the age of eighteen. At the time of SAVI being conducted in 2000 it was posited that a follow up study would be conducted on children. The detailed scoping report on such a study addressed every methodological hurdle bar one, the question of whether it could be ethical or too controversial to ask children questions about sexual harassment (2005). The children’s SAVI never proceeded.

The RCNI’s (2013) Children’s report figures which includes Rape Crisis and the Children at Risk in Ireland Foundation data from 2012, found that 37% of the perpetrators of child and adolescent sexual harassment, that were reported to specialist sexual violence services were themselves under the age of eighteen. The RCNI Rape Crisis Statistics 2019 (2020) report found that 13% of survivors attending the centres were subjected to sexual violence by perpetrators who were under eighteen years of age.

At the time there were several data sources that were relevant to sexual harassment available, including the Rape and Justice in Ireland (2009) report, and some disaggregated information from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the Department of Public Prosecution (DPP) and Court Services reports. In addition, there was a growing wealth of data on sexual health practices of young people most notably from Crisis Pregnancy Programme commissioned research, the Royal College of Surgeons and the WHO Health Behaviours of School Based Children 14 – 18 into which the Irish team under NUIG’s Prof. Saoirse Nic Gabhainn introduced a sexual behaviours module. However, these sexual health studies, while giving invaluable insight into the context of sexual violence amongst children, rarely addressed sexual harassment in any direct manner.



Most of the information available is adolescent-adjacent or subject-adjacent giving valuable insights regarding behaviours, attitudes and practices and sometimes containing the retrospective experiences of adult survivors but not a direct study of sexual violence experiences for adolescents.

In 2013, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) published their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours (KAB) 'Say Something' survey, which highlighted the level of sexual harassment encountered by students in third level Irish institutions, while additionally outlining the social issues that contributed to instances of sexual harassment within this cohort. As part of the RCNI Rape and Justice in Ireland programme, RCNI commissioned research from NUIG on young people, alcohol, consent and sex that year also. This set the path for a series of other research enquires led by Padraig MacNeela amongst whose outputs include the Sexual Experiences Survey in 2020 and the Active\* Consent Programme.

RCNI's children's report in 2013 outlined the critical gap in Irish knowledge where anecdotal evidence of sexual harassment and violence to which members of school communities are subject to, had not been tested and measured leading to the unknown level and nature of such harassment and uncertain responses. Dr Michelle Walsh, a Rape Crisis Counsellor and Educator from the Midwest Rape Crisis Centre and now RCNI's Clinical Lead, undertook a PhD in 2016 to fill this knowledge gap. This report is a distillation of some of her key findings when she spoke to adolescents directly about their experiences over the preceding 12 month period and our recommendations in light of what the adolescents and youth workers told her.



## Headline findings of the study

Key risk factors for being subjected to sexual harassment are:

### Gender

**Girls were subjected to higher levels of sexual harassment than boys**



### Sexuality

**Adolescents who were LGBT+ were subjected to higher levels of sexual harassment than those who were heterosexual**



### Age

**Adolescents aged 16-17 were subjected to much higher levels of sexual harassment than teens ages 13-15**



## In a 12 month period:

- 80%** of adolescents disclosed being subjected to some form of sexual harassment
- 24%** of adolescents disclosed that they were subjected to physical or extreme forms of sexual harassment
- 83%** of adolescents witnessed some form of sexual harassment
- 28%** of adolescents witnessed physical or extreme forms of sexual harassment
- 78%** of adolescent participants said that sexual harassment occurred within their peer community
- 100%** All of the youth workers who participated in the study stated that they had witnessed sexual harassment with levels varying from verbal to extreme forms of sexual harassment
- 57%** of youth workers experienced sexual harassment from adolescents while at work
- 68%** of LGBT+ adolescent participants experienced serious sexual harassment compared with 20% of the whole population
- 47%** of adolescents did not know how to report sexual harassment within their school



# Introduction

## This study sought to:

- **Explore adolescents' experiences and understanding of sexual harassment which is perpetrated against them by their peers.**
- **Consider adolescents' responses to sexual harassment and what responses they would like to see to address sexual harassment within their peer community.**

The study focused on the previous 12-month period of the young peoples' lives. The research comprised of data from 599 adolescents who completed a questionnaire, interviews with 93 adolescents, and interviews with 21 youth workers in Ireland.

There is a dearth of research measuring the prevalence, nature and character of sexual harassment perpetrated against Irish adolescents. This absence of comprehensive research that fully incorporates all forms of sexual harassment has made it difficult to determine the scale of the problem and preventative solutions. Although we know that sexual harassment amongst school communities is prevalent, it has not been tested and measured systematically, therefore the level and nature is unknown. In response to this, Dr Michelle Walsh completed this research study which explores Irish adolescents' experiences and understanding of sexual harassment within their peer communities, and responses required to address adolescent sexual harassment. The cognitive changes relating to sexual behaviour that occur during adolescence often involve working out how to address and deal with their desires, learning to successfully and appropriately incorporate sex into their intimate peer relationships. This period in adolescent development is often referred to by developmentalists as a time of 'storm and stress', which was used as the title for this research.

The study found that Irish adolescents are experiencing high levels of sexual harassment. Social norms and gender inequality are two major contributing factors, along with a lack of adequate comprehensive Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) within educational settings. Additionally, there is confusion over how to respond to sexual harassment and few supports available to those who have experienced sexual harassment. Based on these findings, Dr Walsh has developed an ecological framework for understanding and responding to adolescent sexual harassment. It is intended that this framework can be employed by academics, policy makers and at a practice level to understand and implement strategies in response to the key issues outlined within this research study.





## What is Sexual Harassment?

There is a broad spectrum of behaviours that can be included in experiences of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is part of a continuum of behaviours that negatively impact upon the person, and it shares many common elements often seen in violence against women.

Sexual harassment can be viewed as unwanted sexual, verbal and nonverbal behaviours which draw on gender-based beliefs and sexist hostility. It can range from unwanted banter, jokes, comments, gestures, and unwelcome sexual advances to unwanted, unwelcome or uninvited sexual contact. This is behaviour which violates a person's dignity and creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading or offensive environment for the young person.

Some individuals who experience these behaviours are sometimes unable to recognise them as sexual harassment. Furthermore, societies as well as individual attitudes and behaviours towards violence, women and the serious nature of different forms of sexual harassment can be both explicitly and implicitly condoned by social norms, thus trivialising the impact of sexual harassment.

## Impact of sexual harassment

Adolescence is a period of significant developmental transition in the lifecycle of a person. The impact of sexual harassment at this critical juncture can be hugely impactful and have long lasting consequences for the individual. There is a significant body of research that exists on the impacts of sexual harassment on adolescents, which include:

- low self-esteem,
- depression,
- suicidal ideation,
- eating disorders,
- panic attacks,
- self-harm,
- self-blame,
- problems in body image,
- loneliness,
- difficulties with sleep,
- academic under-performance,
- reduced feelings of academic competence,
- problems in school attendance and engagement,
- problems socialising,
- problems in regulating emotions.



All of these issues can have ongoing effects well beyond adolescence itself. The findings from this research concur with SAVI and RCNI annual RCC data analysis, which tells us that vulnerability to sexual harassment increases with age, and if sexual violence perpetrated against a child is not adequately addressed as early as possible, the child is at much higher risk of being subjected to further and more extreme forms of sexual violence throughout their life. We know from SAVI that children who are subjected to penetrative sexual violence are at a sixteen-fold increased risk of penetrative sexual violence in adulthood.

## Why do adolescents perpetrate sexual harassment?

Harmful sexual behaviours presenting in adolescence are usually part of a continuum of behaviour that develops early in childhood as a result of a number of interrelated and interdependent factors. Social norms that promote rigid gender roles encourage the acceptance of various forms of sexual violence. Shifts in societal norms, technology and communications coincide with the emergence of an individualistic outlook in adolescents and challenge the development of prosocial behaviour and empathy. The development and expression of empathy and prosocial behaviour (behaviour intended to help others) is critical to avoiding the development of behaviours that contribute to instances of sexual offending. If the actions of children who are displaying harmful sexualised behaviour and perpetrating sexual violence are not addressed appropriately, there is a high probability that child will go on to perpetrate more extreme forms of sexual violence as they age.

Empathy and prosocial behaviour are established through a child's exposure and interactions on two key environmental processes:

1. Individual skills and values/psychological traits
2. Key environmental processes/social predictors

### 1. Individual skills and values/psychological traits

The most prominent psychological traits, include:

- gender expectations,
- personality and character traits,
- personal values,
- knowledge and moral reasoning,
- self-efficacy,
- self-esteem, and
- emotional regulation.

### 2. Key environmental processes/social predictors

The most prominent social predictors include:

- gender norms,
- parental modelling, siblings, family dynamics,
- peers,
- popularity among friend groups,
- school,
- social background,
- culture,
- media exposure, and
- affiliation to sports or other group activities.



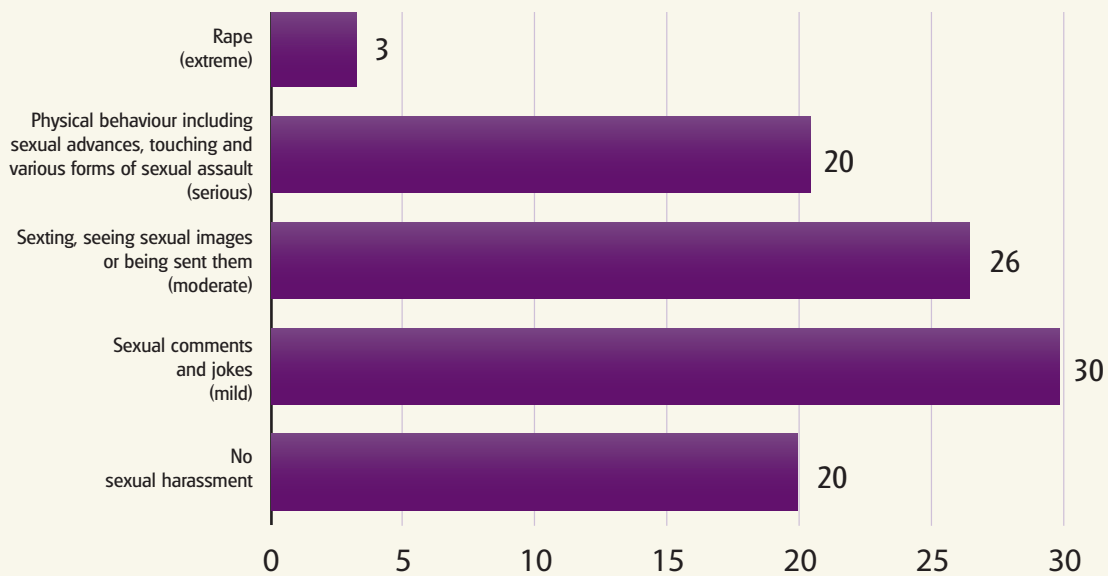
# Findings of research

## Adolescents and sexual harassment

The following information examines data from 599 adolescents who completed a questionnaire, and interviews with 93 adolescents following on from this questionnaire. The adolescents were asked to consider their experiences of sexual harassment perpetrated against them by their peers over the previous 12 month period. The profile of adolescents is in Appendix I.

### Levels and type of sexual harassment witnessed by adolescents

**Graph 1: Levels and type of sexual harassment experienced by adolescents (n=599)**



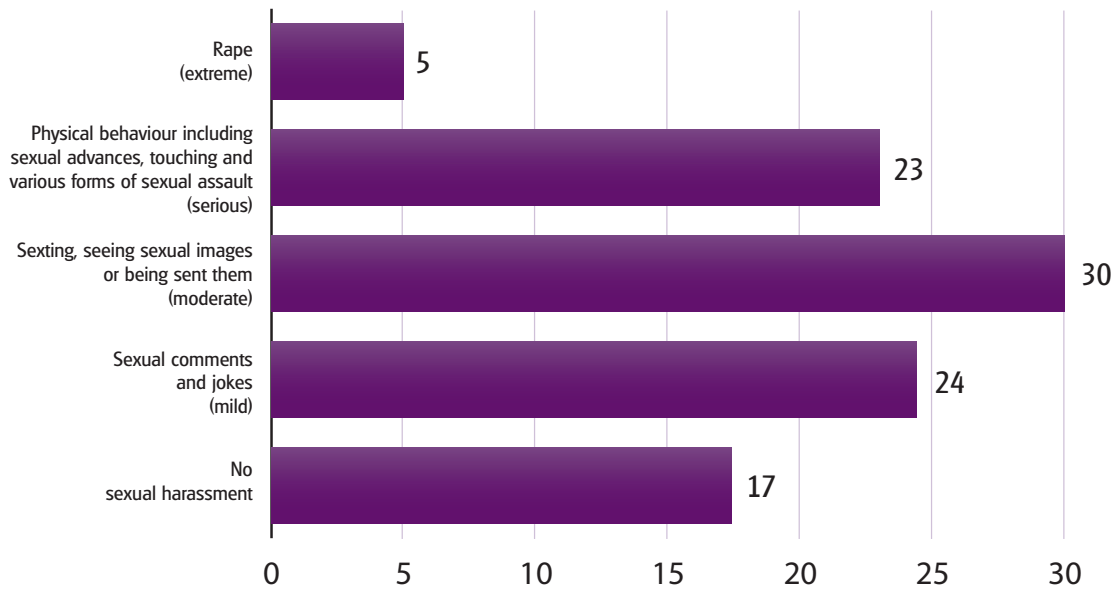
80% of adolescents had been subjected to some form of sexual harassment in the past year, while 20% of adolescents stated they had not experienced any sexual harassment.

- 30% reported that they had experienced mild sexual harassment (sexual comments and jokes),
- A further 26% reported experiencing moderate sexual harassment (sexting, seeing sexual images or being sent them),
- 20% reported experiencing serious sexual harassment (physical behaviour including sexual advances, touching and various forms of sexual assault, attempted rape),
- 3% reported experiencing extreme sexual harassment from members of their peer community within the last year (rape).



## Levels and type of sexual harassment witnessed by adolescents

Graph 2: Levels and type of sexual harassment witnessed by adolescents (n=599)



83% of adolescent participants witnessed some form of sexual harassment within the past year, while 17% said they had never witnessed sexual harassment,

- 24% disclosed witnessing mild sexual harassment (sexual comments and jokes),
- 30% said they had witnessed moderate sexual harassment (sexting, seeing sexual images or being sent them),
- A further 23% had witnessed their peers experiencing serious sexual harassment (physical behaviour including sexual advances, touching and various forms of sexual assault, attempted rape),
- while 5% of respondents said they had never witnessed extreme sexual harassment perpetrated over the course of the last year (rape).



## Key vulnerabilities to being targeted for sexual harassment

When the study analysed differences in gender, sexuality and age group, we see some key characteristics that make children targets for sexual harassment. It is important to note that children's perceptions of vulnerability to being targeted for sexual harassment relates to two things: their lived experience and the cultural/social norms which have taught them how to interpret and name those experiences. We see particularly worrying indications here for girls, as all too often abuse continues to be normalised, denied and minimised.

### Gender

- Girls were 2.11 times more likely than boys to report that they experienced unwelcome sexual comments.
- Girls were 2.49 times more likely to have experienced unwanted sexual touches than boys.
- Girls were 1.92 times more likely to have experienced online sexual harassment than boys.
- Girls were 1.50 times more likely than boys to agree that sexual harassment occurs within their adolescent peer community.
- Boys were 1.92 times more likely to be exposed to homophobic name calling than girls.

*“It’s just the way it is. Like you could be standing talking to your friends and like some guy will try and grab you or whatever. Like you just have to push them off or whatever. So, it’s kind of accepted, that just what boys do. Like, it is hard because no one is going to do anything. It happens to everyone at least once.”*

*(Adolescent participant)*

### Sexuality

- LGBT+ adolescents were 2.95 times more likely to have experienced unwelcome sexual comments in comparison to straight adolescents.
- LGBT+ adolescents were 1.97 times more likely to have been forced into a non-consensual sexual experience than straight adolescents.
- LGBT+ adolescents were 1.99 times more likely to experience inappropriate or unwanted touching than adolescents who were straight.
- Adolescents who identified as LGBT+ were 2.73 times more likely than respondents who identified as straight to agree that sexual harassment occurs within their adolescent peer community.
- Homophobic name calling is by no means confined to LGBT+ people and the use of homophobic slurs against straight adolescents is part of the way that a general homophobic atmosphere is created and maintained. However, LGBT+ adolescents were 11.81 times more likely to have the direct experience of being called gay or lesbian in a negative way than straight adolescents.
- 68% of those who identified as LGBT+ experienced serious sexual harassment compared with 20% of the whole population in the study.

*“I think because a lot of my friends being LGBT, like it happens a lot more. Like almost every one of my close friends has experienced some sort of sexual harassment”*

*(Adolescent participant)*



## Age

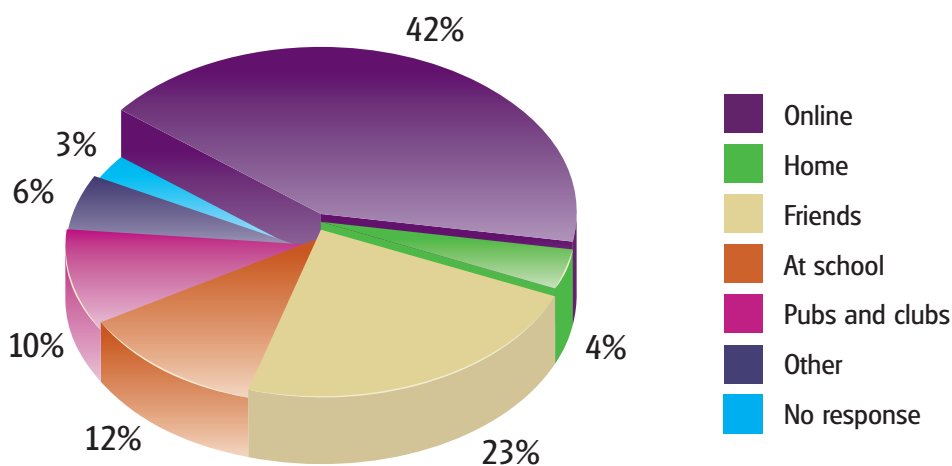
- Older Irish adolescents (16-17) were 2.71 times more likely to report that they had been forced to do something sexual against their will when compared with younger adolescents (13-15).
- Older adolescents were 1.83 times more likely to experience inappropriate, non-consensual touching than younger adolescents.
- Older adolescents were 1.96 times more likely than younger adolescents to agree that sexual harassment occurred within their peer community.

*“So, he brought me away from the playground where everyone was, and he started trying to touch me. Then I pushed him off me and he kept pushing me back to him. Then I pushed him away and I started crying and he was like ‘Your friend told me you wanted to do this’”*

*(Adolescent participant)*

## Location of adolescent sexual harassment

**Graph 3: Adolescent sexual harassment by location (n=599)**



Adolescents who took part in this research disclosed that of the sexual harassment perpetrated against them in the previous twelve months:

- 42% most commonly occurred online,
- 23% said it was most commonly experienced in the company of friends,
- 12% reported that school was the most common location,
- 10% said that sexual harassment happened in pubs and clubs,
- A further 10% said it most commonly happened when socialising in towns, parks, festivals, at house parties or within their own homes.



## Adolescent harmful sexual behaviour

The vast majority of those perpetrating the sexual harassment were boys. Despite the high levels of sexual harassment from peers being experienced and witnessed by the adolescents taking part in this research, only a very small number recognised their own behaviour as problematic when asked to reflect on it:

- 78% of adolescent participants said that sexual harassment occurred within their peer community.
- 8% of adolescents admitted to perpetrating sexual harassment upon members of their peer community. All of these were boys.
- 4% stated they had been a perpetrator of sexual harassment while at school. All of these were boys.
- All of the adolescents who were subjected to serious and extreme forms of sexual harassment (physical behaviour including sexual advances, touching and various forms of sexual assault, attempted rape, and rape) disclosed that the perpetrators were boys.
- Most of the adolescents who were subjected to mild and moderate forms of sexual harassment (sexual comments and jokes, sexting, seeing sexual images or being sent them) disclosed that the perpetrators were boys. Some disclosed that the perpetrators were girls. Harmful sexual behaviours perpetrated by girls most commonly consisted of making sexual comments and jokes, and sending sexual images.

## Experiencing sexual harassment within school

Of the adolescents who reported experiencing sexual harassment within their school communities:

- 63% disclosing that they were subjected to someone making unwelcome sexual comments, jokes or gestures to or about them in the last year.
- 15% of respondents stating that they had personal experiences of peer sexual harassment while in school over the preceding year.
- 39% of participants reported witnessing incidents of sexual harassment involving their peers within school in the last year.
- 23% of all adolescents felt that sexual harassment within school is common, often overlooked or not adequately disciplined by school authorities.
- 47% of adolescents stated that they would not know how to report sexual harassment within their school if they were exposed to it.
- 63% of adolescents didn't know if a sexual harassment policy was in existence within their school.
- 36% of adolescents reported receiving no formal education pertaining to sexual harassment while at school.
- 65% of adolescents referenced the need for comprehensive sexual education in schools to challenge sexual harassment.



## Youth workers and sexual harassment

Foróige and Youth Work Ireland are currently the two largest youth work organisations working with adolescents in Ireland. The views and experiences of these organisations' youth workers were included in the study, in order to explore their current perspectives and their understanding of adolescent sexual harassment and its prevalence as well as any recommendations they might have to deal with it. The participants interviewed had a combined total of 131 years experience in youth work within Foróige and Youth Work Ireland, ranging from one participant who had 6 months experienced to another who had been in their role for 20 years. The profile of Youth Worker participants is in Appendix II.

- All of the youth workers stated that they had witnessed sexual harassment with levels varying from verbal to extreme issues of sexual harassment.
- A large number of youth workers (57%) experienced sexual harassment from adolescents while at work.
- The resounding view was that most adolescent sexual harassment was perpetrated by adolescent boys, although they stated that they have seen a rise in incidents of female adolescents perpetrating sexual harassment. They noted that sexual harassment perpetrated by adolescent girls is predominantly aimed at other adolescent girls.
- A number of the youth workers feel that the girls are in some ways trying to show that they are equally as sexualised as boys. Youth workers contend that this is often displayed in sexualised behaviours that are more extreme than those exhibited by their male peers. However, this behaviour can often backfire, causing an escalation in behaviour from other peers, leading to sexual harassment of the harasser.
- There was consensus among youth workers that the advancement of technology has contributed to creating new social norms relating to sexualised behaviours and many adolescents when engaging in these behaviours are not aware of the risks associated with their behaviours.
- Youth workers maintain that adolescents are not receiving enough comprehensive formal RSE, stating that some adolescents were unaware that the comments they were making constituted sexual harassment.
- Male and female youth workers reported experiences of sexual harassment perpetrated by adolescents, with self-reported female experiences being more extreme. A number of female youth workers described having to remove themselves from groups due to the level of sexual harassment they experienced.

*“I actually had to cancel two groups because of being harassed myself. In the end, it was a decision that I had to say ‘I am no longer going on this group because of the way I am being treated by these young people. At the time on one of the groups I was actually pregnant there was a lot of comments on ‘How often did I have sex with my husband to get pregnant?’ would I ‘have sex with them in the bathroom’ this sort of thing, so I was coming into work knowing I was facing this”*

*(Youth Worker participant)*





- Issues of desensitisation and acceptance were apparent among several youth workers, relating to both their understanding of, and the implications of peer adolescent sexual harassment.
- Youth workers discussed being on high alert while at work, feeling they are continually worrying about overlooking child protection concerns where a culture of minimisation and frequent sexual harassment was prevalent and the impact that might have on their careers.
- Other youth workers voiced concerns about their belief in their own ability to continue to work within this field given the extent and nature of the issues that they are being exposed to. They discussed their frustration at trying to implement change in adolescents' behaviour and feeling constrained by the approaches available to combat adolescent sexual harassment.

*“I felt that I had nothing, I couldn't have any positive influence on them, and that's how I saw it, that I have my own limitations and because I'm female, and at that time... that I had no good thing to bring to those people”*

*(Youth Worker participant)*

## Combating and responding to sexual harassment – what adolescents say

Several adolescents discussed feeling that the issue of adolescent sexual harassment is not understood and is ignored within society. Additionally, they felt that their opinions on the subject are not looked for or valued.

All adolescent participants felt that a comprehensive, formal education relating to relationships, consent, safety, legislation and the effects of sexual harassment was essential and needed to be delivered in schools at primary and secondary level, in addition to within youth work settings. Over half of the adolescents interviewed felt that they had not received sufficient, or in some cases, any relevant formal education in relation to understanding and being able to identify sexual harassment.

- 47% of adolescents stated that they would not know how to report sexual harassment if they were exposed to it.
- 81% of adolescent participants felt that, with the support of their peer group, they had the power to combat sexual harassment.
- 84% of the adolescents in this study felt that the adults including their parents, teachers and other influential adults that they interact with within the school environment have the power to address issues of adolescents' sexual harassment.
- 36% of adolescents interviewed stated that they had not received any sexual harassment education within their school.
- 63% of respondents said they didn't know if a sexual harassment policy was in existence within their school.
- 23% of adolescent participants who were interviewed stated that they felt sexual harassment within school is common, often overlooked or not adequately disciplined by school authorities.

*“It's always other causes, you never hear of anybody coming in to our age group looking for our opinion and what you're doing right now, I just really appreciate what you're doing I just wanted to say that to you.”*

*(Adolescent participant)*



Participants stressed the importance of having appropriate interventions in place in order to support adolescents as they came forward for assistance and there was a consensus that social media might be a good place to start raising awareness around this issue. Participants said that posters and leaflets giving them information regarding sexual harassment would be helpful, and suggested that helplines could be a first line response in directing adolescents seeking additional emotional support, in addition to providing information on reporting adolescent sexual harassment. Half of those interviewed discussed the availability of accessible counselling as an important resource for those that have experienced sexual harassment.



## A new framework to address sexual harassment

**Effective prevention begins by addressing the issues that contribute to sexual harassment within Irish society. Approaching the issue of adolescent sexual harassment without having a good understanding of its causes and the responses needed, results in isolated and ad hoc pockets of good practice.**

By taking an all-encompassing approach, Dr Walsh has created a new ecological framework for prevention of sexual harassment amongst adolescents which can provide clarity and support to service providers, educators and policy makers, aiding their understanding of the issues and outlining strategies needed to respond to adolescent sexual harassment in Ireland.

Addressing adolescent sexual harassment needs broad understanding, the appropriate skills and standardised guidance to ensure effective responses. Responding appropriately to sexual harassment needs a combined effort at all levels of society. Addressing each level of the adolescents' environment can impact upon these norms, practices and structures, to produce changes in awareness, prevention, education and attitudes, that could increase over time and impact positively on future generations. A whole of society response which is embedded in early and ongoing education throughout the lifespan of the adolescent is needed in order to prevent sexual harassment. Empathy and prosocial skills need to be encouraged from an early age and reinforced at both interpersonal and social levels.

This new ecological framework developed by Dr Walsh addresses two key functions:

1

**Understanding of  
the issues that contribute  
to adolescent  
sexual harassment**

2

**Outlines recommendations  
needed to address  
adolescent sexual  
harassment**



# Dr. Walsh's Ecological Framework

## Intergenerational Level (Chronosystem, Norms, Structures, Practices)

Includes changes that happen over time from one generation to the next.

Agencies this section applies to:

Whole of society

## Societal Level (Macrosystem)

Includes all areas of society including government, policy, practices and all forms of media that help shape the belief systems held by the other levels of the framework.

Agencies this section applies to:

Policy makers

Government departments

Mass media & entertainment content creators

Internet service providers

Law makers

Religious organisations

## Community Level (Ecosystem)

Includes schools, work, places of worship and other organisations within community where our individual and interpersonal beliefs are shaped.

Agencies this section applies to:

Youth workers

Educators & teachers

Social care organisation

Community organisations

Sports organisations

Health professionals

Legal professionals

## Interpersonal Level (Mesosystem)

Includes belief systems and experiences of close family, friends and relations that are shaped by our interpersonal connections.

Agencies this section applies to:

Family

Parents

Guardians

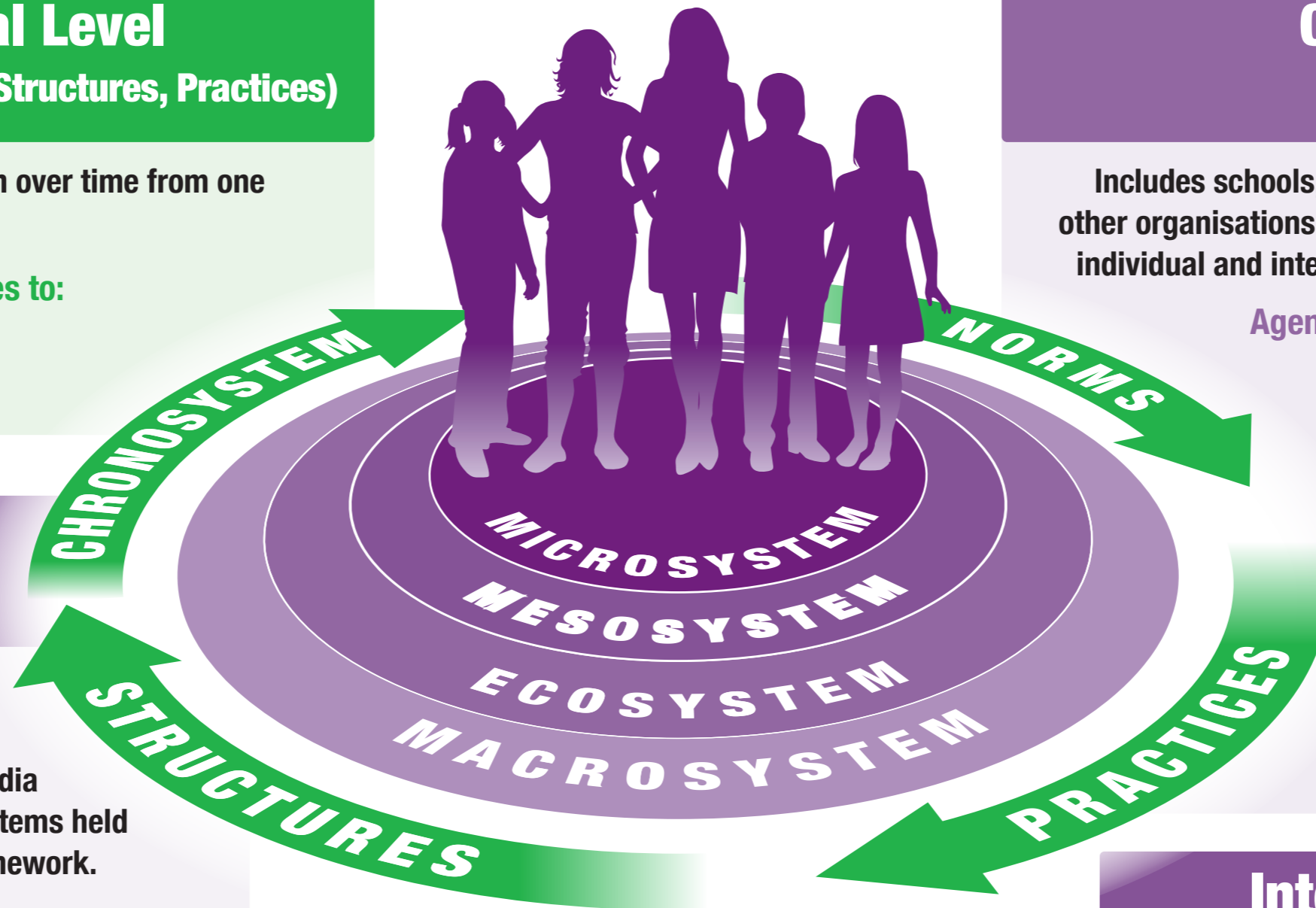
Carers

Friends

## Individual Level (Microsystem)

Includes personal beliefs and experiences that are shaped by our interpersonal connections.

Agencies this section applies to: Adolescents



## Intergenerational Level (Chronosystem, Norms, Structures, Practices)

**Intergenerational Level includes changes that happen over time from one generation to the next.**

The societal norms, practices and structures, and chronosystem (the era in which one lives), surround all levels in this framework and have a bi-directional influence on each level of the adolescent's life, passing down from one generation to the next. They can reinforce negative social norms and practices, within all structures and levels of the system which contributes to adolescent sexual harassment.

Adolescent sexual harassment that is normalised within a society and its structures, can lead to the individual becoming desensitised and unable to recognise sexual harassment. Experiences of sexual harassment can contribute to experiences of coercive control, drug and alcohol use, risk taking behaviour, thoughts of suicide and death, shame and self-blame, as well as poor physical and mental health, and poor educational performance, which negatively impact upon the adolescent's life trajectory.

## Societal Level (Macrosystem)

**Societal level includes all areas of society including government, policy, practices and all forms of media that help shape the belief systems held by the other levels of the framework.**

Within the societal level, the adolescent's risk factors are influenced by social norms. The norms that support patriarchy and gender inequality are also contributing factors. Social norms that promote rigid gender roles based on gender inequality and patriarchy encourage the acceptance of various forms of sexual violence. Influences at this level include religious institutions and the beliefs and norms that they contribute to society, which filter down to the inter and intra personal levels of the adolescent's environment. However, the belief systems in addition to laws and policies provided by governing structures and other structures within this level, produce the same effect, which filters down to the individual level.

Acceptance of gender inequality within all public and private societal structures is a contributing factor to adolescent sexual harassment. In addition to educational deficits, one of the largest contributing factors to sexual harassment within adolescence at this level is seen within mass media and social media streams, where a large proportion of content objectifies women and girls and normalizes the use of pornography.



## Community Level (Ecosystem)

**Community Level includes schools, work, places of worship and other organisations within community where our individual and interpersonal beliefs are shaped.**

At a community level, adolescents are experiencing and witnessing high levels of sexual harassment within their educational settings and other community settings including youth work, health and social care. These systems are failing in their responses to adolescents' experiences of sexual harassment by contributing to a general tolerance of sexual assault within the community, in addition to weak sanctions against perpetrators of sexual assault.

## Interpersonal Level (Mesosystem)

**Interpersonal Level includes belief systems and experiences of close family, friends and relations that are shaped by our interpersonal connections.**

At an interpersonal level, adolescents are experiencing and witnessing high levels of sexual harassment within their peer communities, which includes friend groups, youth groups, schools, online and in other social settings where they congregate. Within this level, interventions and awareness need to be aimed at those systems in direct contact with the individual, including adolescents peer groups, family members, in addition to parents and primary caregivers.

The social norms exhibited and the responses given to adolescents by their peers, intimate partners, family, parents, teachers and others with whom they are close contact, directly impact their acceptance of sexual harassment and the norms that support it. An acceptance of sexual harassment which is not taken seriously or adequately sanctioned reinforces the norms supporting sexual harassment, which can lead to further experiences of sexual harassment. This in turn contributes to victim blaming by peers, who in failing to recognise sexual harassment and the behaviours that encourage and support it, look to myths, placing the blame on the victim and not the perpetrator, and leads to stigma, shame and silence.

## Individual Level (Microsystem)

**Includes personal beliefs and experiences that are shaped by our interpersonal connections.**

Adolescent experiences are driven by their intrapersonal immediate connections. For example, the belief system and style of parenting a child receives contributes to the formation of their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Parenting that is experienced as fair and equitable will impact upon both early child and adolescent development, which could impact the individual's self-concept, ability to self-regulate and to respond appropriately to their environment including sexual harassment risks, threats and experiences. Maladaptive social norms that shape attitudes and beliefs that support gender stereotyping and gender inequality contribute to adolescent experiences of sexual harassment. At an individual level, taking responsibility for your actions, beliefs and the consequences of those actions and beliefs is needed.



# Recommendations

## RCNI Recommendations to address sexual harassment amongst adolescents

1. **Centring adolescents in prevention and response:** all action and policy should recognise the progressive development and independence of children and adolescents, empower them to take responsibility for their actions and beliefs and support them in understanding the consequences of those attitudes and actions.
2. **Education and awareness raising** within the community and general public as part of the National Strategy on DSGBV of adolescent vulnerability and prevention of sexual harassment, including the impact of drugs, alcohol use, pornography, and online sexual violence.
3. **Community organisations' awareness, response and referral capacity** needs to be supported in responding to and preventing adolescent sexual harassment through government resourcing the development of policy, awareness, specialist training, developing the capacity of services, and interagency collaboration and skills sharing with specialist organisations.
4. **Education: National policy to address sexual harassment in schools** should be developed (Department of Education). The national policy to include:
  - a. **Adequate comprehensive RSE**, to enable adolescents to identify the social norms that support power and gender inequality, thus combatting desensitisation and normalisation of sexual harassment. This should include critical training on the negative impacts of **pornography** and be tailored to each **age** group. Those delivering the training should be trained and supported (see NCCA 2019 report).
  - b. Those delivering the training should **receive standardised training and support** (see NCCA 2019 report). Consideration should be given to having external facilitators with comprehensive knowledge delivering sensitive sexual material contained within the RSE module.
  - c. Challenging and exploring social norms and gender inequality within **egalitarian interpersonal relationships** through school curriculum programmes and school wide culture.
  - d. Proactively establishing a **zero-tolerance to sexual harassment environments** and norms in the school community with particular attention paid to addressing **intersectional characteristics and vulnerabilities such as sex, gender, sexuality and disability**.
  - e. **Reinforcing positive parenting and partnering with parents** to prevent sexual harassment.
  - f. **Partnering with specialists in sexual harassment** to support the policy.
  - g. **Systems of reporting** need to be standardised and formalised and all adolescents should know how to report sexual harassment.
  - h. **Systems of support** for those who experience sexual harassment that are evidence led, specialist and adequately funded.



- i. **Systems of intervention** for those adolescents who perpetrate sexual harassment that are evidence led, specialist and adequately funded.
  - j. **Support and protection of staff engaged in sexual harassment education and response** through the provision of specialist supervision and counselling
  - k. **Support of staff experiencing sexual harassment** through appropriate processes and legal remedies if necessary (see Appendix III for detail).
5. **Protection of workers** through adequate organisational response, implementation of zero tolerance practices, and support for individual workers in adolescent contexts impacted by sexual harassment to access support, protection and redress as appropriate (see Appendix III).
  6. **Supporting parenting** through education on parenting styles and their effects and the impact of gender inequality alongside access to specialist advice, counselling, interagency support and if needs be, protection (Tusla Supporting Parenting Strategy). Supporting parents to set age-appropriate boundaries for their children in the type of social media and mass media content they are able and allowed to access.
    - a. Provide **digital skills resources and tools aimed at parents** to enable them to keep up with technological developments.
    - b. **Ensure legislation and protections are sufficient and appropriate** to respond to and protect from online harassment.
  7. **Supporting Online Safety: Harmful online content** - a dedicated **Online Safety Commissioner** needs to be appointed to set out and regulate the responsibilities of internet services providers in relation to online sexual harassment. An **individual complaints mechanism**, is needed, to which anyone who is the victim of online harassment could apply for redress in any case in which the response of the relevant internet service provider to a complaint or takedown request has not been satisfactory.
  8. **Resourcing community specialist responses** and providing for clear referral and collaboration pathways for parents, adolescent self-referral, schools and other organisations.
    - a. Adolescent sexual harassment **counselling and support** available in schools, in Rape Crisis Centres and other community settings.
    - b. Adolescent **intervention programmes** nationwide.
  9. In addition to surveying adolescents experiences, within the next five to ten years, the National Strategy on Domestic Sexual and Gender Based Violence should contain **a framework of monitoring, research, evaluation and review** of changes that have been made within policy, legislation and practice. This could outline the effectiveness of any changes that have been made, allowing for a re-evaluation of any additional actions that have been implemented or amended.





## Methodology

**Findings from this study are based upon utilising mixed methods of data collection, comprising 599 quantitative questionnaires completed by adolescent participants, in addition to a qualitative section comprised of interviews with 93 adolescents and 21 youth workers.**

A combination of descriptive statistical and inferential analyses was used to analyse the quantitative data. Based on the findings, an ecological framework for understanding and responding to adolescent sexual harassment has been developed. Dr Walsh employs a critical realist approach in this study which gives voice to Irish adolescents' experiences of sexual harassment, examining the concept of what it means to be an adolescent in Ireland today from an ecological perspective, exploring the social norms that shape their environment, while outlining the protective and risk factors regarding their exposure to instances of peer adolescent sexual harassment.

She introduces a new conceptual framework which can be used by service providers and educators to understand and address adolescent sexual harassment within Ireland. This two-phase model was constructed on the basis of findings from this study as a tool that could be utilised to conceptualise adolescents' experiences of sexual harassment within their peer communities and to address the third objective of this study, which was to make recommendations towards policy and practice to address instances of adolescent sexual harassment.



## Profile of adolescent participants in this research

### Gender

Female adolescents accounted for 59% of the sample. The remaining 41% of adolescent participants were male.

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### Age

The adolescents were divided into two cohorts; older and younger adolescents. The younger adolescents, aged 13 to 15 years accounted for 36% of participants, while the older adolescents aged 16 and 17 years, accounted for the remaining 64% adolescents.

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### Sexual Orientation

A total of 13% identified as LGBT+. 87% identified as straight.



### Profile of youth worker participants in this research

#### **Gender**

Most, 67% of the youth workers were female and 33% were male.

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#### **Age**

The participants ranged in age from 22 to 61 years of age with 76% aged between 20 – 40 years old.

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#### **Sexual Orientation**

The majority, 90.5% identified as straight while 9.5% identified as LGBT+.



### Civil and criminal protections from sexual harassment

Staff and volunteers working with adolescents should have effective access to existing civil sexual harassment redress provisions to help ensure their safety and well-being within the workplace, and youth work organisations need to understand and implement their own responsibilities under the legislation to take such steps as are reasonably practicable to prevent the youth workers from being exposed to sexual harassment in the workplace.

A simple civil statutory provision under which an individual could seek a civil restraint order against another individual in either the District or Circuit Court to prevent further unwanted communication or approach to their home or place of work, and to restrain other specified behaviours as necessary, should be introduced. It must be possible to get such an order using a fast-track procedure whenever this is warranted, and breach of such an order should be an arrestable offence. If such a statutory power existed, it would be a very valuable supplement to the existing procedures through which a complaint may be made of sexual harassment in the workplace (or elsewhere) to the Workplace Relations Commission because it would give the Court a means of controlling unacceptable sexual harassment behaviours from the moment it is granted, regardless of how long it took for any WRC or criminal proceedings to reach the hearing stage.

With regard to criminal sanctions against individual perpetrators for various forms of sexual (and other) harassment, the recently enacted *Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020*, now in force, has expanded significantly the range of available offences and has increased the maximum penalty for the offence of harassment itself from 7 to 10 years. The harassment provision also allows for restraining orders to be made against accused persons even if the trial ends in an acquittal, in a proper case. This Act also introduced two new offences of distributing or publishing intimate images without consent of their subject, among other things. In addition, Section 45 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 has criminalised “offensive conduct of a sexual nature” and is drafted widely enough to include several different forms of sexual harassment.

In summary, existing civil and criminal statutory provisions are generally drafted widely enough to cover a wide range of sexual harassment behaviours. However, in practice it can be difficult to access them in a timely manner - that is why the introduction of civil restraint orders which could take effect very quickly – would be such a welcome improvement. The civil procedures designed to provide redress for sexual harassment in the workplace and elsewhere by means of a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission are designed to be used without legal assistance and are relatively simple, but the delays before there is a decision average about 8 months for a contested case, during which time there is no legal constraint on the behaviour of the accused (Workplace Relations Commission Annual Report 2020).



While there are also significant delays in the criminal justice process from the moment of the initial Garda complaint through the investigation and the decision whether or not to prosecute, during which time the accused person is not constrained by bail conditions, the most significant hurdle is the standard of proof: the case will not be prosecuted unless there is enough evidence to secure a judgement/verdict that the accused is guilty of the harassment beyond reasonable doubt, a very high standard.

Procedure surrounding complaint hearings in the Workplace Relations Commission has become less informal very recently: hearings are no longer being heard automatically in private and parties may be named in published decisions, following the majority Supreme Court judgement in the Zalewski case in April 2021. On foot of the same judgement, legislation is now being debated in the Oireachtas to provide for evidence to be given on oath (Workplace Relations (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2021). We hope that these changes do not have a chilling effect on the number of complaints being brought to the WRC. However, it should also be said that if procedure is allowed to become too informal, there is a risk that the voice of either party may not be heard as it should be and that decisions may be seen as (and may be) arbitrary and inconsistent.

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**Rape Crisis Network Ireland is a specialist policy agency on sexual violence. We are founded, owned and governed by our member Rape Crisis Centres. We have been serving survivors' interests and working towards the prevention of all forms of sexual violence since 1985.**

**RCNI builds and sustains expertise and collaboration to identify, make the case for, and implement priorities for a whole-of-society and Government response to sexual violence.**

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The Rape Crisis model is a unique model of responding to sexual violence that has been developed, tested and adapted over 40 years across hundreds of women-led centres across the world.

The model is part of an international movement for change where local organisations supporting survivors, link with each other and draw and build learning and best practice.

An important part of the model is that rape crisis support, and service delivery, to a survivor is ethical only if we seek to learn, and understand, in order to transform.

Every survivor using a Rape Crisis Centre (RCC) is met, not only with a set of options that they may benefit from, but knows that in sharing their stories with a RCC they become part of a movement for change.

This Rape Crisis model is a feminist, woman-led, response to sexual violence. We understand all sexual violence to be an abuse of power and we understand gender inequality to be the most important determinant of that abuse, whether the victim (or indeed perpetrator) is male or female. We understand sexual violence happens in a social context rather than being purely about individual perpetration. This is a critical frame which makes Rape Crisis Counselling different to most generic counselling as it addresses victim blaming and the shame that seeks to individualise responsibility for what is a part of a system of oppression.

The model of supporting survivors is trauma informed, empowerment and healing based. It is non-directive and non-judgemental. It is also survivor-led as we believe that the best responses possible are led by survivors themselves who are best placed to know what they need at any given point.





Carmichael House,  
North Brunswick Street,  
Dublin 7

E: [admin@rcni.ie](mailto:admin@rcni.ie)

[www.rcni.ie](http://www.rcni.ie)

RCC contact details for support or donations can be found on:

[www.rapecrisishelp.ie](http://www.rapecrisishelp.ie)



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