



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

28 July 2021

Dear Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP,

Re: Ofsted Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges

We are writing to you as specialist women's organisations 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 organisations 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 wish to respond to the findings of the Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges. The report has confirmed what we have known about the scale of sexual harassment and sexual violence between young people and lack of confidence in reporting, for many years, having repeatedly raised concerns with government.

This was a much-needed review and the findings from it give a clear sense of an urgent to-do list; progress against which will also support government ambitions articulated in the new VAWG strategy. We were however, disappointed that the Ofsted review did not cover which young people are most likely to be targeted for sexual harassment and/or violence or explore the impact of race, disability or other characteristics which can compound the abuse girls are subjected to on- and offline. This includes racialised sexual harassment experienced by girls from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, who can be targeted by harmful gendered and racist stereotypes – or disabled girls and girls with learning difficulties which research finds are very disproportionately targeted for abuse. We are aware that specialist “by and for” disabled women and girls organisations have also expressed concerns regarding the review’s failure to include disabled young people and so it is necessary that any opportunities for further work engage with specialist “by and for” organisations to ensure the voices of minoritised and marginalised young people are heard. Any meaningful approach to tackling abuse must take account of these intersecting inequalities.

We are also concerned that the updated Keeping Children Safe in Education statutory guidance does not make clear the legal obligations schools have to not defer action regarding an allegation of sexual violence until a police investigation is complete. The End Violence Against Women Coalition published a [briefing](#) setting out the legal obligations of schools under human rights and equalities legislation to ensure the safety of girls in their care which has led to [successful legal challenges](#) against schools where their response to serious sexual assault has fallen short. These legal obligations and the unlawfulness of schools failing to act in the safety of girls in their care

before a criminal investigation is complete must be explicitly stated in any DfE guidance relating to sexual harassment and violence in schools.

We welcome the leading recommendation of the review, which we have campaigned for, that a ‘whole school approach’ is needed so that schools and college leaders can create a culture where sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are not tolerated. This must include training for all school staff on definitions of sexual harassment and sexual violence, and training for teachers on how to deliver relationships, sex and health education as well as giving both young people and staff the skills to respond to, challenge and prevent violence against women and girls within their establishment and the local community. This must reach all young people, including young people with learning difficulties in mainstream and special schools as they are often excluded from RSE lessons due to false perceptions of maturity and stereotypes.

Violence against women and girls organisations have been at the forefront of developing and delivering a ‘whole school approach’ and innovative prevention work with young people. The expertise of this specialist sector, including organisations led “by and for” Black and minoritised, LGBT, and Deaf and disabled women, should therefore be actively sought in order to support the meaningful implementation a ‘whole school approach’ that is holistic and meets the needs of young women and girls with intersecting identities.

We note that the report found the response from schools to be inconsistent, with many teachers underestimating the scale of the problem or not being aware it is happening between their pupils and feeling unclear on what is unacceptable behaviour. These inconsistencies can also be exacerbated by structural inequalities experienced by Black and minoritised girls, disabled girls and girls with learning difficulties. It is vital that teachers are well supported and trained to appropriately respond to sexual harassment and violence. Such training must be linked to comprehensive funding and an explicit statement from the DfE that sexual harassment training, as part of a ‘whole school approach’, is necessary and important for all schools. We note that the recently-published government VAWG strategy commits to better support teachers to deliver the recently introduced Relationships, Sex and Health education curriculum, as well as explore how we can use young people, such as university students, to support this. We are keen to know more about DfE’s plans in this regard.

It will also be important for DfE to join this work up with welcome plans featured in the new VAWG strategy regarding a communications campaign to tackle misogyny. Given the findings of the Ofsted review, young people in educational settings are a key target audience for this campaign.

At a time when our schools are focused on catch-up curriculum, the implementation of compulsory relationship, sex and health education must not be allowed to be sidelined. Sexual harassment very disproportionately affects girls, because it is rooted in gender inequality, and so it is vital that RSE guidance and training is not de-gendered or generic in any way but delivered within an intersectional VAWG framework.

While the Ofsted report shines a much-needed light on these longstanding issues, we cannot let this be the end of the conversation. We are therefore asking Ministers to take this issue seriously by creating a taskforce that brings together leaders across government, education, and experts on violence against women and girls to advise on next steps and drive the rollout of a ‘whole school approach’ that is relevant to the daily experiences and reality of young people’s lives. This taskforce should include representation of specialist “by and for” BME, disabled and LGBT organisations to ensure the different experiences of young people based on race, disability and other identities are addressed going forward. Sexual abuse in schools is deeply gendered in its nature and the expertise of the violence against women and girls sector is vital to creating a culture where all girls can be confident that sexual abuse and harassment will not be tolerated.

We look forward to hearing from you and are available to meet to discuss our concerns and recommendations in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

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Lucy Hadley
Head of Policy and Campaigns, Women’s Aid Federation of England

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