

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP  
Education Secretary  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT



8 April 2021

Dear Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP,

**Re: Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools**

We are a UK wide coalition of more than 100 women's organisations and experts with extensive collective experience of supporting survivors of all forms of violence against women and girls, and working in schools to end and prevent abuse. Many of our members work with girls and young women who have experienced multiple forms of gender-based violence, and we have campaigned together for many years to improve safeguarding and abuse prevention work in schools.

We are writing to you highly concerned that schools are continuing to fail to handle sexual harassment and assault allegations appropriately, or to be effective at preventing harassment and abuse.

We acknowledge your commitment to taking action following the deeply distressing accounts shared on the 'Everyone's Invited' platform, and we welcome these allegations being dealt with properly. We do however note that the extent of sexual harassment and violence in and out of schools is an issue that has been raised consistently with the DfE for many years.

The findings and recommendations from the 2016 Women and Equalities Select Committee, on the scale of sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools, were a key driver for the introduction of statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in all schools. The report found 5,500 sexual offences recorded in schools over a three-year period, including 600 rapes. EVAW's own research with girls in 2010 had already found girls being subjected to relentless sexual harassment by other young people in school, with almost one in three (29%) 16–18-year-old girls experienced 'groping' or other unwanted sexual touching at school.

It is clear that sexual harassment and assault is a widespread and longstanding issue despite schools having specific legal obligations to keep girls safe. Legal actions against schools and local authorities where there have been child protection failures after sexual assaults, include significant compensation paid to a girl forced back into the classroom with the boy who raped her. But we know that despite the duties placed on schools by the Human Rights Act and the Equality Act, schools are failing girls in their care. Girls and boys are learning that sexual harassment and violence is not regarded as important by adults, and that perpetrators of abuse are rarely challenged. This has long-term consequences for individual pupils and the whole school community.

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We welcomed working with the DfE on the development of strong supplementary child protection guidance on sexual violence and sexual harassment in schools. This 2017 guidance has been available for almost 4 years, but we remain concerned about how widely it is known about, understood and implemented in schools. In any case, guidance alone would never be enough to stop schools failing in their duties. We need schools to take their duty of care seriously and not to look simply to a criminal justice system response to reports of sexual assault before acting. It is crucial that schools' response is grounded in a 'Whole School Approach' which requires school leadership that prioritises tackling abuse, teacher training, and making links with local, specialist abuse organisations.

We note that Ofsted is tasked with a review of safeguarding policies in state and independent schools. This will be most effective if Ofsted inspectors are also appropriately trained in identifying cases of sexual harassment and sexual violence. We are concerned that schools which have failed to respond effectively to sexual violence and even been the subject of successful human rights and equalities challenges, have routinely been found to be safeguarding effectively by Ofsted. We would have more confidence in this 'deep dive' investigation if it had explicit input from women's sector specialists who understand the gendered dynamics of abuse and have significant experience and expertise in working with schools and girls; so, we would encourage Ofsted to engage those in our sector with such specialist and valuable expertise.

We are also keen to stress that while it is important to ensure that the police take any reports of sexual violence seriously, it should be recognized that the police are never a replacement for support from specialist organisations. Any increased police presence in schools is unlikely to make students feel more willing to report abuse and could have a detrimental impact on minoritised communities. Instead, **we recommend that the DfE take the following actions as part of efforts to tackle abuse in schools:**

1. A resourced strategy and action plan at the DfE for wholesale improvement of the school response to sexual harassment and assault
2. A 'whole school approach' becomes an explicit expectation in addition to the full roll-out of compulsory relationship and sex education (RSE)
3. DfE collection, monitoring and reporting of disaggregated data on sexual harassment and sexual violence
4. Sexual harassment and assault is closely monitored under school inspection frameworks, by trained inspectors
5. The specialist VAWG sector is consulted as part of a review into school safeguarding arrangements for sexual harassment and violence

We look forward to hearing from you and are available to meet to discuss these concerns.

Yours sincerely,



Andrea Simon

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