

# **It's #AboutTime**

**A Whole School Approach  
to Ending Violence  
Against Women & Girls**



**Mapping report**

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## **About EVAW**

The End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) is a leading coalition of over 140 specialist women's support services, researchers, NGOs and other experts working to end violence against women and girls in all its forms. Established in 2005, we campaign for every level of government to adopt better, more joined up approaches to ending and preventing violence against women and girls, and we challenge the wider cultural attitudes that tolerate and condone this abuse.

[www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk](http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk)

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## Executive summary

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is endemic in our society. Schools are a critical site for the protection of children and young people, and present the best opportunity to challenge attitudes which condone abuse and transform the long-term likelihood of abuse in adult relationships. However, there are alarming levels of sexual violence and sexual harassment in our schools, which is why it has been deemed a national crisis.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years we have seen the growth of online misogynist influencers, who promote violence against women and girls, and have had a real impact on boys and young men's attitudes and behaviour. Schools and colleges are often left to deal with the aftermath of this, without sufficient funding or resources to deal with the issues. Teachers and staff have reported feeling ill-equipped and unprepared to address the scale of the problem, and sometimes prefer to downplay or ignore its magnitude.<sup>2</sup> The impact of this inaction is devastating and addressing the matter has never been more urgent.

In the context of a number of devastating and high-profile murders of women and the exposing of misogyny and racism in our police

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<sup>1</sup> The Women and Equalities Committee reports that “a number of large scale surveys find girls and young women consistently reporting high levels of sexual harassment and sexual violence in school”. Women and Equalities Committee (2016) [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#). House of Commons

<sup>2</sup> NEU and NSPCC (2019). [NEU and NSPCC survey into school readiness for RSE lessons](#)

forces,<sup>3</sup> the government has restated its commitment to tackling violence against women and girls. However, a meaningful commitment and subsequent resourcing for prevention work and tackling VAWG in our schools remains elusive. This is despite the masses of evidence on the extent of the issue – from the End Violence Against Women Coalition’s 2010 call to tackle VAWG in schools,<sup>4</sup> and the Women and Equalities Select Committee Review in 2016,<sup>5</sup> to the watershed moment of Everyone’s Invited in 2020,<sup>6</sup> and the subsequent Ofsted Review in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

Publication of this report marks two years since the 2021 Ofsted report into sexual harassment and abuse in schools. Yet still almost a third of girls (32%) recently surveyed by EVAW think schools would not take reports of sexual harassment seriously,<sup>8</sup> and there is a clear indication of the need to transform the whole school culture - with nearly 60% of girls surveyed having heard teachers using sexist language.<sup>9</sup> The call from young people is clear – with 80% of girls

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<sup>3</sup> Baroness Casey of Blackstock (2023). [An independent review into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service.](#)

<sup>4</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2010). [YouGov Poll Exposes High Levels Sexual Harassment in Schools](#)

<sup>5</sup> Women and Equalities Committee (2016) [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools.](#)

<sup>6</sup> Everyone is Invited: <https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/about>

<sup>7</sup> Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges.](#) Department for Education.

<sup>8</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Sexual Harassment at School](#)

<sup>9</sup> nfpResearch conducted, on behalf of EVAW, an online survey of 1000 young women and 500 young men aged 16 – 18 between 3rd and 14th November 2022. End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023) [New report: It’s #AboutTime: - A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.](#)

surveyed saying schools need to do more to tackle this and support young people's sex and relationships education.<sup>10</sup>

Although Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) is now mandatory in schools, we are concerned that there seem to be many issues impacting the delivery of a robust RSHE curriculum. Most recently, a troubling backlash to RSHE in schools seems to have been fuelled by largely anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and contested claims about inappropriate content being covered in schools.<sup>11</sup> Critically, RSHE is only the beginning of the change needed, and schools need to embrace this curriculum and go much further to take proactive steps to create a culture in which girls are safe, can thrive and fully access their right to education.

We need a 'Whole School Approach' (WSA) to address this - a model recommended in the 2021 Ofsted report, which requires not only the essential training for teachers and school staff, but also the necessary changes in policy and transformation of the school culture and community. In effect, a transformation needs to occur at all levels, and tackling VAWG needs to be a whole-society priority for maximum impact. This report sets out how and why a WSA is beneficial in tackling VAWG in schools, along with a number of examples of best practice; many of which have been developed by the specialist VAWG sector, who have a long history of delivering evidence-based and trauma-informed interventions with children and young people. These include organisations led 'by and for' Black and minoritised women, Deaf and disabled women, and LGBTQ+ people, who are experts in identifying and meeting the needs of their communities and supporting marginalised children and young people.

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<sup>10</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Sexual Harassment at School](#)

<sup>11</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Concerns vital Relationships & Sex Education review is based on contested claims and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.](#)

This report outlines some of the issues that are currently preventing a more consistent and national roll out of WSA to tackling VAWG in schools. Key among these is the lack of political will to drive this, which subsequently leads to a string of other barriers such as lack of adequate funding and prioritisation within schools. There are also gaps in government guidance and obstacles with the implementation of guidance, including deficiencies in the quality of RSHE, which is hindered by insufficient time, training and support for school staff. We also need to see greater emphasis in this work on tackling the pervasiveness of gender inequality and other intersecting oppressions in our school communities and beyond, which are the underlying drivers of VAWG. The pervasiveness of gender inequality in the UK demands a shift in orientation to the systemic influences that sustain and encourage violence. The government must work with, and draw on, the expertise of the VAWG sector and academia to inform its approach and strategy for prevention work in schools, if it is to uphold its commitment to tackling violence against women and girls.

# Introduction

Girls and young women are facing abuse on an alarming scale. A recent survey conducted by the End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) found that nearly one-third of girls surveyed don't feel safe from sexual harassment in school,<sup>12</sup> whilst Girlguiding's 2022 Attitudes survey noted 71% of girls had experienced some form of harmful online content in the past year.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, EVAW found that of the 62% of girls surveyed who were made to feel uncomfortable about their appearance, 26% said it was a teacher who had made the comments.<sup>14</sup> Decades of research shows that pupils and teachers excuse sexual harassment and sometimes blame girls for abuse perpetrated towards them.<sup>15</sup> This evidence points to the need for a Whole School Approach to tackling violence against women and girls, addressing factors that enable VAWG all the way through the school community.

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<sup>12</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Sexual Harassment at School](#)

<sup>13</sup> Girlguiding (2022). [Girls Attitudes Survey 2022](#).

<sup>14</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [New report: It's #AboutTime: - A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls](#).

<sup>15</sup> Reay, D. (2001). 'Spice Girls', 'Nice Girls', 'Girlies', and 'Tomboys': Gender discourses, girls' cultures and femininities in the primary classroom, *Gender and Education*, 13:2, 153-166;

Robinson, K. (2006). Reinforcing hegemonic masculinities through sexual harassment: issues of identity, power and popularity in secondary schools, *Gender and Education*, 17:1, 19-37.

Gillander Gådin, K. & Stein, N. (2019). [Do schools normalise sexual harassment? An analysis of a legal case regarding sexual harassment in a Swedish high school](#). *Gender and Education*, vol. 31: 7, pp. 920-937.



Although there has been recent media attention on the issue of sexual harassment and violence in schools, we know these issues are nothing new. EVAW's own research in 2010 found that almost a third of 16-18 year old girls had experienced unwanted sexual touching at school, while nearly a quarter said that their teachers had never said that groping, sharing of sexual pictures or sexual name-calling was unacceptable.<sup>16</sup> In 2020, we saw what was heralded as a watershed moment, with the experiences of young people brought to mainstream attention by the Everyone's Invited movement.<sup>17</sup> This prompted the government to task Ofsted with conducting a rapid review in April 2021<sup>18</sup> of sexual abuse in schools and colleges across England and Wales. The hurried review was published in June and noted the many challenges schools face in terms of funding, teacher training and support, and school policies on VAWG; and called for preventive measures including a Whole School Approach. But such recommendations for a Whole School Approach to tackle sexual harassment and violence in schools are also not new. For many years there has been pressure put on the government by the VAWG sector and academic experts alike, to prioritise and fund educational interventions to tackle sexual harassment and violence in schools.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that shows how pervasive VAWG is in schools, little is being done to tackle this issue on a national scale. While Relationships Sex and Health Education (RSHE) is now mandatory in schools in England and Wales, we need schools to go much further to create environments where girls feel safe and can thrive. A national Whole School Approach programme to tackle VAWG - drawing on the expertise from specialist VAWG sector and academic researchers - would be a

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<sup>16</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2010). [YouGov Poll Exposes High Levels Sexual Harassment in Schools](#)

<sup>17</sup> Everyone is Invited: <https://www.everonesinvited.uk/about>

<sup>18</sup> Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#). Department for Education.

welcome step to supporting schools in addressing VAWG. When a school fails to address sexual harassment and violence effectively there can be serious long-term consequences for individual pupils, the whole school community, and society at large.

This report sets out progress towards implementing a Whole School Approach to tackling VAWG in England as of April 2023. We will also be shedding light on examples of good practice in Scotland and Wales. We have drawn on policy documents, national and international legislation regarding VAWG, case study models developed by specialist VAWG sector organisations in England, Scotland and Wales, and research to understand:

1. Where the UK is at with regard to prevention work in schools since RSHE became mandatory in schools in England, with a focus on the Whole School Approach (WSA);
2. Best practice examples of the Whole School Approach;
3. The barriers to adopting a consistent, national WSA programme for England;
4. And recommendations to move this agenda forward.

## **What is the issue?**

### **Why we need a Whole School Approach to end violence against women and girls**

#### **Prevalence**

*“I reported sexual assault that happened to me, I got a lot of blame for it. It’s quite hurtful - you’ve just reported and it makes you doubt what you’ve been through”.*

(Young Person, #AboutTime focus group)

Sexual harassment and abuse, and other forms of VAWG, are pervasive in UK schools.<sup>19</sup> This can encompass sexist name-calling, unwanted sexual comments, being pressured to send sexual images, unwanted touching, and sexual assault. In a recent survey conducted by EVAW:<sup>20</sup>

- Nearly a quarter (24%) of girls in mixed sex schools said they had experiences of unwanted sexual touching in school;
- 1 in 4 girls had shared a sexual image of themselves (24%) and of those, a quarter (24%) said they felt pressured into it, and almost a third (31%) initially wanted to but later regretted it.

Sexual harassment and abuse are disproportionately experienced by girls,<sup>21</sup> and the intersections between gender and other characteristics of marginalisation are also important to consider. Black girls and others who are marginalised are at the sharp edge of this abuse, with racism and other forms of discrimination compounding the abuse they face. Fifty-eight percent of girls surveyed by EVAW think racism is a problem at their school, and 40% of those who have witnessed sexual name calling have heard it reference race.<sup>22</sup> Recent research by Plan International UK has similarly found that Black and racially minoritised young women experience racialised sexual harassment in school, including comments made about their ethnicity, their difference from white

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<sup>19</sup> Women and Equalities Committee (2016) [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#). House of Commons; National Union of Students (2018). [Power in the Academy](#). NUS, London, UK; Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#). Department for Education.

<sup>20</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Sexual Harassment at School](#)

<sup>21</sup> Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#). Department for Education.

<sup>22</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Sexual Harassment at School](#)

peers, and religious clothing.<sup>23</sup> LGBTQ+ pupils are also more vulnerable to gender-based violence; research found that 82% of transgender pupils experienced bullying on the grounds of trans identity,<sup>24</sup> and Girlguiding found that LGBTQ+ girls were more likely to experience sexism than those who were not.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, disabled women and girls are twice as likely to experience violence than non-disabled women and girls.<sup>26</sup>

## School culture

*“When you joke about it you are normalising it...rape jokes are a fluent language to them.”*

(Young Person, #AboutTime focus group)

Sexual harassment and abuse are part of a continuum of VAWG,<sup>27</sup> and must be understood as a cause and consequence of gender inequality and symptomatic of wider misogyny and sexism in society. School culture reflects this reality, with nearly three-quarters (72%) of girls surveyed by EVAW stating sexist behaviour in school makes them feel uncomfortable,<sup>28</sup> and nearly 60% of girls surveyed having

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<sup>23</sup> Sundaram, V., Jessop, N., Bell, B. & Jackson, E. (2022). [Everything is racialised on top: Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of public sexual harassment in the UK](#). Plan International UK.

<sup>24</sup> LGBT Youth Scotland and the Scottish Trans Alliance (2010). Out of Sight Out of Mind, Transgender People's Experience of Domestic Abuse.

<sup>25</sup> Girlguiding (2022). [Girls Attitudes Survey 2022](#).

<sup>26</sup> Engender (2017). Our Bodies, Our Rights: Identifying and removing barriers to disabled women's reproductive rights in Scotland.

<sup>27</sup> Kelly, L. (1988) Surviving sexual violence.

<sup>28</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Sexual Harassment at School](#)

heard teachers using sexist language.<sup>29</sup> This reality is compounded by racism, ableism and homophobia. In Plan International’s study, some young women said that teachers told them to take racialised comments as a ‘compliment’.<sup>30</sup> Existing research shows that teachers sometimes blame girls for their experiences of sexual harassment,<sup>31</sup> and that this happens more frequently for Black girls.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in recent years we have seen the rise of online misogynist influencers promoting violence against women and girls, and teachers reporting that it is having a worrying impact on boys and young men’s attitudes and behaviour in schools.<sup>33</sup>

## **A girl’s right to education – impact on education and their human rights**

Forms of sexual harassment and VAWG can lead to lower school engagement, anxiety, poor self-esteem, alienation from teachers,

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<sup>29</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [New report: It’s #AboutTime: - A Whole School Approach to Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.](#)

<sup>30</sup> Sundaram, V., Jessop, N., Bell, B. & Jackson, E. (2022). [Everything is racialised on top: Black and minoritised girls’ and young women’s experiences of public sexual harassment in the UK.](#) Plan International UK.

<sup>31</sup> Harris, J. and Kruger, A.C. (2020) “We Always Tell Them, But They Don’t Do Anything About It!” Middle School Black Girls Experiences with Sexual Harassment at an Urban Middle School. *Urban Education*.

<sup>32</sup> Wilmot, J. M., Migliarini, V., & Ancy Annamma, S. (2021). Policy as Punishment and Distraction: The Double Helix of Racialized Sexual Harassment of Black Girls. *Educational Policy*, 35(2), 347–367.

<sup>33</sup> Weale, S. (2023). [We see misogyny every day’: how Andrew Tate’s twisted ideology infiltrated British schools.](#) Guardian

and poor academic achievement.<sup>34</sup> Fundamentally, violence against women and girls is a violation of girls' human rights and undermines their right to education.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1988) states that children have the right to live free from violence (Article 19) and that they have the right to be heard on matters affecting them (Article 12).<sup>35</sup> Schools, central government and other public bodies have legal obligations to protect girls from sexual bullying, harassment and violence under the Human Rights Act and the Equality Act (EA), including the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED).<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, under Chapter III of the Istanbul Convention, the prevention of VAWG requires long-term changes in attitudes and behaviours which can lead to, justify, trivialise and minimise the occurrence of such violence. Since such patterns of behaviours and beliefs are shaped very early on in life, Article 14 contains the obligation to contribute to the prevention of VAWG through both formal and informal education. Articles 12, 13, 15 and 17 of the Istanbul Convention outline more specifically the contextual features that are needed to support high-quality and successful teaching materials or educational programmes that address VAWG.<sup>37</sup>

This context underscores the need and legal obligations for government and schools to be actively involved in safeguarding pupils, for pupils to be widely consulted in the prevention of VAWG,

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<sup>34</sup> Gruber, J. E., Fineran, S. (2008). Comparing the impact of bullying and sexual harassment victimization on the mental and physical health of adolescents. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 59(1-2), 1–13.

<sup>35</sup> United Nations (1989). [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

<sup>36</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2016). [“All day, every day”. Legal obligations on schools to prevent and respond to sexual harassment and violence against girls.](#)

<sup>37</sup> Council of Europe. [Istanbul Convention Action against violence against women and domestic violence](#)

and for a Whole School Approach to be adopted as part of a whole-society commitment to preventing VAWG.

## What is the solution?

### Defining a Whole School Approach

EVAW defines a WSA as “an approach that addresses the needs of pupils, staff and the wider community across the entire school environment, from the curriculum or learning environment to addressing the school’s physical environment and what actions are taken to prevent VAWG and ensure safety for both students and staff”.<sup>38</sup>

It is essential that any WSA model is grounded in a gendered and human rights framework and is focused on prevention, education, safeguarding and emphasising the importance of partnership work with the specialist VAWG sector. The below diagram<sup>39</sup> shows six key areas of a WSA, including examples of what each area of work might involve. All of the areas are closely interlinked and support one another.

EVAW also notes that it is important to explicitly highlight the root causes and consequences of why and how VAWG affects girls and young women disproportionately, and how this inequality is compounded and experienced differently by racialised, minoritised and marginalised communities.

Ofsted have defined a WSA as “encompassing a carefully sequenced RSHE curriculum that specifically includes sexual harassment and violence, training and support for all staff, early

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<sup>38</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition. (2015) [A Guide for Schools](#).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

intervention and ongoing monitoring of the learning environment, and close relationships with specialist support services”.<sup>40</sup> The RSHE guidance for England also mentions a WSA as a necessary condition for tackling VAWG. Point 112 under the section ‘Senior Leadership and Whole School Approach’ gives an example:<sup>41</sup>

“All of these subjects should be set in the context of a wider whole-school approach to supporting pupils to be safe, happy and prepared for life beyond school. For example, the curriculum on relationships and on sex should complement, and be supported by, the school’s wider policies on behaviour, inclusion, respect for equality and diversity, bullying and safeguarding (including handling of any reports pupils may make as a result of the subject content).” (p. 40)

WSA has also been implemented in relation to other school priorities, including mental health and wellbeing (MHWB). There are clear similarities in the principles of a WSA for tackling VAWG and those outlined by Public Health England and the Department of Education in supporting MHWB. For example, the government defines the school’s role in supporting MHWB as being about prevention, identification, early support and signposting to specialist services.<sup>42</sup> While there is no universal definition of what constitutes a WSA for tackling VAWG, key principles to note which aim to change culture and prevent and respond to VAWG are:

1. Institutional and policy development;
2. Awareness-raising, training and support for staff;

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<sup>40</sup> Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#). Department for Education.

<sup>41</sup> Department of Education. (2019) [Relationships and sex education \(RSE\) and health education guidance](#).

<sup>42</sup> Department for Education (2021) [Promoting children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing. A whole school and colleges approach](#). Public Health England/Department for Education.



3. Education for pupils through formal curriculum and informal school spaces;
4. Early support, safeguarding and signposting to specialist services for pupils.

Below we describe case study examples of how these principles have been applied in models in England, Scotland and Wales.

## **Spotlight on the Whole School Approach in England, Scotland and Wales**

### **(i) AVA's Healthy London Healthy Relationships (HLHR) Programme and 'Ask AVA' Toolkit<sup>43</sup>**

Funded by London Councils, HLHR is a school-based prevention programme that uses an embedded WSA to tackle attitudes and beliefs that cause VAWG and strengthen schools' responses to VAWG. The project includes free training on creating a WSA; digital safeguarding for professionals working with children and young people; community outreach with schools, parents and children; and a prevention toolkit. The HLHR partnership consists of AVA, IKWRO Women's Rights Organisation, IMECE Women's Centre, Jewish Women's Aid (JWA), Foundation of Women's Health Research and Development (FORWARD), Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS) and the Women and Girls Network (WGN). A key strength of the project is its partnership work and the involvement of a number of 'by and for' services who are best placed to meet the needs of their communities.

The HLHR programme is built on AVA's award-winning Prevention Platform, more widely known as "Ask AVA"<sup>44</sup> – which is grounded in evidence and expertise from the frontline. 'Ask AVA' is a practical toolkit designed to strengthen schools' responses to gender-based

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<sup>43</sup> AVA (2022). [Healthy London Healthy Relationships Programme](#)

<sup>44</sup> [AVA Prevention Platform](#)

violence. The toolkit continues to evolve to meet the intersectional needs of diverse communities in the 21st century and is currently being refreshed to include a strategic overview to support uptake from schools. 'Ask AVA' is a framework in which WSA can practically be implemented in schools and in other youth settings.

### **(ii) Equally Safe At School (ESAS)<sup>45</sup>**

The University of Glasgow has been working with Rape Crisis Scotland to develop a theory-informed intervention approach since 2016 called Equally Safe At School (ESAS). Funded by the Scottish Government's Equally Safe (Violence Against Women and Girls) Fund, ESAS provides evidence-based interventions designed for a WSA. Based on multiple online surveys, participatory mapping workshops with students and staff, and interviews with school leaders, ESAS has developed a school systems map and a Theory of Change model to help schools better understand how to tackle VAWG at the whole-school level. They also have simple data collection tools that can be self-administered by schools to understand from staff and students how VAWG manifests. Their research is ongoing and constantly being refined, and soon to be published in journals.

### **(iii) Tender's RE:SET<sup>46</sup>**

Between 2017-2020, funded by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), Tender worked in collaboration with four schools in the London Borough of Croydon exploring a WSA to preventing VAWG. The results of that collaboration led to the birth of RE:SET. Relationships Education: School's Equality Toolkit or RE:SET is available online to support primary schools, secondary schools and alternative provisions to explore, adapt and reset their existing

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<sup>45</sup> [Equally Safe at School](#)

<sup>46</sup> Tender (2022). [Relationships Education: School Equality Toolkit](#)

relationships education across the school. The toolkit works on the principle of involving all members of a school staff to promote healthy, equal and respectful relationships. The training is designed in collaboration with an assigned Tender Mentor, to not only work with students, but also their families and the larger community. Being online, it keeps a record of all project documents and evaluation for easier and faster reporting and monitoring.

#### **(iv) Good Practice Guide: A Whole Education Approach to Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence in Wales<sup>47</sup>**

In 2015, the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act was passed in Wales. In the Act, six objectives are listed out to tackle instances of violence and harassment, and these are intended to be meted out through different avenues, including through education. The Good Practice Guide (funded by the Welsh Government) was developed as a guide for implementation of the Act in conjunction with Welsh Women's Aid (WWA) and intended to be a practical and useful toolkit for embedding principles of a Whole Education Approach (equivalently WSA) to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence within schools and Further Education Institutions (FEIs). It recognises the importance of education settings being environments where positive attitudes towards gender equality and healthy, respectful relationships can be fostered in a needs-led, strengths-based and trauma-informed way, as advocated for in the Change That Lasts approach championed by WWA.

The guide lists and describes nine key elements, along with relevant activities and tools that could be utilised for an effective Whole Education Approach:

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<sup>47</sup> Welsh Government and Welsh Women's Aid (2015). [Good Practice Guide: A Whole Education Approach to Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse & Sexual Violence in Wales](#)

1. Children and young people learn about violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence;
2. Staff learn about violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence;
3. Parents, care-givers and family learn about violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence;
4. Monitoring and evaluation systems are in place to measure impact of this work;
5. Measures are in place to support people who experience forms of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence;
6. Active participation of children and young people, staff and parents/care-givers to prevent violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence;
7. Taking action to prevent violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence in the wider community;
8. Working in partnership with relevant local experts;
9. Embedding a comprehensive prevention programme.

Each of these elements is important to ensure a comprehensive 'whole education' approach and are explored in turn over the following pages.

### **(v) The National Education Union's It's Not OK: Preventing sexism and sexual harassment in schools<sup>48</sup>**

The National Education Union (NEU) has created a toolkit to help NEU members take necessary steps against sexism, sexual harassment and sexual violence. It proposes a WSA to preventing sexism and sexual harassment by targeting ten elements - five key themes and the five threads that need to run through each aspect of the Whole School Approach. The themes are leadership, staff, student, curriculum and community; and the threads are

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<sup>48</sup> National Education Union (2022) [It's Not Ok: Preventing sexism and sexual harassment in schools](#).

infrastructure, inclusion, interpersonal, internal and imagery. The toolkit comes with a series of downloadable resources and videos to support implementation.

## Where have we got to?

### Policy timeline

As outlined above, the need for a Whole School Approach to tackling VAWG is clear and has been for some time. This timeline outlines some of the key policy milestones and developments in England that have reaffirmed the role of schools in preventing violence against women and girls and summarises government responses to date.

#### 2016

##### **Women and Equalities Committee Enquiry into Sexual Harassment in Schools<sup>49</sup>**

The report asked for a prioritisation of the issue of sexual harassment in schools, the development of national guidance to tackle it, and the Education Bill including a statutory obligation for all schools to use a WSA in response to the problem.

#### 2017

##### **Children and Social Work Act (mandatory RSHE)<sup>50</sup>**

RSHE was made mandatory in all schools, and the Act required all primary schools to teach age-appropriate Relationships Education and secondary schools to teach RSHE.

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<sup>49</sup> Women and Equalities Committee (2016) [Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools](#). House of Commons.

<sup>50</sup> [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#)

## 2018

### **Working Together to Safeguard Children Guidance<sup>51</sup>**

The Department for Education adopts the child-centred approach in their safeguarding guidance to schools, drawing on the Children Act, the Equality Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to state that “practitioners should be considering the needs of children first when determining what action to take” with regard to neglect, abuse or exploitation (including sexual, physical and emotional abuse and online abuse).

## 2019

### **Relationships Sex and Health Education (RSHE) Guidance<sup>52</sup>**

The RSHE guidance for England, published by the Department of Education in 2019, provides clear directives on the aims of RSHE and what needs to be done for students; giving schools autonomy in the teaching process. The guidance gives an indication of the focus of teaching and issues to be covered, which include those relevant to the prevention of VAWG and the need for a WSA.

## 2020

### **Everyone’s Invited**

Founded by student-activist Soma Sara, Everyone’s Invited is an online platform for survivors of VAWG to share their stories, highlighting the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, unwanted touching, cyberbullying, sexual assault and rape within schools and colleges in the UK and elsewhere.

## 2021

### **Ofsted Review of Sexual Abuse in Schools and Colleges<sup>53</sup>**

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<sup>51</sup> Department of Education. (2018) [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)

<sup>52</sup> Department of Education. (2019) [Relationships and sex education \(RSE\) and health education guidance](#).

<sup>53</sup> Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#). Department for Education.

The report found evidence of widespread sexual harassment in schools, teachers downplaying its pervasiveness and feeling unprepared to deal with it, and inadequacies in relevant government guidance. The report makes a series of recommendations including high-quality training for teachers, and a Whole School Approach.

### **Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy<sup>54</sup>**

The government published the current iteration of its Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy which included prevention as a key strand, promising to better support teachers to deliver the RSHE curriculum.

## **2022**

### **Behaviour in Schools Guidance<sup>55</sup>**

Government guidance is updated and includes a section on ‘child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment’ (including behaviour incidents online) and makes references to the safeguarding principles given in the ‘Keeping children safe in education’ guidance.

### **Guidance on Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges<sup>56</sup> withdrawn**

The government withdraws guidance for schools on responding to sexual violence, and at point of this report’s publication we are still awaiting the release of updated guidance.

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<sup>54</sup> Home Office (2021). [Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy](#)

<sup>55</sup> Department of Education (2022). [Behaviour in schools Advice for headteachers and school staff](#)

<sup>56</sup> Department of Education (2017). [Sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges](#) (withdrawn September 2022).

## **Keeping Children Safe in Education Guidance (part 5)<sup>57</sup>**

Part 5 (updated) stipulates that teachers should be able to identify the different manifestations of sexual harassment, harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) and gender-based violence among children and young people, both within and outside school/college premises. It makes references to the ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’ statutory guidance.

## **2023**

### **Teaching online safety in schools non-statutory guidance<sup>58</sup>**

The latest government update describes what teaching online safety looks like in schools across the UK, with the recommendation that all teaching about online safety and harms be embedded within a WSA, with reference to the ‘Keeping children safe in education’ guidance.

### **RSHE Guidance Review announced<sup>59</sup>**

The government announces details of a review of RSHE guidance in March 2023. However, concerns are raised that the framing of the review may be reactionary, rather than in response to the grave need to do more to prevent VAWG.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Department of Education (2022). [Keeping children safe in education 2022](#)

<sup>58</sup> Department of Education (Updated 2023). [Teaching online safety in schools](#)

<sup>59</sup> Department of Education (2023) [Review of relationships, sex and health education to protect children to conclude by end of year](#)

<sup>60</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Concerns vital Relationships & Sex Education review is based on contested claims and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.](#)



# What is preventing national implementation of a Whole School Approach to tackling violence against women & girls?

## i. Political will and prioritisation

In recent years the government has restated its commitment to tackling violence against women and girls. However, despite its VAWG strategy emphasising the role of prevention and RSHE in this work,<sup>61</sup> much of the political narrative is focused on a criminal justice response to VAWG, and meaningful engagement from Education Ministers and the Department of Education is vital to this cross-departmental work.

When RSHE has been the focus of government in recent months, we have seen little value placed on the expertise of the specialist VAWG sector in shaping government policy. For example, earlier this year we saw the government bring forward their review of RSHE following alarmist headlines claiming ‘inappropriate content’ is being taught in schools, which was worryingly reactionary, rather than being based on research on young people’s views and experiences. EVAW and over 50 other specialist organisations wrote to the Education Minister seeking assurances that the RSHE review will be focused on the urgent need to do more to tackle VAWG and the rising influence of online misogyny in schools.<sup>62</sup> However, concerns remain about a backlash to RSHE fuelled by anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.<sup>63</sup> Schools are an absolutely critical site to prevent VAWG and to

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<sup>61</sup> Home Office (2021). [Tackling violence against women and girls strategy](#)

<sup>62</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023) [Don’t politicise Relationships, Sex & Health Education, 50+ VAWG experts warn](#)

<sup>63</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Concerns vital Relationships & Sex Education review is based on contested claims and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.](#)

protect young people, and long-term political will, prioritisation and commitment to a WSA must match this reality.

## ii. Funding

The lack of political will and prioritisation is evidenced in the lack of strategic investment required to create sustainable and meaningful change. For example, recent research by SafeLives and the National Education Union highlights that teachers lack confidence, training and time to deliver RSHE.<sup>64</sup> Yet despite the government announcement in 2019 that schools would receive access to a £6 million training and support package in the roll out of RSHE, data obtained by VICE in 2022 noted that only £3.2million of that had been spent.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, the specialist VAWG sector, who must play a vital role in the development and delivery of a WSA to tackle abuse, is chronically underfunded and a postcode lottery has been created with regard to local provision.<sup>66</sup>

## iii. Prioritisation from schools

“[We need to] raise the status of VAWG and gender equality to a priority level that can match the biggest policy drivers in education (e.g. academic attainment).”  
(EVAW Prevention Network Member)

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<sup>64</sup> Boyson, L. & Taylor-Gee, C. (2022). [‘I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously’: An exploration of relationships and sex education in English secondary school settings](#). SafeLives.

<sup>65</sup> Smith Galer, S. (2022). [UK Government Has Only Spent Half the Sex Education Training Money It Promised](#). Vice.

<sup>66</sup> Domestic Abuse Commissioner. (2023). [A Patchwork of Provision: How to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales](#)

The lack of prioritisation and leadership from government on these issues is often mirrored by senior school leaders, as reported by many young people and teachers.<sup>67</sup> For example, this plays out in inconsistencies in how school governance and leadership prioritise and resource RSHE. SafeLives' recent study found that while RSHE is mandated, there is large variation in how frequently schools teach RSHE and their form of delivery, and although most schools (65%) are teaching through timetabled lessons, some are teaching through 'drop down days' or one-off assemblies.<sup>68</sup> This confirms what we hear from specialist VAWG services who report challenges with getting buy-in from senior school leaders on the importance of an embedded WSA to tackling VAWG. They are often only being invited into schools to do 'one-off' sessions in response to a particular concern or following high-profile events.

Members of EVAW's Prevention Network<sup>69</sup> have voiced that this lack of prioritisation can stem from competing school pressures and priorities. For example, the wider context of new managerialist expectations for schools, including the pressure created by the National Curriculum and league tables of school grades, puts Values Education, PSHCE, Physical Education, and arguably even

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<sup>67</sup> Sex Education Forum (2022). [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#). Sex Education Forum;

NEU and NSPCC (2019). [NEU and NSPCC survey into school readiness for RSE lessons](#);

Boyson, L. & Taylor-Gee, C. (2022). ['I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously': An exploration of relationships and sex education in English secondary school settings](#). SafeLives.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> The Prevention Network was created by the End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) for organisations to come together to share knowledge and information and to discuss points relating to prevention of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in educational settings. This group works from an intersectional feminist starting point.

children’s emotional and physical wellbeing, under scrutiny in order to justify their importance and how much time in the curriculum they deserve to be allocated. Members also noted the current backlash against RSHE can make leaders wary, as well as there being a general tendency towards minimisation or avoidance of the issues – which was also noted in the 2021 Ofsted report.<sup>70</sup> Reports have noted that teachers themselves feel strongly about the importance of good quality RSHE, but note that without structural support and prioritisation at a school leadership level, there is too much pressure on them.<sup>71</sup>

#### **iv. Training, support and time for school staff**

*“Sexual violence prevention work is a specialist skill and the assumption that any teacher can do it without training is very common and unhelpful for staff”.*

*(EVAW Prevention Network)*

Training and support for all school staff is an essential component of a successful Whole School Approach to tackling VAWG, and the training should be developed and delivered in partnership with the specialist VAWG sector. However, it is a significant gap in the current landscape, with research clearly indicating that teachers have not been given sufficient training and support to deliver RSHE

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<sup>70</sup> Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#). Department for Education.

<sup>71</sup> Boyson, L. & Taylor-Gee, C. (2022). [‘I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously’: An exploration of relationships and sex education in English secondary school settings](#). SafeLives; Sex Education Forum (2022). [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#). Sex Education Forum.

and respond to VAWG in schools.<sup>72</sup> Recent FOI data shows that the government's online training materials to help teachers deliver RHSE on topics such as consent and online pornography were downloaded a mere few thousand times – only a fraction of the teachers in the 20,000 schools they were designed to support.<sup>73</sup> Such figures clearly illustrate that the government's approach is not working.

It is essential that the government recognises that teachers need much more than mere guidance to do this critical work, and they must invest the time and resources to support teachers to develop the necessary skills and enable them to prioritise delivery of RSHE. The Sex Education Forum has called for the government to properly resource teacher training, on a par with other curriculum subjects, and develop a long-term plan to support and sustain the professionalisation of RSHE teaching.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, SafeLives recommends that PSHE and RSHE leads and teachers should receive training in practical teaching strategies, as well as specialist knowledge about delivering RSHE in an inclusive way.<sup>75</sup>

It is also essential that additional spaces are created for professional development and opportunities to share learning and best practice – both amongst teachers, but also with the specialist VAWG sector, academic experts, children and young people, and the Department for Education.

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<sup>72</sup> Boyson, L. & Taylor-Gee, C. (2022). ['I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously': An exploration of relationships and sex education in English secondary school settings](#). SafeLives.

<sup>73</sup> Smith Galer, S. (2021). [Sex Education 'Not Being Taken Seriously' in England](#). Vice.

<sup>74</sup> Sex Education Forum (2022). [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#)

<sup>75</sup> Boyson, L. & Taylor-Gee, C. (2022). ['I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously': An exploration of relationships and sex education in English secondary school settings](#). SafeLives.

## v. **Government guidance on how to respond to harm and keep children safe, and its implementation**

Any government guidance seeking to tackle VAWG in schools must be rooted in a gendered and intersectional understanding and situate that guidance in a Whole School Approach. However, existing government guidance on responding to harm and safeguarding concerns tends to take an atomised, individualised and punitive approach to tackling VAWG, rather than thinking about it as located in and reflecting a wider school, cultural and social context of inequality. This approach is reflected in the Behaviour in Schools guidance and Keeping Children Safe.<sup>76</sup>

The government's behaviour guidance instructs schools to have a zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment and violence. Increasingly, however, caution has been raised over phrasing of 'zero tolerance' policies which are solely punitive.<sup>77</sup> Such approaches can mask the structural and systematic issues at play and can often disproportionately target boys who are already pathologised and criminalised, such as working class, those with special educational needs, and Black, minoritised and other marginalised boys. Intersections between gender and other characteristics impact on who is seen as a 'deserving victim' or as a 'dangerous perpetrator'. There should be explicit reference to how specific groups are disproportionately subject to punitive sanctions to ensure that schools are able to identify processes, practices and norms that exacerbate this, and to address them.

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<sup>76</sup> Department of Education (2022). [Behaviour in schools Advice for headteachers and school staff](#)

Department of Education (2022). [Keeping children safe in education 2022](#)

<sup>77</sup> Lloyd, J. (2019) [Why 'zero tolerance' doesn't work](#). Durham University.

Additionally, it is important that a Whole School Approach to tackling VAWG does not just seek to address illegal acts but understands sexual harassment as part of a wider continuum of VAWG that further reinforces gender inequality. A sole emphasis on addressing illegality is not only limiting, but importantly, it could also have a silencing effect on children and young people's reporting. This is particularly true of children and young people from over-policed communities, who may be concerned about police involvement due to institutional racism in the police. Punitive outcomes do not always reflect survivors' views about what 'justice' would look like either; rather accountability, reflection and ways of preventing future harm are seen as important.<sup>78</sup> As well as being compliant with existing legal frameworks, government guidance on responding to harm should focus on the young person who is harmed, including ensuring their future wellbeing. Here, it is important to draw on the expertise of the specialist VAWG sector on how best to support the young person and ensure their ongoing wellbeing.

Online safety is clearly a huge issue for schools and is mentioned as being the responsibility of schools to address in behaviour and safeguarding guidance. While new online safety guidance<sup>79</sup> is now available, there are concerns at the extent to which this has been developed as a reactionary response to media attention on the rise of online misogynistic influencers such as Andrew Tate, rather than as part of a holistic response to tackling VAWG. Teachers have reported being turned away by DfE officials when asking for support to address these issues in their classrooms,<sup>80</sup> and the VAWG sector

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<sup>78</sup> McGlynn, C., & Westmarland, N. (2019). Kaleidoscopic Justice: Sexual Violence and Victim-Survivors' Perceptions of Justice. *Social & Legal Studies*, 28(2), 179–201.

<sup>79</sup> Department of Education (Updated 2023). [Teaching online safety in schools](#).

<sup>80</sup> Fazackerley, A. (2023) [Don't talk to pupils about misogynist Andrew Tate, government urges teachers in England](#). The Guardian.

has often been filling in these gaps (e.g. providing tailored workshops and resources tackling the rise of Andrew Tate in schools),<sup>81</sup> often without government funding for this work.

It is also essential to note the challenges, and often disconnect, between guidance and the realities of implementation of any guidance. The 2021 Ofsted report noted that schools lack clarity on the different guidance documents, wanted guidance to be more easily accessible, and sought more clarity on the scope of their safeguarding responsibilities when incidents take place outside of school. In that scenario they questioned whether their school behaviour policy applies, and how to help children and young people be safe in the context of such rapidly changing social media.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, a former Department for Education minister has expressed concern that many teachers seem not to be aware of the peer-on-peer abuse guidance.<sup>83</sup>

#### **vi. Implementation and quality of RSHE**

Evidence from the specialist VAWG sector and decades of academic research shows that teaching children about harmful gender stereotypes, consent, respect and healthy peer relationships from the earliest stages of school are key to preventing VAWG and intersecting forms of violence. Therefore, RSHE has a vital part to play within a Whole School Approach to tackling VAWG. However, three years on from the government's promise to deliver quality RSHE through new guidance, new research from the Sex Education Forum shows only 40% of young people aged 16 and 17 rate the RSHE they received at school as good or very good.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile, nearly one in five (18%) still say their in-school RSHE is bad or very

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<sup>81</sup> For example [Bold Voices workshops on Andrew Tate](#).

<sup>82</sup> Ofsted (2021). [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#). Department for Education

<sup>83</sup> Hazell, W. (2019). [Exclusive: DfE 'concerned' at teachers' lack of awareness about peer abuse guidance](#). TES Magazine.

<sup>84</sup> Sex Education Forum (2022). [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#)



bad. Girlguiding's latest Attitudes survey similarly found that only half of girls aged 11-21 learn about healthy relationships in RSHE and only 40% learn about sexual harassment.<sup>85</sup>

In a recent Sex Education Forum poll, the topics children and young people felt had not been covered enough or at all included power imbalances in relationships (58%), pornography (58%), culture and faith-based perspectives (57%), LGBTQ+-relevant information (54%), the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women and girls (55%), and what a healthy relationship looks like, including online relationships (54%).<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, research from both SafeLives and Sex Education Forum noted that children and young people want to see more open discussions in RSHE.<sup>87</sup>

An intersectional approach to RSHE is also crucial. LGBTQ+ students feel less comfortable and less confident about where to go for support about relationships or sexual harassment.<sup>88</sup> Although legally required by the guidance, the majority of LGBTQ+ students surveyed by SafeLives disagreed that content about LGBTQ+ relationships is threaded throughout RSHE. Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) also receive poorer quality RSHE.<sup>89</sup> There is a tendency by teachers to infantilise disabled students when talking about issues of sexuality, and the guidance itself focuses on their vulnerability to exploitation and bullying, rather than how to discuss consent, respect, healthy

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<sup>85</sup> Girlguiding (2022). [Girls Attitudes Survey 2022](#)

<sup>86</sup> Sex Education Forum (2023) [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#)

<sup>87</sup> Boyson, L. & Taylor-Gee, C. (2022). ['I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously': An exploration of relationships and sex education in English secondary school settings](#). SafeLives;

Sex Education Forum (2023) [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#)

<sup>88</sup> Sex Education Forum (2023) [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#)

<sup>89</sup> Boyson, L. & Taylor-Gee, C. (2022). ['I love it - but wish it were taken more seriously': An exploration of relationships and sex education in English secondary school settings](#). SafeLives.

relationships and sexuality with this group of children and young people.<sup>90</sup>

### **vii. The need to tackle gender inequality and other intersecting forms of oppression**

Existing evidence tells us that the biggest risk factor for violence perpetration is gender inequality in terms of structure, social and cultural norms and practices, and individual beliefs.<sup>91</sup> Adherence to traditional gender roles, conservative ideas about masculinity that emphasise dominance, control, and heterosexuality, and conventional social norms for gender are linked to higher perpetration and acceptance of VAWG.<sup>92</sup> This reaffirms the importance of addressing harmful gender stereotypes and expectations (for girls and boys) as a central aspect of a Whole School Approach to tackling VAWG.

In this work, concerns are often raised about how we engage boys and young men in critical conversations about gender, and toxic and alternative masculinities, with fears such conversations can demonise and alienate them. However, these conversations are essential for the wellbeing of all young people and wider society, and there are specialist organisations helping to navigate the complexities of these discussions to engage boys and young men in a hopeful future. Furthermore, this work is increasingly important to counter the narratives of misogynist online influencers such as

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<sup>90</sup> Sex Education Forum (2023) [Young People's RSE Poll 2022](#)

<sup>91</sup> Jewkes, R., Flood, M., Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: a conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385 (9977), 1580-1589.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Andrew Tate and a growing ‘manosphere’ community,<sup>93</sup> who claim to be leading positive conversations about masculinity.

It is also essential that WSA models are trying to tackle intersecting forms of inequality and marginalisation. Black and racially minoritised girls are more likely to experience racialised sexual harassment about their bodies and appearance, and this harassment focuses on their difference from a white Europeanised norm.<sup>94</sup> LGBTQ+ young people are at increased risk of violence in school,<sup>95</sup> and homophobic bullying is common as a way to police conformity to gendered expectations, even in primary schools.<sup>96</sup> A WSA should recognise and tackle forms of inequality throughout the institution, including in policies and processes. Yet we see that racism and other inequalities are embedded in institutional safeguarding processes and culture, as exemplified by the recent case of Child Q.<sup>97</sup> It is also important to underscore the need for a WSA to change the culture of the whole school community, which includes teachers and parents.

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<sup>93</sup> Ging, D. (2019). Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere. *Men and Masculinities*, 22(4), 638–657.

<sup>94</sup> Sundaram, V., Jessop, N., Bell, B. & Jackson, E. (2022). [Everything is racialised on top: Black and minoritised girls' and young women's experiences of public sexual harassment in the UK](#). Plan International UK.

<sup>95</sup> Bradlow, J., Bartram, F., Guasp, A., & Jadva, V. (2019) *The Schools Report*. Stonewall/University of Cambridge.

<sup>96</sup> Renold, E.J. (2010). 'Coming out': Gender, (hetero)sexuality and the primary school, *Gender and Education*, 12:3, 309-326.

<sup>97</sup> House of Commons Library (2022). [Child Q and the law on strip search](#)

**viii. The need to value the specialist VAWG sector, including ‘by and for’ organisations, and the importance of partnership work**

*“Funding is needed for specialist services to be actively and meaningfully engaging with schools - and provide support for children and young people.”  
(EVAW Prevention network)*

A meaningful commitment to tackling VAWG through a Whole School Approach must draw on the specialist expertise of the VAWG sector, which has a long history of designing and delivering trauma-informed interventions with children and young people, and working in partnership with schools. This includes the inclusion of organisations run ‘by and for’ Black and racially minoritised women, disabled women, and LGBTQ+ youth who understand and meet the needs of marginalised groups of children and young people. However, as noted earlier, the specialist VAWG sector is chronically underfunded<sup>98</sup> and under recognised in this space, despite doing much of this essential work in schools. EVAW notes a lack of engagement by Education Ministers and the DfE with the VAWG sector in comparison to other government departments. This can result in less value being placed on the sector’s expertise and less opportunity to input into the government’s future proposals for RSHE curriculum and materials – with current government plans to progress this work with an organisation without specific VAWG expertise.<sup>99</sup> EVAW Prevention Network members also noted the need for greater recognition from policy makers and statutory funders about how much time and consideration this work takes, and

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<sup>98</sup> Domestic Abuse Commissioner. (2023). [A Patchwork of Provision: How to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales](#)

<sup>99</sup> End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023). [Concerns vital Relationships & Sex Education review is based on contested claims and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.](#)

to combat the prevalent idea that a "quick fix" is possible (which ties in with a lack of funding for research to evidence the long-term value of investment in this work).

#### **ix. Investment in research and evaluation of the Whole School Approach**

There is a continuing lack of funding for academic research in the area of VAWG in schools. Currently, some excellent WSA models have been developed for local contexts, with varying frameworks. But there has been no wide-lensed review of the various models proposed and no comparative or bench-marked studies that could guide a school to select an appropriate intervention that best meets its pupils' and whole community's needs. This impedes a national, evidence-based approach that can be robustly evaluated for impact.

# Recommendations

## For government:

- The Department for Education should establish a VAWG advisory group, with ministerial level input and representation from the specialist VAWG sector, including ‘by and for’ organisations. This would support the work needed to develop a resourced action plan for wholesale improvement of the school response to VAWG, and support dissemination of best practice. This work should be informed by, and feed into broader cross-governmental work, including that guided by the Tackling VAWG strategy, the Rape Review Action Plan and the Tackling Child Sexual Abuse strategy.
- A Whole School Approach should become an explicit expectation on schools in addition to the full roll-out of compulsory RSHE. This should be accompanied by government guidance on embedding a Whole School Approach, with input from the specialist VAWG sector. This should emphasise the need to take a gendered, intersectional, and equalities and human rights approach.
- Government must commit to strategic investment to prevent and respond to VAWG in schools, including resourcing the implementation of a Whole School Approach in all areas. This looks like:
  - sufficient investment in our school staff to enable training, resourcing and dedicated capacity for RSHE delivery and embedding a WSA approach to tackling VAWG,
  - dedicated funding for local VAWG services, including ‘by and for’ organisations, to design and implement prevention interventions,
  - a duty to fund specialist community-based services to support children and young people who have been affected by VAWG,

- further investment in research and evaluation of school-based interventions to address VAWG, including investment in work which aims to:
  - ensure prevention interventions meet the intersecting needs of children – for example relating to gender, race, disability and sexuality.
  - support survivor-centred responses to sexual abuse and harm which tackle the harm of inaction, whilst not replicating the harms of the criminal justice system and zero tolerance approaches.
- Government must ensure reviews and evaluations of RSHE:
  - listen and respond to the views of children and young people, including marginalised young people,
  - centre the need to tackle the cultural norms which underpin the epidemic of VAWG we see today,
  - value the expertise of the specialist VAWG sector, including in the development and delivery of curriculum materials,
  - take an intersectional approach to the development of guidance which should be holistic and inclusive in meeting the needs of all children (e.g. including teaching about LGBTQ+ experiences, recognising special educational needs, and disproportionality and discriminatory responses to Black and minoritised children).
- Department of Education should publish its updated guidance for schools on responding to sexual harassment and abuse, and publish the two accompanying pieces of research they commissioned to support this work.
- Department of Education should ensure all relevant guidance (for example Behaviour in Schools guidance and Keeping Children Safe) reflects the gendered nature of VAWG and takes an intersectional approach – ensuring the guidance

meets the needs of all children and does not cause additional harm to marginalised groups.

- Department for Education should collect, monitor and report on disaggregated data relating to the prevalence of VAWG in schools and children's access to RSHE. The framework and measures for this should be developed in consultation with the specialist VAWG sector and ensure compliance with the Equality Act, the Human Rights Act, and the Istanbul Convention.

### **For local commissioners:**

- Champion a Whole School Approach to preventing VAWG among primary and secondary schools, including academies, in your area.
- Fund partnership work between schools and specialist VAWG services, including 'by and for' organisations, to deliver a Whole School Approach to tackling VAWG.
- Ensure prevention work is central to the work of local partnerships with relevant voluntary sector agencies, including the specialist VAWG sector and 'by and for' partners, primary and secondary schools.

### **For schools and colleges:**

- As highlighted in the Ofsted review, assume that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening in your school, even when there are no specific reports.
- Senior leaders must ensure teachers and school staff (including governors) have sufficient training, skills, time and support to identify and respond to VAWG, and to create the necessary culture shift within the school environment to challenge gender inequality and other forms of oppression.



- Utilise best practice to implement a Whole School Approach to preventing VAWG, wherever possible in partnership with local specialist VAWG services.
- Partner with VAWG services to design and deliver targeted prevention interventions, and set up referral pathways to ensure children have access to the support they need in the community.
- Ensure your policies, including safeguarding and anti-bullying policies, are fit for purpose with regard to responding to sexual harassment and abuse, and take a gendered, anti-racist and intersectional approach.

### **For school inspectors**

- Ensure your inspection framework includes a more robust assessment of the identification, prevalence, and school response to tackling and preventing VAWG. Sexual harassment and assault must be closely monitored under school inspection frameworks by trained inspectors.
- Conduct regular consultation with children and young people about their experiences of VAWG and prevention work in schools - building on the 2021 Ofsted review, and ensuring future reviews take an intersectional analysis.