

Chapter 5

Gendered Harassment in Adolescence



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A majority of youth will experience gendered harassment, specifically sexual harassment (SH) and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE harassment) at some point in school, and these harassment experiences are related to a host of negative psychological, social, and academic outcomes (Espelage et al., 2008, 2015; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Jewell & Brown, 2014; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Leaper & Brown, 2008; Russell et al., 2010; Smith & Juvonen, 2017). Because much of that harassment happens within schools, it is especially important to understand the role of schools and teachers in preventing and mitigating (or at times, exacerbating) youth's experiences of gendered harassment.

In this chapter, we first define and document the prevalence and negative psychosocial outcomes associated with two types of gendered harassment in schools: sexual harassment and SOGIE harassment. Next, we discuss how schools may contribute to the prevalence of SH and SOGIE harassment, and how they can respond to and prevent SH and SOGIE harassment from occurring. We conclude by suggesting directions for future research.

Gendered Harassment: Prevalence in Schools and Characteristics of Victims and Perpetrators

Gendered harassment includes verbal, physical, and cyber harassment and bullying on the basis of perceived gender/sex, gender identity, and gender typicality, as well as harassment that policies heterosexual gender norms (Meyer, 2006, 2008). This

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includes both sexual harassment and SOGIE based harassment. While youth are in middle school and high school, gendered harassment is prevalent, affecting the vast majority of teens (Espelage & Swearer 2003; Pellegrini, 2002; Poteat et al., 2009). Although both sexual and SOGIE harassment are common in schools, they are distinct phenomena characterized by different patterns of characteristics for victims and perpetrators.

Sexual Harassment in Schools

Sexual harassment is characterized by unwanted verbal, nonverbal, and physical sexual behavior that can occur in person or online. Sexual harassment in adolescence is most frequently a peer-to-peer occurrence, typically occurring between peers who know one another and in public and visible spaces of schools, such as hallways (Charmaraman et al., 2013; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Pepler et al., 2006; Timmerman, 2003, 2005). Sexual harassment is considered a form of sexual violence; although it may seem extreme, it occurs more frequently than sexual assault, coercing someone into sexual activity, and attempted and completed rape (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). Although peer-to-peer sexual harassment can begin in late elementary school and early middle school, research suggests that it increases as early adolescents progress through middle school and peaks around 9th to 10th grade (Pepler et al., 2006; Espelage et al., 2016).

The most common type of sexual harassment experienced by students is verbal harassment, such as hearing sexual jokes or comments and having sexual rumors spread about them (Espelage et al., 2016; Hill & Kearl, 2011). For example, Hill and Kearl (2011) found that having someone make unwelcome sexual jokes, comments, and gestures was experienced by 33% of students in their national survey. Although less frequent, physical sexual harassment, such as being touched in an unwanted sexual way, is also experienced by many youths (Espelage et al., 2016; Hill & Kearl, 2011). In a direct comparison between verbal and physical SH, Espelage et al. (2016) found that about 57% of students in their study reported experiencing some type of verbal sexual harassment, such as unwanted sexual jokes and comments or being the target of sexual rumors, and 46% reported experiencing some type of physical sexual harassment, such as being touched against their wishes, being brushed up against, blocked, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way. A small minority, 5%, reported sexual assault, such as being kissed or touched in an unwanted way, being coerced into sexual activity, or experiencing attempted or completed rape.

Although prevalence rates of sexual harassment at school vary from study to study, in part due to methodological differences in measurement, sexual harassment appears to be a frequent occurrence for youth. One study of 18,090 high school students found that 30% of youth (37% of girls and 21% of boys) reported experiencing sexual harassment in the last year (Clear et al., 2014). Another nationally representative study found that 48% of students experienced sexual harassment in the last year, with 56% of girls and 40% of boys reporting experiencing sexual

harassment (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Higher rates found by Hill and Kearl may be reflective of including some homophobic harassment, such as being called gay or lesbian in a negative way, into their definition of sexual harassment. This may especially account for the high rates reported by boys, as boys experience more homophobic harassment than any other type of harassment. When studies assess lifetime experiences with sexual harassment, results indicate that up to 90% of adolescent girls report having experienced sexual harassment at some point in school (Leaper & Brown, 2008).

For many youth, experiencing sexual harassment is a typical part of their school day. For example, a qualitative study of girls who had experienced harassment and sexual assault found that many viewed the harassment as a normal part of their life, with one 13-year-old participant saying, “it’s just, like, how it goes on and everyone knows it, no one says nothing” (Hlavka, 2014, pg. 8). In one study of high school students in Australia, researchers found that sexual harassment toward girls from boys, particularly sexual jokes, name calling, and spreading of rumors, was a daily occurrence (Shute et al., 2008). Teachers and students all reported that they saw sexual harassment occur frequently (Shute et al., 2008). Hill and Kearl (2011) found that 44% of students who sexually harassed others said they did so because it was a part of school life. Taken together, research suggests that sexual harassment at school is common, public, and occurs daily.

Characteristics of Victims and Perpetrators While both boys and girls experience sexual harassment, girls are more likely to be the victim of verbal, physical, and cyber sexual harassment than boys (e.g., Hill & Kearl, 2011). In addition to gender/sex differences, sexual orientation, race, and socioeconomic status are also related to victimization rates of sexual harassment. LGBTQ students are at higher risk of being sexually harassed than heterosexual and cisgender students. For example, the 2019 National School Climate Survey found that 58.3% of LGBTQ students were sexually harassed at school in the last year, and of those students, 13.4% said that this harassment occurred often or frequently (Kosciw et al., 2020). In particular, students that identified as pansexual experienced the highest rates of sexual harassment compared to students of other sexual orientations. Additionally, girls of color and girls from low-income homes experience higher rates of sexual harassment than their White or more affluent peers, respectively (Espelage et al., 2016; Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Goldstein et al., 2007; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2014).

Perpetration of sexual harassment is also common and frequently overlaps with victimization. Overall, 72.1% of adolescents (76.0% of boys, 68.4% of girls) reported perpetrating sexual harassment against other-gender/sex peers at least once, whereas 77.3% of adolescents (84.7% of boys, 70.3% of girls) reported perpetrating sexual harassment against same-gender/sex peers at least once (Jewell et al., 2015). In other words, while girls are more likely than boys to be the target of sexual harassment, boys are more likely to be the perpetrators (Ashbaughm & Cornell, 2008; Espelage et al., 2016; Fineran & Bennett, 1999; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Jewell et al., 2015; Pepler et al., 2006; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018).

At the individual level, certain youth are more likely to perpetrate sexual harassment than other youth. Research has shown that perpetrators of sexual harassment are often also victims of sexual and gendered harassment (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). For example, Ybarra and Thompson (2018) found that being the victim of sexual harassment predicted later sexual harassment perpetration. Further, when boys are victimized by sexual harassment, they are likely to perpetrate it against others, especially if they felt apathy toward others and if their beliefs about masculinity included the belief that they should be dominant in their interactions with others (Rizzo et al., 2020). In other words, when boys were the target of sexual harassment, their masculinity was usurped, by their own definition of masculinity. In response, as a way to reclaim their diminished masculinity, they sexually harassed others. Other research further suggests that, for boys, perpetrating sexual harassment appears to be a way to attain or maintain social status. Specifically, boys who are more popular, or central to their peer group, are more likely to engage in sexual harassment than their less popular peers (Jewell et al., 2015). Relatedly, teens that perpetrate sexual harassment also display less empathy than their peers who do not sexually harass (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018).

SOGIE Harassment in Schools

While sexual harassment is harassment of a sexual nature, SOGIE harassment targets individuals on the basis of: (a) their sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation, referred to as homophobic harassment; (b) their gender identity or perceived gender identity, referred to as transphobic harassment; and (c) their gender expression or gender typicality, referred to as gender typicality harassment. SOGIE harassment can be verbal (e.g., being called homophobic epithets such as “dyke”), physical (e.g., being shoved or pushed), or relational (e.g., rumor spreading), and it can occur online or in person (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Like sexual harassment, SOGIE harassment is also a widespread issue in schools, especially in high schools. Verbal harassment is especially common, as more than half of LGBTQ high school students report hearing “gay” being used in a negative way or hearing homophobic epithets such as “fag” or “dyke” often or frequently in their schools (Human Rights Campaign, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2020; Rinehart & Espelage, 2016). Over 40% of LGBTQ students report hearing transphobic remarks such as “tranny” or “he/she” often or frequently (Kosciw et al., 2020). Lastly, more than 50% of LGBTQ students report hearing negative comments about gender expression (e.g., saying a person is not “masculine enough”; Kosciw et al., 2020). This harassment is not only perpetrated by students at schools, as more than half of LGBTQ students say they have heard teachers or staff make homophobic comments or negative comments about an individual’s gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2013, 2020).

Physical SOGIE harassment is also an acute issue in schools. For example, one-third of LGBTQ students report that they have been pushed or shoved on the basis

of their gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2020). Nearly, 22% of LGBTQ students say they were physically harassed on the basis of their gender expression at least once during the school year (Kosciw et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2020). Alarming, 11% of LGBTQ students report being physically assaulted (e.g., being punched, kicked, or attacked with a weapon) in school on the basis of their sexual orientation at least once in the last school year, and nearly 10% report being physically assaulted on the basis of their gender expression at least once in the last school year (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Lastly, relational harassment, while less commonly studied than verbal and physical harassment, is still a prevalent problem in schools. For example, over 90% of LGBTQ students say that they have felt purposefully left out or excluded by their peers, and almost three-quarters of LGBTQ youth say that they have had rumors or lies about them spread at school (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Characteristics of Victims and Perpetrators SOGIe harassment targets sexual and gender minorities, as well as gender nonconforming or gender atypical individuals; however, heterosexual and cisgender individuals can also experience SOGIE harassment. For example, while roughly only 11% of high school students identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), 61% of high school students report witnessing verbal homophobic harassment, and 36% report experiencing verbal homophobic harassment (AAUW, 2001; Hill & Kearn, 2011; Lichty & Campbell, 2012). This discrepancy between the number of youth who experience homophobic harassment and those who actually identify as LGB is likely due to gender expression or gender typicality. Sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are closely related, and individuals often assume a target's sexual orientation or gender identity on the basis of stereotypical gender cues (e.g., voice, dress, hair; Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Cox et al., 2016; Kachel et al., 2018; Miller, 2018; Rieger et al., 2008). Similar to sexual harassment, the perpetrators of SOGIE harassment are also likely to be the victims of SOGIE harassment (Tam & Brown, 2020; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018).

There are also gender differences in rates of SOGIE harassment. Boys are more often the target, and the perpetrator, of SOGIE harassment than girls (Buston & Hart, 2001; D'Urso & Pace, 2019; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Poteat et al., 2011, 2012). This may be because boys often experience stricter gender norms and receive harsher social punishments for violating these norms than girls (Corby et al., 2007; Egan & Perry, 2001; Fagot, 1977; Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011; Martin et al., 2017; Pauletti et al., 2017; Sandberg et al., 1993; Young & Sweeting, 2004; Zosuls et al., 2016). For girls, it may be acceptable to engage in stereotypically masculine activities or wear stereotypically masculine clothing (e.g., be a "tomboy"); conversely, boys are often punished for the smallest infractions of stereotypical gender roles (e.g., liking to dance). Indeed, sexual minority boys encounter a more hostile school climate and report feeling less safe at school than sexual minority girls (Kosciw et al., 2020). Likely rooted in a similar restriction of toxic masculinity (in which individuals labeled at birth as boys face harsh

restrictions on expressions of gender), transgender girls report feeling less safe and experiencing more harassment than transgender boys (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Consequences of Gendered Harassment at School

Gendered harassment leads to negative physical, emotional, and academic outcomes for targets, perpetrators, and witnesses. It is important to note that these negative outcomes may come at a particularly sensitive point in development. During adolescence, youth explore various identities and roles (McLean & Syed, 2015; Meeus et al., 1999). Peers play a critical role in this process, and the influence of peers is especially important at this time. Similarly, rejection and harassment from peers may be especially detrimental at this age. Because the majority of this harassment is happening at school, schools have a responsibility to understand these consequences and how gendered harassment impacts their students both inside and outside of the classroom.

Targets of gendered harassment may experience a wide spectrum of responses from minor emotional upset, or appearing numb, to higher rates of PTSD and suicidality (Haskell & Randall, 2019; Bonanno & Mancini, 2012; Jewell & Brown, 2014; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Russell et al., 2010; Smith & Juvonen, 2017). On average, girls are impacted more negatively by SH than boys, whereas boys are impacted more negatively by SOGIE harassment than girls (AAUW, 1993, 2001; Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Espelage et al., 2016). Overall, however, those that experience gendered harassment have higher rates of anxiety and suicidality than their peers who are not harassed (Jewell & Brown, 2014; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Russell et al., 2010; Smith & Juvonen, 2017). Individuals who experience SH and SOGIE harassment report lower self-esteem, more feelings of shame and worthlessness, more negative body image, and higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality relative to their non-harassed peers (AAUW, 2001; Chiodo et al., 2009; Goldstein et al., 2007; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Jewell & Brown, 2014; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Russell et al., 2010; Sagrestano et al., 2019; Smith & Juvonen, 2017). Targets of SH and SOGIE harassment also report a variety of somatic symptoms, including headaches and stomachaches, nausea, disordered eating, and sleep issues (Espelage et al., 2008; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Russell et al., 2010; Smith & Juvonen, 2017). These negative emotional and physical symptoms can range from moderate to severe.

Not only do targets of SH and SOGIE harassment experience physical and emotional consequences from their victimization, but they also experience negative academic outcomes (Chesire, 2004; Hill & Kearl, 2011). For example, targets of SH and SOGIE harassment report lower grades, lower school engagement, and higher school withdrawal relative to their non-harassed peers (Chesire, 2004; Hand & Sanchez, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2010). Additionally, school attendance and participation in extracurricular activities may decline as a result of experiencing gendered harassment. For example, in one national study, 8% of students

reported quitting an activity, and 46% of adolescents that experienced sexual harassment or homophobic harassment said they did not want to go to school, because of the harassment (Hill & Kearl, 2011).

Witnessing Gendered Harassment

Although not all students are victims or perpetrators of gendered harassment, many are still exposed to gendered harassment. Prior work has found that the majority of SOGIE harassment and SH occurs in the presence of peers, primarily in public spaces such as hallways and locker rooms (Espelage & Merrin, 2016; Hill & Kearl, 2011). According to one estimate, 96% of students report having witnessed SH at school (Lichty & Campbell, 2012). Thus, students do not have to directly participate or be targeted by gendered harassment in order to be exposed to it.

Witnesses' responses to gendered harassment vary along gender/sex and are informed by their own past experiences. When witnessing SH, girls are more likely than boys to stop the harassment or to assist the victim (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Girls are also more likely to participate in social support-seeking behaviors (e.g., getting a teacher) when witnessing SOGIE harassment than boys are (Tam & Brown, 2020). Additionally, those who have experienced gendered harassment in the past are more likely to confront the harassment they witness. For example, students who are lower in same-gender typicality (who have likely been SOGIE harassed more often) and students who have experienced SH are more likely to confront perpetrators of SOGIE harassment and SH more than those higher in same-gender typicality or those who have not experienced SH (Tam & Brown, 2020).

An important impact of witnessing SH and SOGIE harassment is the school environment it creates. SH and SOGIE harassment have become so commonplace in schools that they are considered normal and expected occurrences by both students and teachers (Buston & Hart, 2001; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2018; Meyer, 2008; Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2017). Indeed, 63% of adolescents who admit sexually harassing a peer state that they did so because "a lot of people do it" or their "friends encouraged them" (AAUW, 2001). Seeing frequent gendered harassment establishes norms that then shape peers' behaviors. Research has shown that boys perpetrate more sexual harassment when they perceive their peer groups to be accepting of sexual harassment (Dishion et al., 1996; Jewell et al., 2015; Rohlf et al., 2016). Similarly, individuals tend to perpetrate more homophobic harassment when they belong to peer groups that engage in high levels of homophobic harassment (Poteat, 2008; Poteat et al., 2015a, b). In other words, in schools, harassment behaviors do not occur in isolation, and affect not only the targets of harassment but also witnesses who then may also be potential harassers.

Youth often underestimate the negative impact of SH and SOGIE harassment on victims and minimize it, labeling it as "no big deal" (Espelage et al., 2016; Hand & Sanchez, 2000). Yet, when students routinely see their peers victimized, this creates a hostile environment at school in which students may be afraid for themselves and

their friends, may feel uncomfortable, and may feel unwelcome at school (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2018; Landstedt & Gådin, 2011; Tam & Brown, 2020; Witkowska & Menckel, 2005). For many youth, school becomes an unsafe and hostile environment.

The Role of Schools

Although children experience both SH and SOGIE harassment outside of school, the most common place these types of harassment occur is at school; thus, schools play a vital role in allowing gendered harassment (Espelage et al., 2016). The law is very clear that schools are required to prevent gendered harassment. The 1996 case of *Nabozny v Podlesny* found that schools can be held liable for failing to protect LGBTQ students from gendered harassment, because of guarantees of equal protection in the Fourteenth Amendment. The 1999 Supreme Court case of *Davis v Monroe County Board of Education* found that schools are also required to protect students from sexual harassment, because of Title IX of the Education Amendments which asserts that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2001). Thus, legally, schools are subject to losing federal funding if they do not protect students from gendered harassment.

Despite this, gendered harassment is rampant in schools. Schools play an important role in fostering acceptance of SH and SOGIE harassment in several ways. Schools and teachers tend to: (1) emphasize gender/sex as an important social category, thus increasing gender/sex stereotypes, (2) lack policies prohibiting SH and SOGIE harassment, and (3) overlook instances of SH and SOGIE harassment.

Emphasizing Gender/Sex and Increasing Stereotypes

Although the endorsement of gender stereotypes does not always result in gendered harassment, gendered harassment is rooted in gender/sex stereotypes, and the more gender/sex stereotypes youth endorse, the more they perpetrate gender harassment against their peers (Brown et al., 2020; Jewell & Brown, 2014). When teachers and schools engage in practices that increase gender/sex stereotypes, they in turn are increasing the likelihood of gendered harassment. Developmental intergroup theory suggests that stereotypes develop and are strengthened when social categories are made salient and meaningful to children (Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007). Previous research has shown that teachers frequently emphasize gender/sex within the classroom; for example, by having certain cubbies for boys and others for girls, saying “good morning boys and girls,” and calling attention to gender/sex in organizing

activities. When schools and teachers increase the salience of gender/sex – by using gender/sex to sort, label, and organize students – they increase children’s endorsement of gender/sex stereotypes (e.g., Bigler, 1995; Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007; Hilliard & Liben, 2010).

Further, schools contribute to gender/sex stereotypes when they promote school activities that are heavily segregated by gender/sex. For example, organizations such as girls’ and boys’ scouts, girls in STEM clubs, and athletic teams separate children based on their gender/sex. In adolescence, schools and teachers continue to segregate by gender/sex with separate health classes and physical education classes. This separation, beyond increasing the salience of gender/sex categories, further discourages cross-gender/sex friendships. Positive and meaningful interactions and friendships are important components to foster positive intergroup interactions (Martin et al., 2018; Pettigrew et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Importantly, engaging in activities *together* increases positive intergroup attitudes, more so than just group contact (Davies et al., 2011; Graham et al., 2014; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Thus, when schools create environments that discourage mixed-gender/sex activities, they increase youth’s endorsement of gender/sex stereotypes and decrease their likelihood of cross-group friendships, indirectly contributing to high rates of acceptance and perpetration of gendered harassment (see Brown et al., 2020).

Not only are youth’s gender/sex stereotypes related to their likelihood of perpetrating gendered harassment, but teachers’ beliefs and responses to sexual and SOGIE harassment are also related to teachers’ own biases. For example, teachers show heteronormativity biases in justifying sexual harassment. Teachers often discuss sexual harassment as a normal way for adolescent boys to show interest in romantic and sexual experiences, and this belief is informed by sexualized gender stereotypes that state boys are highly interested in sex, and girls are sexual objects (Brown et al., 2020; McMaster et al., 2002). Furthermore, the explanation of “boys being boys” and boys simply wanting to show romantic attention to girls is a common explanation and excuse that teachers and other adults give for adolescents’ sexually harassing behavior (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2017; Sandler & Stonehill, 2005). Interestingly, when students themselves are asked why they sexually harass peers only 3% said they did so because of romantic interest (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Thus, the tolerance of SH is more closely associated with teachers’ beliefs than students’ motives.

Lacking Policies Prohibiting SH and SOGIE Harassment

Many schools also lack official school policies regarding SH and SOGIE harassment. For example, while Title IX has specific guidelines for addressing gender-based harassment such as requiring schools to explicitly ban SH, have policies regarding this behavior, and report SH to the Title IX officer, many schools fail to adhere to these requirements (Equal Rights Advocates, 2015). For example, one

study of California schools found that many schools in the state were not in compliance with Title IX – more than 30% of schools reviewed did not have someone who received Title IX complaints, and 85% of school policies regarding SH were not easily accessible. Additionally, despite students' high reports of SH to researchers (Leaper & Brown, 2008), almost two-thirds of school districts in the U.S. reported zero instances of SH to the Office of Civil Rights (USDOE, 2016). Research on SH policies in the southeastern United States finds similar results. A majority of schools in this region have policies regarding bullying; however, we found that only 43.4% of districts mentioned sexual harassment in their code of conducts, and only 27.3% of those actually defined what sexual harassment was (Brown et al., 2022).

Similarly, schools often lack specific policies regarding SOGIE harassment, and even when these policies are present, they are rarely enforced in schools (Frost, 2017; Greytak & Kosciw, 2013; Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2010). In a national survey of LGBTQ youth, few students reported that their school had policies regarding sexual orientation, and only one in 10 reported that their school had policies regarding gender identity and gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2020). Few schools have comprehensive sex education that discusses LGBTQ topics, and even fewer do so in a positive manner (Greytak & Kosciw, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018). Just over 40% of youth in this survey report that their school administration was supportive of LGBTQ students, and only 60% of these youth attend a school that has a gay-straight alliance (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Not only is there a lack of school policies regarding gendered harassment, but many teachers feel they lack the support of school administrators to address this harassment. Many teachers feel that they do not know what to do when they witness SH and SOGIE harassment and are not supported by school administrators (Meyer, 2008; Sela-Shayovitz, 2009). For example, the majority of trainings regarding SH are focused on adult-to-student harassment and do not equip teachers on how to deal with peer-to-peer harassment (Meyer, 2008). When teachers feel unsupported by administrators and cannot rely on policies to help guide their response to seeing SH and SOGIE harassment, they are less likely to act. Similarly, research suggests that teachers have increased self-efficacy in their responses to violence at school when they are supported by the school and when they receive training on how to respond (Sela-Shayovitz, 2009). Thus, creating clear policies regarding SH and SOGIE harassment and support from the top down is vital to lessening gendered harassment.

Ignoring or Overlooking SH and SOGIE Harassment

Even when schools do have policies that prohibit SH and SOGIE harassment, teachers often fail to enforce these policies and rarely intervene to stop gendered harassment. Research suggests that teachers are *less* likely to intervene when they witness gendered harassment than when they see other types of harassment and general bullying (AAUW, 2001; Kosciw et al., 2009; Meyer, 2008). By not intervening and refusing to punish perpetrators, schools and staff communicate to students that

gendered harassment is acceptable and that perpetration will go unpunished (Robinson, 2005; Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2017). Furthermore, when teachers do address SH and other gendered harassment, the punishments and consequences they assign are often lenient and ineffectual, such as giving perpetrators a “talking to” (Keddie, 2009; Meyer, 2008).

This lack of teacher support affects students’ own responses to SH and SOGIE harassment. Despite the high occurrences, few students report gendered harassment to adults and teachers (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Gådin et al., 2013; Timmerman, 2003). For example, one study found that only 12% of SH victims reported it to an adult at school (Hill & Kearl, 2011). This underreporting may be, in part, related to student’s lack of trust in authority figures to stop the harassment. For example, only about 12% of students feel that their schools adequately address SH and SOGIE harassment (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2020). Students’ lack of faith in schools to stop gendered harassment may also lead victims to feel hopeless that there is not any alternative to experiencing gendered harassment, and that they must “just deal with it” (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2017; Oliver & Candappa, 2007). For example, a national survey of LGBTQ youth found that over half of these students never report harassment to family members or school staff for reasons such as not being believed (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Students may also have a desire to conceal gendered harassment from adults at school for fear of judgment and even negative consequences, such as being punished themselves (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2017; Oliver & Candappa, 2007). For example, when students do report gendered harassment, teachers often engage in victim blaming and shift responsibility for the harassment to the victim rather than the perpetrator (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2017; Keddie, 2009). A common example of this is punishing a girl for a dress code violation after she reports being sexually harassed. Currently, students are more aware of the school policies enforcing dress codes banning short shorts and tank tops than policies banning sexual harassment (Brown et al., 2022). Thus, for schools to actually limit gendered harassment, school and teachers need to not only have specific policies but also enforce those policies equitably.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Research has well documented that gendered harassment is common in schools and is extremely harmful to students on multiple levels including emotionally, physically, and academically. However, we continue to see high rates of perpetration of gendered harassment in middle and high schools. In order to create a safer academic environment for students, effective intervention strategies within schools should be utilized. Next, we discuss a few strategies schools can utilize to lessen gendered harassment and then suggest areas for future research.

Recommendations for Effective Intervention Strategies

Harassment intervention efforts in schools often target general bullying, but do not discuss gendered harassment (Earnshaw et al., 2018; Gruber & Fineran, 2007). When interventions ignore sexual and SOGIE harassment, it is a dangerous oversight and a missed opportunity to create safer schools. Hence, intervention efforts to decrease general bullying should also target gendered harassment and should directly address SH and SOGIE harassment. As suggested by the bully sexual violence pathway (Espelage et al., 2012, 2015) and the bioecological theory of sexual harassment (Brown et al., 2020), interventions to lessen gender harassment must directly and explicitly address SOGIE harassment and should begin when children are young. When bullying interventions do not discuss gendered harassment, it suggests that this type of harassment is acceptable behavior and further increases its normalization (Gillander Gådin, 2012; Larkin, 1994). However, if gendered harassment is treated as equally harmful as general bullying, it may become less accepted and normalized.

Furthermore, preventing gendered harassment, particularly sexual harassment, may hinge on preventing homophobic and gender typicality-based harassment when children are young, as these precede sexual harassment and are correlated with perpetrating high rates of sexual harassment (Espelage et al., 2012, 2015). For example, research suggests that middle schoolers' homophobic bullying and general bullying were predictors of sexual harassment behaviors 3 years later, such that those that engaged in high level of homophobic bullying also later engaged in higher levels of sexual harassment (Espelage et al., 2012). Additionally, in one study, boys who bullied their peers were almost five times more likely to sexually harass their peers 2 years later, and those who also engaged in homophobic harassment were more likely to sexually harass their peers than those that reported low levels of homophobic harassment (Espelage et al., 2015). Thus, general bullying, homophobic harassment, and sexual harassment prevention should not be considered separate, but instead predictive of one other.

Schools may also lessen gendered harassment by making sure gender/sex equity is valued and fostered. Rinehart and Espelage (2016) found that having high levels of gender equity (reported by teachers and staff) was associated with less gendered harassment, both SH and homophobic harassment, reported by students. One way to foster greater gender/sex equity is by promoting positive cross-gender/sex interactions, as those are related to better intergroup attitudes and may increase empathy for peers of another gender/sex (Martin et al., 2017).

Finally, students themselves have many important insights for how to lessen SH and SOGIE harassment in their schools. For example, students suggest that they should be able to anonymously report sexual harassment, in particular, thus circumventing some negative social impacts (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Students also suggest that schools punish perpetrators in a consistent fashion, have a designated person that students can talk to regarding sexual harassment, and have in-class discussions regarding gendered harassment (Plan International & PerryUndem, 2018).

Recommendations for Future Research

Given how common sexual and SOGIE harassment is in schools, there is clearly much work to do to understand how schools can help change the school climate. We suggest several areas of future research. First, researchers should examine early predictors for perpetrating gendered harassment (i.e., characteristics emerging in elementary school). This would facilitate designing early and effective interventions. For example, it is important to examine how cross-gender/sex friendships in elementary school might increase empathy for other gender/sex children and might lead to lower rates of harassment perpetration in adolescence.

We also suggest research address how to best empower teachers and administrators to address SH and SOGIE harassment. Research has shown that teachers who feel supported by their administration are more likely to intervene when they witness gender harassment. Thus, future research should investigate how to best assist teachers and administrators in consistently enforcing policies against gendered harassment.

Although effective prevention of gendered harassment should be a major goal of researchers, policy-makers, and educators, there are many children who have already experienced gendered harassment. As previously discussed in this chapter, children suffer many negative consequences from perpetrating, witnessing, and being victims of gendered harassment; thus, future research should also focus on how to lessen these negative consequences and support children when they do experience SH and SOGIE harassment. Furthermore, many perpetrators of gendered harassment were themselves victims and future research should investigate the mechanisms that may underlie this connection and ways to disrupt the cyclical violence of being victimized and then victimizing others (Pauletti et al., 2014; Tam et al., 2019; Ybarra & Thompson, 2018).

Lastly, future research should also focus on online harassment, especially in light of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and physical isolation many students experienced. In the early spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic circled the globe and in the U.S. schools began shutting down and learning became completely remote. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of adolescents in the US had access to a smartphone and 45% reported being online almost constantly (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Many of these online interactions include gendered harassment. Prior to COVID-19, one national survey estimated that about 41% of women and 22% of men have experienced online SH (Kearl, 2018). Furthermore, in the 2019 GLSEN school climate survey, 45% of LGBTQ students reported experiencing online harassment or cyberbullying in the last year (Kosciw et al., 2020). Thus, future research should focus on how increased online interactions and decreased in-person interactions impacted the prevalence of gendered harassment online, and the subsequent impact on students.

Conclusion

Homophobic slurs, unwanted touching, unwelcome sexual jokes, and other forms of gender-based harassment and violence are pervasive in school hallways and classrooms. This harassment has lasting negative impacts; however, it is widely ignored by adults. Schools play an important role in fostering the acceptance of SH and SOGIE harassment through: (1) emphasizing gender/sex and reinforcing stereotypes, (2) absence of policies prohibiting SH and SOGIE harassment, and (3) teachers' tendency to overlook these types of harassment. Moving forward, attention needs to be given to interventions that lessen gendered harassment in schools and help youth feel safe and secure while learning.

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