

Young people's experiences of online sexual harassment



A cross-country report from PROJECT deSHAME December 2017

## About this report

This report presents findings from quantitative and qualitative research conducted with 13-17 year olds in Denmark, Hungary and the UK designed to provide a unique insight into their experiences of online sexual harassment.

This research has been conducted as part of **Project deSHAME**, a European Commission funded project which aims to increase reporting of online sexual harassment among minors and improve multi-sector cooperation in preventing and responding to this behaviour.

Project deSHAME is a collaboration between Childnet (UK), Kek Vonal (Hungary), Save the Children (Denmark) and UCLan (UK), co-financed through the European Union's Daphne programme.

## PROJECT deSHAME

Digital Exploitation and Sexual Harassment Among Minors in Europe  
Understanding, Preventing, Responding



Co-financed by  
the European Union

# Foreword



**“Together we can empower young people to speak up about online sexual harassment. But we need to listen to them, understand them and be there for them no matter what.”**

The internet has transformed how we connect with others, form relationships, explore our identity and express ourselves. For so many of us, it is embedded in every aspect of our lives and with that it reflects both the best and worst of humanity.

Managing the complexities of love, relationships and peer group dynamics has always been a challenge for teens. But the internet opens new possibilities that make societal discussions about sexual harassment, consent, respect, misogyny and sexualisation more pertinent than ever. It is evidently something

that as a society we can no longer ignore, as recent campaigns such as #MeToo have highlighted.

Sexual harassment is not a new phenomenon, but the ‘audience’ and ‘evidence’ provided by digital technology facilitates it and has opened the door for new forms of sexual harassment. Never before have people been so connected, but this networked community can facilitate the rapid spread of harassment and widens the audience of bystanders, making it possible to victimise someone with a simple ‘like’. Meanwhile the ‘evidence’ can endure online, as a nude image that has been circulated in a peer group can resurface at a later point, leaving the potential for later re-victimisation.

This report is at times difficult reading. Throughout the development of this report we have listened to the stories of young people across Denmark, Hungary and the UK who are navigating the complexities of relationships in a digital age and in some cases are facing the worst forms of peer-to-peer victimisation and online sexual harassment.

It highlights how 2 in 5 young people have witnessed people their age circulating nude or nearly nude images of someone they know, while 6% have been the target of this behaviour. It also reveals a culture of victim blaming and ‘slut shaming’ where young people – particularly girls – often face further harassment and abuse.

Listening to young people’s views and experiences has been essential to our work. Guided by our Youth Advisory Board and through focus groups, youth surveys and case study interviews, we have developed our understanding of the diverse range of experiences faced by young people, identifying four main types of online sexual harassment taking place between young people, from unwanted sexualisation to sexualised bullying, exploitation and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images.

This report represents the first stage of a two and a half year collaborative project - Project deSHAME. At Childnet, together with our partners Kek Vonal, Save the Children Denmark and UCLan, we will be continuing to work together to prevent online sexual harassment and ensure that it is not an inevitable part of growing up.

It is only through working collaboratively that we can make this possible. Already we have been working closely with our national Expert Advisory Boards and other key stakeholders and we look forward to growing this collaboration as we seek to develop how online sexual harassment is understood and addressed across Europe and more widely.

Our mission is to empower all young people to feel they can speak up about online sexual harassment. We need to help them overcome the barriers, from embarrassment, fear and blame, and help ensure that those they turn to (whether their friends, parents, carers, family, school, police) can offer the support they need. We also need to work together to change the culture that enables online sexual harassment to surface and show young people what positive, healthy online interactions look like. All young people have a right to be safe and free to express themselves in digital spaces.

Together we can empower young people to speak up about online sexual harassment and prevent it from happening. But we need to listen to them, understand them and be there for them no matter what.

**Will Gardner**

CEO, Childnet

Coordinator of Project deSHAME

"Her friends would support her but the others would tell her she is a slut"  
Boy, 15 years, Hungary

"It passes on, everyone has friends, those friends have friends, and it all links back... The internet makes it such a small world."  
Boy, 17 years, UK

"A friend of mine was in a seemingly healthy sexual relationship, when noticing things weren't going okay, he decided to end it with that person. That person then retaliated in threatening my friend about sharing nude photos. I could do nothing but comfort him."  
Girl, 14 years, UK

"Someone had recorded her during sex and then had gone around showing it to some of his friends."  
Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark.

"He went to court but wasn't convicted for it, exactly because there wasn't any evidence that he had shown it to others... It was like allegation against allegation."  
Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

"You can mock your friends, you can say stuff to just tease them but you can get too far very easily, there's a fine line and you've got to be careful of overstepping that"  
Girl, 14-16 years, UK

"As for me, I try to [ask for help from my parents]. It is hard because they live in another world."  
Girl, 15 years, Hungary

"But the police can't do much because it's partially the girl's fault for sending it in the first place."  
Boy, 13 years, UK

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# 1 Executive Summary



## Young people's experiences of online sexual harassment

**For most young people the internet plays an essential role in their friendships and relationships, providing positive opportunities for communication, connection and self-expression.**

However, for many young people, online sexual harassment is embedded in their digital lives and to some extent normalised and expected. It emerges as part of the wider dynamic of their peer group and intimate relationships.

In this report, online sexual harassment is defined as **unwanted sexual conduct** on any digital platform and it is recognised as a form of sexual violence. Online sexual harassment encompasses a wide range of behaviours that use digital content (images, videos, posts, messages, pages) on a variety of different platforms (private or public). It can make a person feel threatened, exploited, coerced, humiliated, upset, sexualised or discriminated against.

This report specifically focuses on peer-to-peer online sexual harassment taking place **between** young people.

Such harassment takes place in a gendered context, with girls being more likely to be targeted than boys - particularly for some forms of online sexual harassment - and these incidents often resulting in more negative outcomes for girls.

In this report online sexual harassment has been categorised in four main types. These different behaviours are often experienced simultaneously and can overlap with offline experiences of sexual harassment.

**Non-consensual sharing of intimate images and videos:** A person's sexual images and videos being shared without their consent or taken without their consent.

**Exploitation, coercion and threats:** A person receiving sexual threats, being coerced to participate in sexual behaviour online, or blackmailed with sexual content.

**Sexualised bullying:** A person being targeted by, and systematically excluded from, a group or community with the use of sexual content that humiliates, upsets or discriminates against them.

**Unwanted sexualisation:** A person receiving unwelcome sexual requests, comments and content.

The findings of the survey, focus groups and case study analysis demonstrate the prevalence of these forms of online sexual harassment and the short and long term impact on mental health and wellbeing they can have on young people. The research provides an indication that the experience and impact of online sexual harassment is unique to the individual and dependent on numerous intersecting factors, including actual or perceived gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, special educational need or disability. The report also highlights both the similarities and differences in the experiences of young people in Denmark, Hungary and the UK.

## Methodology

This report presents findings from quantitative and qualitative research conducted across Denmark, Hungary and the UK.

3,257

Young people  
aged 13-17 years who  
completed an online survey

107

Young people  
aged 13-17 years who took  
part in focus groups

29

Teachers  
who took part in focus groups

19

Interviews  
conducted with professionals,  
including police, helpline staff  
and other agencies

## Key findings:

### Non-consensual sharing of intimate images

**6%** of respondents aged 13-17 years across Denmark, Hungary and the UK have had their nude or nearly nude image shared with other people without their permission in the last year, while 41% have witnessed this happening.

**68%** **The majority** of respondents (68%) agree that people will think badly about a girl if her nude or nearly nude image is posted online, whereas a smaller proportion would think the same if it were a boy (40%).

**25%** **A quarter** of respondents (25%) have witnessed young people secretly taking sexual images of someone and sharing them online, while 10% admitted they had done this in the last year.

**“A boy who told me he really liked me and that if I sent him it we could be such amazing couple... I fell for it and the next day my pictures were all around school even though he sent me a picture first.”**  
Girl, 14 years, UK

### Exploitation, coercion and threats

**9%** of respondents aged 13-17 years across Denmark, Hungary and the UK have received sexual threats online from people their age in the last year, while 29% have witnessed this happening.

**6%** of respondents said that someone used sexual images of them to threaten or blackmail them in the last year.

**10%** **1 in 10** respondents said their boyfriend or girlfriend had pressured them to share nude images in the last year, with girls being more likely to report this.

**“I was being pressurized into sending sexual photos and videos of myself and was threatened if I didn't. They would go on and on at me when I said no but would carry on with the threats.”**  
Girl, 13 years, UK

### Sexualised bullying

**25%** of respondents aged 13-17 years across Denmark, Hungary and the UK have had rumours about their sexual behaviour shared online in the last year, with over two-thirds of respondents (68%) saying that girls are judged more harshly for this than boys.

**31%** **Almost a third** of respondents (31%) had seen people their age creating fake profiles of someone to share sexual images, comments or messages in the last year, while almost half (48%) witnessed other young people sharing personal details of someone who is seen as 'easy'.

**80%** **4 in 5** respondents (80%) had witnessed people their age using terms like 'sket' or 'slut' to describe girls in a mean way online in the last year, while over two-thirds (68%) had witnessed people using homophobic or transphobic language online.

**“I had an acquaintance, and we fell out, so he wrote ugly comments to my photos and things like that, and then he made a new profile with my profile picture, he added all my friends on Facebook and he posted that “I am gay”**  
Boy, 14 years, Hungary

### Unwanted sexualisation

**24%** of respondents aged 13-17 years across Denmark, Hungary and the UK have received unwanted sexual messages and images in the last year, with girls being significantly more likely to experience this (30%) compared to boys (13%).

**24%** **Almost a quarter** of respondents (24%) reported that they had received sexual comments on a photo they posted of themselves in the last year, with girls being significantly more likely to experience this (26%) compared to boys (18%).

**45%** **Almost half** of respondents aged 13-17 years (45%) said that they have witnessed people their age editing photos of someone to make them sexual, for example putting their face on a pornographic image or placing sexual emojis over them.

**“If they write like, huge knockers, nice ass and so on, then you think... Then you'd feel like you're violated by the person, because it is a boy.”**  
Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

## Responding to incidents of online sexual harassment

The research identifies a number of reporting routes and sources of support available to young people if they experience online sexual harassment. However, many young people face significant barriers that may prevent them from seeking help, and schools, police and other agencies can face challenges in effectively responding to incidents.

Young people said that if they experienced online sexual harassment they would be most likely to:



Fewer young people said they would be likely to report to a social network (39%), report to police (27%), speak to a helpline (15%) or speak to a teacher (14%). 2 in 5 respondents said they would ignore it (39%).

### Barriers

Young people reported a range of barriers that might prevent them from reporting online sexual harassment.

### Top #5 barriers to seeking help:



#### Top reason for not telling a teacher:

"Worried that their school would overreact" (50%)

#### Top reason for not telling the police:

"Not wanting them to involve their family" (53%)

#### Top reason for not reporting on social media:

"Not thinking it would help" (43%)

## Preventing online sexual harassment

The majority of respondents aged 13-17 years across Denmark, Hungary and the UK said they have learned about key topics relating to healthy relationships and online sexual harassment at school. However, many of those did not find this helpful. The research highlights how schools, police and other agencies can be involved in preventing online sexual harassment and the challenges they may face.

'Types of behaviour that would be online sexual harassment'

85%

learned about it in school

41%

of those found this helpful

'Responsibility to not share someone's nude/nearly nude images without their permission'

87%

learned about it in school

51%

of those found this helpful

'How to report online sexual harassment'

83%

learned about it in school

43%

of those found this helpful

'Law about online sexual harassment'

79%

learned about it in school

40%

of those found this helpful

'Digital behaviours that are okay or not okay in relationships'

82%

learned about it in school

44%

of those found this helpful

# 2

## Acknowledgements



## 2. Acknowledgements

### Expert Advisory Board

Childhouse Copenhagen Danish Institute for Pedagogic and Education (DPU) Danish students Emma Holten Facebook Ministry of Education, Administration for Internet and Learning National Cybercrime Centre (NC3) School and parents School, Social authorities and Police (SSP) The Danish Committee for Health Education	Szilvia Gyurkó, lawyer, Hintalovon Foundation Eszter Szekeres, school psychologist, Rogers Foundation for Person-Centered Education Éva Tóthné Eszes, headmaster, Jászszági Apponyi Albert Elementary School Blanka Baranyai, social worker, Kék Vonal Child Crisis Foundation	Department for Education Facebook Google Government Equalities Office Home Office Internet Watch Foundation Kent County Council NASUWT National Crime Agency's CEOP Command National Police Chiefs Council NSPCC/Childline National Education Union Professionals Online Safety Helpline
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### Youth Advisory Board

Maria, Freja, Frederik, Zandra, Alberte, Frederik, Anita, Magnus, Olivia, Andreas, Afua, Charlie, Harry, Holly, Isha, Liam, Lillie, Mohamed, Reece, Sophie

### Participating Schools

Amager Fælled Skole Billesborgskolen Gladsaxe Gymnasium Gudenådalens Efterskole Lillebæltskolen Maribo Skole Mariendal Friskole Nyborg Gymnasium Polaris Sct. Hans Skole Skanderborg realskole Skovshoved skole Systjernes skolen Tieren, Skive kommune 10. klassecenteret Grindsted	SzSzC József Attila Általános Iskolája és Szakiskolája SzSzC Kossuth Zsuzsanna Szakképző Iskolája SzSzC Vedres István Építőipari Szakgimnázium Jászszági Apponyi Albert Általános Iskola és Alapfokú Művészeti iskola SzSzC Krúdy Gyula Kereskedelmi, Turisztikai és Vendéglátóipari Szakgimnázium és Szakközépiskola Budapest XIV. Kerületi Széchenyi István Általános Iskola Közgazdasági Politechnikum Kölcsey Ferenc Gimnázium Pécsi Művészeti Gimnázium és Szakközépiskola II. Rákóczi Ferenc Gimnázium	Abbeyfield School, Wiltshire Barnhill Community High School, London Burnside Secondary Pupil Referral Unit, London Haberdasher Askes Hatcham College, London Hodgson Academy, Lancashire Holloway School, London Hugh Christie Technology College, Kent Manchester Co-Operative Academy, Manchester McLaren High School, Perthshire Priory City of Lincoln Academy, Lincoln Porthcawl Comprehensive School, Porthcawl Saint Aidan's CE High School, Lancashire Soham Village College, Cambridgeshire Wath Comprehensive School, Rotherham
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### Other organisations who have contributed to this report

Nordsjælland Police  
Njord Law Firm  
Hampshire Police  
Metropolitan Police

# 3

## Background

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## 3.1 Aims of Project deSHAME

**Project deSHAME is a collaboration between Childnet (UK), Kek Vonal (Hungary), Save the Children (Denmark) and UCLan (UK), co-financed by the EU. It aims to increase reporting of online sexual harassment among minors and improve multi-sector cooperation in preventing and responding to this behaviour.**

It will achieve this by empowering local communities, including schools and police, to work together to deliver effective preventative interventions, to increase reporting among young people and to respond effectively and sensitively when young people do report.

In close consultation with young people, professionals, industry and policymakers, Project deSHAME will improve understanding and raise awareness of online sexual harassment, an emerging area of gendered violence against children. This project will see the development of a range of education, training and awareness materials as well as practical tools for multi-sector prevention and response strategies. The project will transfer this learning to other European countries and partners worldwide in order to promote young people's digital rights.

The project is centred on close collaboration with young people, and the project partners have convened a Youth Advisory Board in each of the three countries who will advise and consult on every stage of the project. Similarly, to ensure consultation with a wide range of experts, there is also an Expert Advisory Board in each country consisting of industry, teachers, government, police, charities and other key stakeholders.

There will be four key strands to this project and it will be concluded by June 2019.

1. **Improving understanding of online sexual harassment among teenagers and identifying effective multi-sector strategies** for preventing and responding to this issue through a cross-country comparative analysis, including qualitative and quantitative research with young people, case study analysis, needs-assessment of key stakeholders and collation of good practices.
2. **Developing, implementing and evaluating effective awareness raising activities co-created with young people** to encourage young people to report online sexual harassment. This will include delivering a youth-created campaign and associated educational and campaign materials.
3. **Developing practical guides and tools to enable professionals from multiple sectors to effectively collaborate** to prevent and respond to peer-to-peer online sexual harassment. This will include practical training tools for teachers and police.
4. **Promoting cross-border cooperation and mutual learning** through dissemination activities to share the project's tools and methods with other countries including key events and establishing a network to enable continued knowledge-sharing about this emerging issue throughout the project and beyond.

## 3.2 The context

Project deSHAME was conceived as a consequence of growing concerns about online sexual harassment amongst young people. Anecdotal and initial empirical evidence suggested that online sexual harassment is an emerging form of sexual violence against children and young people, and is taking place in the wider context of gendered sexual behaviours and expectations. However, whilst research and preventative measures undertaken previously have focused on the online sexual harassment or exploitation of minors by adults, the way it manifests in a peer-to-peer context is poorly understood.

Preventative work relating to this topic has primarily focused on 'sexting', or the consensual sharing of intimate images and then the consequent possible negative implications of those images being shared non-consensually. Much of this work had focused on the initial sharing of the image, with often a focus on the victim's behaviour rather than the person breaching their trust. Moreover, through the work of the project partners with young people in UK, Hungary and Denmark – and in consultation with partners, including helplines – it was clear that many young people were witnessing or experiencing a wide range of behaviours that could be defined as online sexual harassment and that they felt numerous barriers that prevented them from reporting it.

Previous research has explored some aspects of children's experiences of online sexual harassment. A qualitative investigation with children across 9 European countries published by [Smahel & Wright \(2014\)](#) found evidence that non-consensual sharing of images, or 'revenge porn', does take place among 9-16 year olds. Children reported that they knew of incidences that involved their peers sharing private, sexual pictures of previous romantic partners as revenge.

An initial challenge to developing effective responses to online sexual harassment was a lack of an agreed definition of the issue. Whilst there was a clearer understanding of how sexual harassment takes place in an offline context, the same was not the case for online behaviours. Consequently, it was clear that it was essential to identify how these harmful sexual behaviours played out in a peer-based context, their associated impacts, and why young people felt unable to report or seek help.

"It passes on, everyone has friends, those friends have friends, and it all links back. Group chats. The internet makes it such a small world."  
Boy, 17 years, UK

Through research across three countries, UK, Denmark and Hungary, the project partners arrived at a definition of online sexual harassment which maps the variety of different behaviours and focuses on how this is experienced by the victim. It sought to define this issue in a way that both reflects the complex and nuanced nature of young people's experiences, but that also clearly outlines the issue for professionals working in this space.

### 3.3 Definition of online sexual harassment

In this report, online sexual harassment is defined as **unwanted sexual conduct** on any digital platform and it is recognised as a form of sexual violence.

Online sexual harassment encompasses a wide range of behaviours that use digital content (images, videos, posts, messages, pages) on a variety of different platforms (private or public).

It can make a person feel threatened, exploited, coerced, humiliated, upset, sexualised or discriminated against.

Such harassment takes place in a gendered context and is deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men. This produces disproportionately negative outcomes and experiences for women and girls. Indeed, girls are more likely to be targeted with online sexual harassment than boys, particularly some forms, with these incidents often resulting in more negative consequences for girls.

Online sexual harassment can intersect with discrimination and hate crimes, relating to a person's actual or perceived gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, special educational need or disability. Young people in these groups may face unique forms of online sexual harassment, resulting in a more negative impact in both the short and long term, as well as multiple barriers that can prevent them from accessing support.

This report specifically focuses on peer-to-peer online sexual harassment taking place between young people.

Among young people this is typically taking place in a peer-to-peer context, focused around schools and local communities, and very often being played out online in front of an active, engaged audience. Whilst it typically takes place amongst peers, it is also possible for adults to sexually harass young people online, although this is not being explored within the scope of this report.

**In this report online sexual harassment has been categorised in four main types. These different behaviours are often experienced simultaneously and can overlap with offline experiences of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, bullying, relationship abuse and stalking.**

<b>Non consensual sharing of intimate images and videos</b> A person's sexual images and videos being shared without their consent or taken without their consent	<b>Exploitation, coercion and threats</b> A person receiving sexual threats, being coerced to participate in sexual behaviour online, or blackmailed with sexual content	<b>Sexualised bullying</b> A person being targeted by, and systematically excluded from, a group or community with the use of sexual content that humiliates, upsets or discriminates against them	<b>Unwanted sexualisation</b> A person receiving unwelcome sexual requests, comments and content
Sexual images/videos taken without consent ('creep shots') Sexual images/videos taken consensually but shared without consent ('revenge porn') Non-consensual sexual acts (e.g., rape) recorded digitally (and potentially shared)	Harassing or pressuring someone online to share sexual images of themselves or engage in sexual behaviour online (or offline) Using the threat of publishing sexual content (images, videos, rumours) to threaten, coerce or blackmail someone ('sextortion') Online threats of a sexual nature (e.g., rape threats) Inciting others online to commit sexual violence Inciting someone to participate in sexual behaviour and then sharing evidence of it	Gossip, rumours or lies about sexual behaviour posted online either naming someone directly or indirectly alluding to someone Offensive or discriminatory sexual language and name-calling online Impersonating someone and damaging their reputation by sharing sexual content or sexually harassing others Personal information shared non-consensually online to encourage sexual harassment ('doxing') Being bullied because of actual or perceived gender and/or sexual orientation Body shaming 'Outing' someone where the individual's sexuality or gender identity is publicly announced online without their consent	Sexualised comments (e.g., on photos) Sexualised viral campaigns that pressurise people to participate Sending someone sexual content (images, emojis, messages) without them consenting Unwelcome sexual advances or requests for sexual favours 'Jokes' of a sexual nature Rating peers on attractiveness/sexual activity Altering images of a person to make them sexual

Sexual harassment of this kind can make a person feel any of the following:

- Threatened or scared
- Exploited
- Coerced
- That their dignity is violated
- Humiliated or degraded
- Shamed or judged
- Upset
- Sexualised
- Discriminated against because of their gender or sexual orientation
- Feel guilty or that they are to blame

The experience and impact of online sexual harassment is unique to the individual and can be felt both in the short-term but also can have long-term impacts on mental health and wellbeing. Long term impacts can be amplified because of re-victimisation if content is re-shared online, or because the initial trauma of the incident resurfaces much later. It is important to recognise that there is no single way that a young person may experience online sexual harassment and that it might also affect others who witness it.

### Legal context

Some incidents of online sexual harassment break the law. In all three countries there are varying laws surrounding:

- the creation, possession and distribution of indecent images of under 18s
- sexual offences
- harassment
- anti-discrimination

When young people are involved in perpetrating these offences, the way in which these laws are interpreted and implemented across the three countries, and indeed within, can vary.

## 3.4 Terminology

Further to this definition of online sexual harassment, there is some key terminology used throughout the report in specific ways, relevant to the scope of this project. These definitions have been developed on the basis of the project partners' ongoing work with young people and review of relevant literature.

**Online** – Any website, app or digital platform including social media platforms, gaming, direct messaging services (for example, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Musical.ly, YouTube, Xbox LIVE). Whilst some professionals may prefer to use the term 'digital', young people were more familiar with the term 'online'.

**Sexual** – Any conduct that concerns a person's sexual activity, body parts or sexual orientation.

**Sexual Violence** – Unwanted sexual behaviour that abuses, coerces, threatens, exploits or harasses.

**Harmful sexual behaviour** – Sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult ([NSPCC, 2016](#)).

**Victim** – A young person who experiences online sexual harassment. Throughout this report young people who experience such behaviours will be referred to as 'victims'. This was terminology that was understood by both young people and professionals, although it is recognised that not all young people will identify themselves as victims, or want to be called a victim, as they may not want to be defined by the behaviour of others.

**Perpetrator** – A young person who has carried out online sexual harassment. The term 'perpetrator' is a recognised description amongst professionals. However, young people would not necessarily refer to themselves or their peers as perpetrators, or even recognise harmful sexual behaviour. They are more likely to identify others by their specific individual actions or repeated behaviours. Moreover, particularly in a peer context, it is important to recognise there are complex vulnerabilities that surround any young person or group of young people who may display such behaviour.

**Bystander** – A young person who witnesses any online sexual harassment.

# 4

## Methodology

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## 4.1 Background

This research has been conducted as part of Project deSHAME, a European Commission funded project which aims to increase reporting of online sexual harassment among minors and improve multi-sector cooperation in preventing and responding to this behaviour.

The project takes an evidence-based approach in the development and evaluation of educational resources for young people, teachers and police officers focusing on online sexual harassment among young people in three European countries (Denmark, Hungary and the UK).

## 4.2 Objectives

The aim of this phase of the project was to develop an understanding of the prevalence, experience and impacts of online sexual harassment in young people aged 13-17 using a multimethods approach.

There is currently a lack of empirical evidence about this aspect of young people’s online behaviour, and this project aims to address this knowledge gap. The results of this phase of the project will be used to develop and deliver educational resources and training for the different audiences which will be subsequently evaluated.

## 4.3 Methodology and analysis

This report presents findings from quantitative and qualitative research conducted with 13-17 year olds in Denmark, Hungary and the UK designed to provide a unique insight into their experiences of online sexual harassment. It is supported with findings from interviews and focus groups with key professionals, including teachers, police officers and helpline staff, conducted in Denmark, Hungary and the UK.

The project utilised both quantitative and qualitative research methods, including web-based questionnaires (e.g., staff, pupils), focus groups (e.g., pupils, teachers) and interviews (e.g., police, helpline staff).

- **School Audit Questionnaire:** An online questionnaire was completed by the Headteacher or nominee in participating schools prior to data collection.
- **Pupil Questionnaire:** An online questionnaire was translated into English, Danish and Hungarian and completed by pupils aged 13-17 at school.
- **Pupil focus groups:** Focus groups were conducted with single-sex and mixed-sex groups of pupils aged 13-17 years in schools in each country. The sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed before analysis.
- **Teacher focus groups:** Focus groups were conducted with teachers in each country. The sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed before analysis.
- **Interviews with professionals:** Interviews were conducted with key professionals (including police, helpline staff, local authorities, youth workers) to collect case studies and identify training needs. Composite case studies were developed on the basis of information provided in these.

All quantitative data was collected by online questionnaires using SurveyMonkey.

Significance testing of country and gender differences in experiences and attitudes at the 95% confidence level was carried out. This means that where findings are commented on in the report, there is only a 5% or less probability that the difference between the samples is by chance.



## 4.4 Participants

### Recruitment

It is important to note that the research did not use random stratified sampling. As a result the data cannot be claimed to be statistically representative of the population of young people aged 13-17 in each country or be scaled up to estimate national rates of prevalence. Schools in Denmark, Hungary and the UK were selected to reflect national demographics as far as possible.

The same process for advertising and recruiting schools and participants was used in all partner countries. Childnet (UK), Kek Vonal (Hungary) and Save the Children (Denmark) used their existing national networks of school contacts to advertise the project and recruit schools. Any schools expressing an interest in participating were sent an information pack including an information sheet for the school, parents and copies of all research materials. Those schools who decided to participate signed a consent form. Data were collected between May and October 2017.

### Participants

Sample	 Denmark	 Hungary	 UK	Total
13-17 year olds completing online survey	915 respondents	783 respondents	1,559 respondents	3,257 respondents
13-17 year olds participating in focus groups	29 young people across 4 focus groups (17 girls and 12 boys)	39 young people across 5 focus groups (20 girls and 19 boys)	39 young people across 6 focus groups (19 girls and 20 boys)	107 young people across 15 focus groups
Teachers participating in focus groups	8 teachers across 2 focus groups	10 teachers in 2 focus groups	11 teachers across 2 focus groups	29 teachers across 6 focus groups
Professionals participating in interviews	5 professionals interviewed, from across police, helplines and local authorities.	5 professionals interviewed, child welfare, school director, NGO, helpline	9 professionals interviewed, from across police, helplines and local authorities.	19 professionals

### Demographics of survey respondents

**Age**  
Young people aged 13-17 years in Denmark, Hungary and the UK participated in the online survey. The UK sample had a higher proportion of younger age groups compared to Denmark and Hungary, and country comparisons should take this into account. 21% of respondents chose not to answer this question.

Age				Total
13	12%	5%	20%	13%
14	17%	18%	36%	26%
15	18%	32%	34%	28%
16	31%	24%	3%	17%
17	18%	14%	2%	10%
18	4%	4%	1%	3%
Other	1%	3%	4%	3%

## Gender

In all countries there were more female survey respondents than male respondents, and this is particularly notable in the Hungarian sample. 18% of respondents chose not to answer this question.

The sample size prevents a further analysis of the unique experiences of transgender young people and those participants who preferred to self-describe. As a result, examination of gender differences in experiences and attitudes will focus on comparisons between participants who identified as female and male.

In the Hungarian survey, the 'trans male' and 'trans female' response options were not included due to cultural sensitivities.

				Total
Female	57%	61%	48%	54%
Male	41%	35%	45%	41%
Trans male	0.4%	-	1%	0.5%
Trans female	0.1%	-	0.6%	0.3%
Prefer to self-describe	2%	4%	6%	4%

## Sexual orientation

The majority of survey participants identified as heterosexual. The sample size prevents a further analysis of the unique experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, and those who preferred to self-describe or not to say. 20% of respondents chose not to answer this question.

				Total
Heterosexual/ straight	91%	83%	85%	86%
Bisexual	3%	6%	4%	5%
Gay male	0.4%	0.7%	1%	0.7%
Gay female/ lesbian	0.3%	0.6%	0.4%	0.4%
Prefer not to say	3%	6%	4%	4%
Prefer to self-describe	2%	3%	6%	4%

## Special educational needs, disabilities and health problems

% Total				Total
Been diagnosed with any special educational needs	13%	12%	10%	11%
Been diagnosed with any physical or psychological health problems	14%	20%	20%	19%
Have a disability	4%	5%	7%	6%

## Ethnicity

🇩🇰 Denmark	
Danish ethnicity	89.5%
Other ethnicity than Danish	10.5%

🇭🇺 Hungary	
In the Hungarian survey, this question was not included due to cultural sensitivities.	

🇬🇧 UK	
White	
White British	81.8%
Irish	1.3%
Any Other White background	3.5%
Mixed	
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	1.1%
White and Black African	0.6%
White and Asian	1.1%
Any Other Mixed background	1.0%
Asian or Asian British	
Asian or Asian British Indian	0.5%
Pakistani	0.6%
Bangladeshi	2.0%
Any other Asian background	0.5%
Black or Black British	
Black or Black British Caribbean	0.9%
African	2.3%
Other	
Chinese	1.0%
Other ethnic group	1.7%

## Social media use

Young people across Denmark, Hungary and the UK use a range of online services, with broadly similar usage across all three countries.

% Ever used	🇩🇰	🇭🇺	🇬🇧	Total
YouTube	99.7%	99.9%	99.5%	99.7%
Instagram	87%	80%	87%	85%
Facebook or Facebook messenger	98%	99%	68%	84%
Snapchat	95%	69%	85%	84%
Twitter	26%	23%	48%	36%
WhatsApp	10%	19%	53%	33%
Musical.ly	14%	29%	17%	19%
Tumblr	10%	30%	14%	17%

## 4.5 Ethics and safeguarding

The project was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the British Psychological Society, and was approved by the School of Psychology Ethics Board at UCLan.

### Consent

The following informed consent procedures were followed for participants.

- **Pupil survey:** Consent for the school to participate was obtained in writing from the Headteacher. Parents were provided with information about the online survey and had the opportunity to withdraw their child from the study.
- **Pupil focus groups:** Parents gave written consent for their child to take part in the focus groups. Participants also provided written consent prior to the start of the group sessions.
- **Teacher/professional focus groups/interviews:** Participants provided written consent prior to the start of the sessions.

### Safeguarding

Given the focus of the project and the involvement of young people, careful consideration was given to the protection and safeguarding of participants.

#### Specific actions taken included:

- Clear descriptions of the nature of questions asked in the questionnaire and focus groups, and the associated potential for distress, were included in the briefing materials for schools, parents and participants.
- Briefing and debriefing information included what young people should do if participation raised any concerns about their online experiences or if they were distressed as a result of taking part. This involved advising them to speak to a teacher or other trusted person, and signposting them to other reporting routes and organisations able to provide support and information about internet safety.
- Ensuring that clear information was provided to schools about the type of support they should have in place for young people should they be concerned or distressed as a result of participation.
- Making it clear that any information disclosed in the online survey or discussed in the focus groups about an individual which related to illegal activity or risk of harm to the individual or other participants would be disclosed to the school and dealt with according to the relevant safeguarding procedures.
- Information that could identify an individual is not published in the report, and all case studies are created from the experiences of multiple young people.

# 5

## Understanding the context

5.1	Love and sex in a digital age	p23
5.2	Navigating the complexities and grey areas	p25
5.3	Factors underpinning the emergence of online sexual harassment	p26



## 5. Understanding the context

To understand young people's experiences of online sexual harassment it is important to contextualise this within a broader consideration of the wider social context of sexualised media culture and debates around gender (for example see [Ringrose et al., 2012](#); [Quayle et al., 2016](#)), as well as how this drives the culture and dynamic of young people's peer groups and intimate relationships. This needs to be understood within the context of adolescent sexual development and the central role that digital technology plays in young people's lives.

In Denmark, Hungary and the UK, as in other countries across Europe and globally, digital technology plays a central role in the lives of young people, enabling them to connect to their friends and learn about the world. Many of their social interactions take place in digital spaces, bringing positive opportunities for connection and self-expression but also opening opportunities for potential harm.

Five key intersecting factors emerged as central to contributing to occurrences of peer-based online sexual harassment – societal, peer group, relationship, developmental and digital. To address online sexual harassment it is essential to understand and address these underlying factors. Before looking at these factors in further detail, this chapter will explore how young people navigate love and sex in a digital age and the complexities that can emerge.

"If a girl sends a nude image to her boyfriend, if he's been brought up in a way that respects women he's less likely to make fun of her and send it around. But if he's someone that treats women like animals and doesn't care about them at all, he'll show it to his friends and makes a real laugh out of her. Yeah, I feel definitely your upbringing."

Boy, 17 years, UK

## 5.1 Love and sex in a digital age

Young people's digital interactions play a key role as they flirt, fall in love, explore their identity and sexuality, and strengthen relationships. This exploration takes place and is embedded within the wider context of their peer relationships.

Previous research highlights the central role that technology plays in young people's relationships and the potential for risky or harmful behaviours as part of this ([Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson & Svedin, 2016](#); [Livingstone & Mason, 2015](#)).

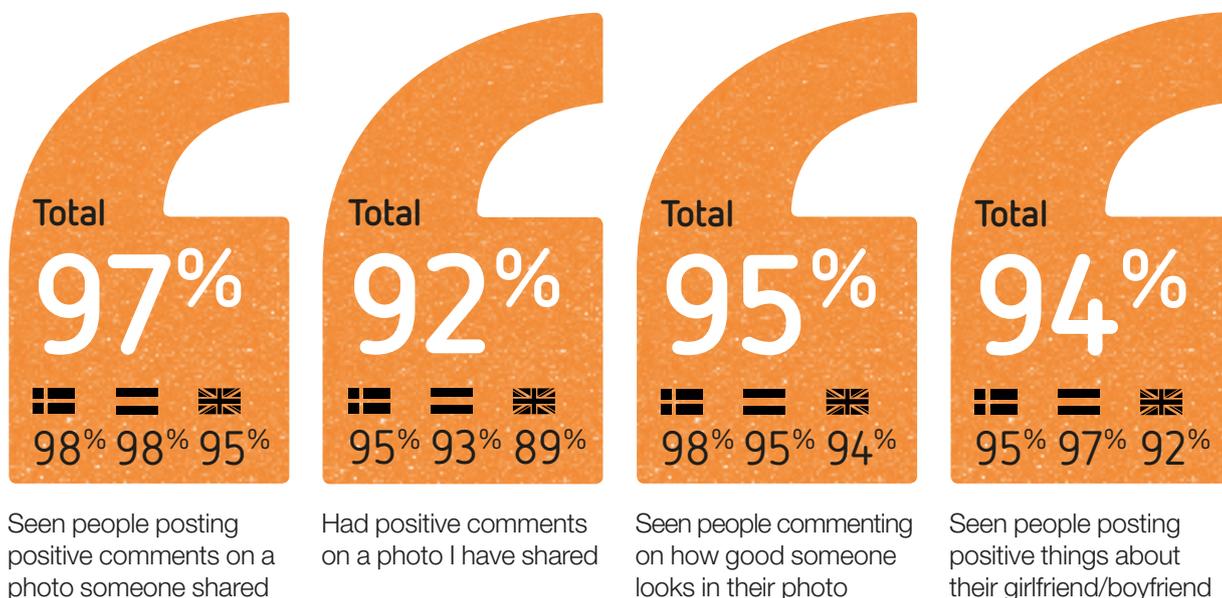
This report finds that:

- 2 in 5 respondents (40%) said that the internet plays an important role in their relationships, for example with girlfriends or boyfriends (19% Denmark, 66% Hungary, 38% UK).
- 30% of respondents said it's fun to flirt with people online (33% Denmark, 26% Hungary, 30% UK).

The majority of young people are experiencing positive interactions, with the research finding that young people regularly see people sharing positive comments and posts.

"I think it's easier for other people to talk about sex online, because they don't have to look each other in the eye, it makes a big difference."  
Girl, 14 years, Hungary

### Percentage of young people who have experienced positive interactions online in the last year



### Image-sharing in relationships

Image-sharing forms an essential part of young people's digital communications ([UK Safer Internet Centre, 2017](#)), and in this context young people may explore sharing sexual images as part of their developing intimate relationships ([Quayle et al., 2016](#)).

"You love this girl, you should make her feel like the most important girl in the world, and then you should, if she feels confident after a certain period of time, if she says, 'do you want to trade pictures' or something, you should then say yes, and make sure she feels comfortable doing it as well, not so she feels obligated to do it, because you'll be making her feel really good." – Boy, 14-15 years, UK

14% of respondents said they had sent nude or nearly nude images of themselves to a boyfriend/girlfriend (14% Denmark, 17% Hungary, 13% UK).

Just over 1 in 10 respondents (11%) said they had sent nude or nearly nude images of themselves to someone who they weren't in a relationship with (15% Denmark, 8% Hungary, 10% UK).

These results are consistent with previous research, although there are variations in reported prevalence of this behaviour in young people of between 2-34% ([Baumgartner et al., 2014](#); [Klettke et al., 2014](#); [Livingstone et al., 2011](#); [Mitchell et al., 2012](#)). A study of young people in Belgium found that 18% of respondents aged 15-19 had engaged in such behaviour in the previous two months ([Walrave et al., 2015](#)), a similar figure to the prevalence figures identified by the analysis. In comparison a recent UK study with a younger age group that found that 13% of respondents aged 11-16 years had photographed themselves fully or partially naked, with 55% going on to share this image ([Martellozzo et al., 2016](#)).

### Exploring sexualities

It was also clear in the focus groups that the online world allowed young people to explore their sexualities in ways they may not feel comfortable in the offline world.

"You do get the people who are like, err you're gay, sort of like, don't come near me I'll get infected sort of thing, and then you have the people who are just like, oh I'm not really a fan of that I'm just going to slowly push away, so you're left with such a small friendship group, that you're not left with much so you revert to the online world, and the virtual world to talk to people that understand your problems" – Boy, 14-15 years, UK

Reflecting this, the UK charity Stonewall recently found in their annual School Report that 96% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people said that the internet helped them understand more about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity with 64% saying that they speak to other LGBT young people using private messaging.

# 14%

of respondents said they had sent nude or nearly nude images of themselves to a boyfriend/girlfriend.

## 5.2 Navigating the complexities and grey areas

It is clear from this research that young people are navigating the complexities of love and sex in a digital age, sometimes experiencing healthy relationships that respect each other's boundaries and communicate consent effectively; and sometimes participating in, witnessing or being targeted with unwanted sexual conduct online.

Young people communicated difficulties in always being able to recognise when behaviour was 'unwanted'. Indeed, understanding and communicating consent and respect in an online world presents new challenges for teens and adults alike. How to develop positive social norms and etiquettes online that enable trust, respect and consensual online relationships to thrive is a challenge that many young people are currently navigating, and often without the support or guidance of adults. Many young people also were uncertain about whether their behaviours potentially breached consent.

*"She is so cute when she is sleeping, I had to take that photo...We sent it to each other's boyfriend, you know."* – Girl, 13 years, Hungary

Within this context, young people often felt that online sexual harassment takes place in a nuanced and complicated manner. When they were asked about how they experience and respond to online sexual harassment, their response was often "it depends".

Rejecting a simplistic reading of the issue, they discussed how it depended on how the person being targeted feels, who is involved, and the specific nature of the behaviour. For them, it depended on numerous intersecting factors such as the wider peer group context, family values, the dynamics of the school community and wider society. It was also dependent on the type of content, how a young person may react, the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, how well they knew each other, as well as the gender dynamics involved. The way in which the content was shared, the online platform and the size and make-up of the audience were all factors that were also seen as variable and significant.

It is clear that every experience of online sexual harassment that young people face is unique and nuanced to them. It is equally apparent that online sexual harassment cannot be understood solely in the context of an individual 'victim' or an individual 'perpetrator', but as part of a wider social and cultural phenomenon.

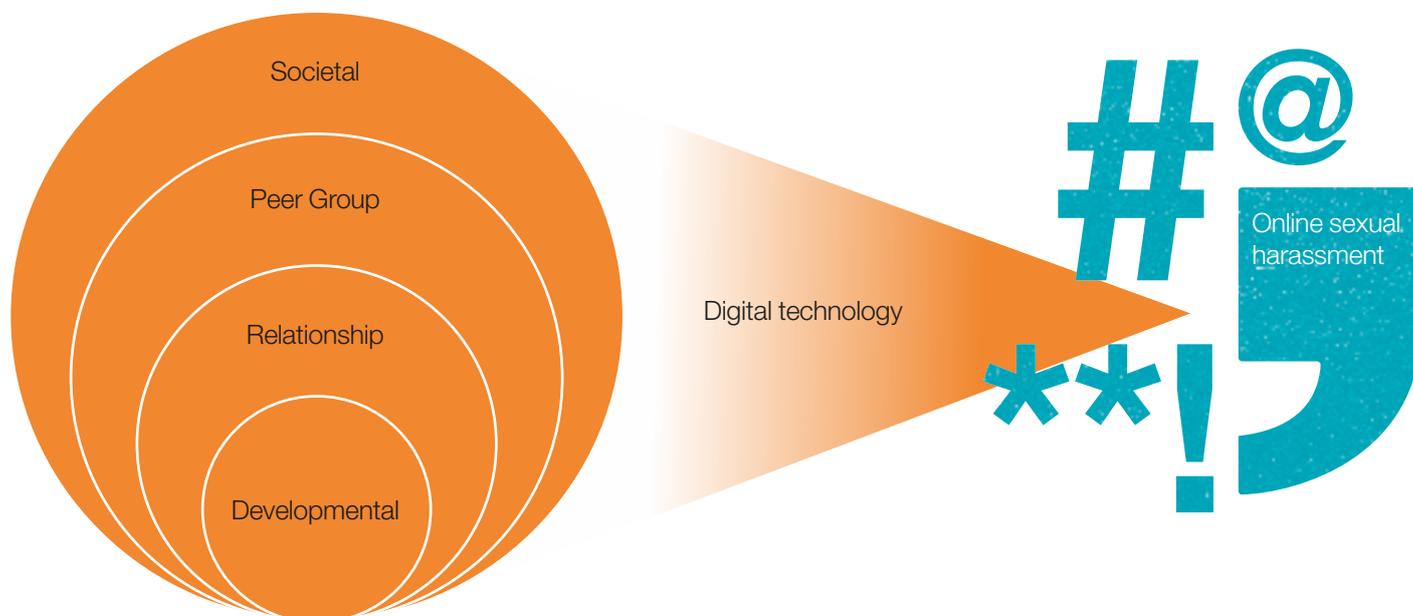
Five key intersecting factors emerged as central to contributing to occurrences of peer-based online sexual harassment – societal, peer group, relationship, developmental and digital. To address online sexual harassment it is essential to understand and address these underlying factors, as well as how young people navigate the complexities of love and sex in a digital age.

*"It depends on... because girls can also write like... Nice ass, whore or something like that, which means that they're being silly and that you're close friends with them."*

Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

## 5.3 Factors underpinning the emergence of online sexual harassment

Online sexual harassment emerges from a complex combination of societal, peer, relationship and developmental factors, which are mediated and facilitated by digital technology.



### Societal factors

Online sexual harassment takes place in societal context, where a pervasive culture of sexualisation, misogyny and homophobia is often left unchallenged (Henry & Powell, 2016; Womens Aid, 2014). The issues of 'slut shaming' and 'victim blaming' are not unique to teens (Pew Research Centre, 2014) or to online sexual harassment (e.g., Hackman et al., 2017), but like in all forms of sexual violence, they play a central role in determining how it is experienced. Other intersecting factors including race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality or sexual identity often created further marginalisation of young people experiencing online sexual harassment.

### Gender roles and expectations

Underpinning much of the discussions around online sexual harassment in the focus groups were the expectations that young people had about what kind of behaviours they thought were 'normal' for boys and girls.

"The boys are getting sissier..."

"And girls become manly!" – Two girls, 13-14 years, Hungary

In the focus groups young people discussed how there was an expectation that boys had more sexual desire and both boys and girls 'expected' a certain kind of sexual behaviour from boys and felt pressure to participate.

"It is like if you just started a relationship to a girl, and you as a boy asked, should we have sex, then she might not say yes right away because you haven't built up trust. If a girl asked a boy, it would be like, fuck yes, let's do it!" – Boy, 14-15 years, Denmark

"I feel like males do have that more sex drive though. Definitely our age. You just see the desire for sexual contact is much more in guys than it is in females. So I think, yeah." – Boy, 17 years, UK

This is consistent with other qualitative research examining the gendered contexts of young people sharing of sexual images online. There is a gendered double standard which influences this behaviour and how those involved are judged, in which boys are perceived to create pressure on girls to send sexual images, and those who do are negatively judged by both girls and boys (Ringrose et al., 2012). Boys do not experience similar pressures and judgements, although there is evidence of peer pressure to request and obtain sexual images from girls (Ringrose et al., 2012). This indicates that these behaviours, and the sexual harassment which may occur as a result, are shaped by the norms of the peer group, gender dynamics, and wider cultural influences (Livingstone et al., 2017; Ringrose et al., 2012).

It is important to note that the majority of the focus group discussions with young people centred around heterosexual interactions and so did not explore the experience and impact of gender norms and roles for LGBT+ young people.

### Sexualisation

Young people talked about how confidence in their bodies and appearance affected the way they were considered in their peer groups, and how they responded to online sexual harassment. This was particularly relevant for girls.

This is taking place in the wider societal context of increased sexualisation and objectification ([Zurbriggen et al., 2007](#)), particularly for women and girls, with increased exposure to online pornography and comparisons to celebrities and other individuals in the media ([Horvath et al., 2013](#); [Fixers, 2016](#)).

Young people are regularly commenting on each other's attractiveness online. The majority of respondents aged 13-17 years (64%) said that in the last year they have posted a comment or emoji about how 'hot' someone looks in their photo (82% Denmark, 56% Hungary, 57% UK).

It was clear in the focus groups that many young people were grappling with their online image and presence. Attractiveness was seen as key for both boys and girls in terms of their motivations, whilst girls particularly seemed to internalise feelings of low self-esteem, body image issues, and have general anxiety about their appearance. In the [Girls Attitudes Survey 2017](#) conducted by Girlguiding UK, 23% of girls aged 11-21 years in the UK said that the impact of gender stereotypes made them feel less confident in themselves and 59% said it changed what they wore.

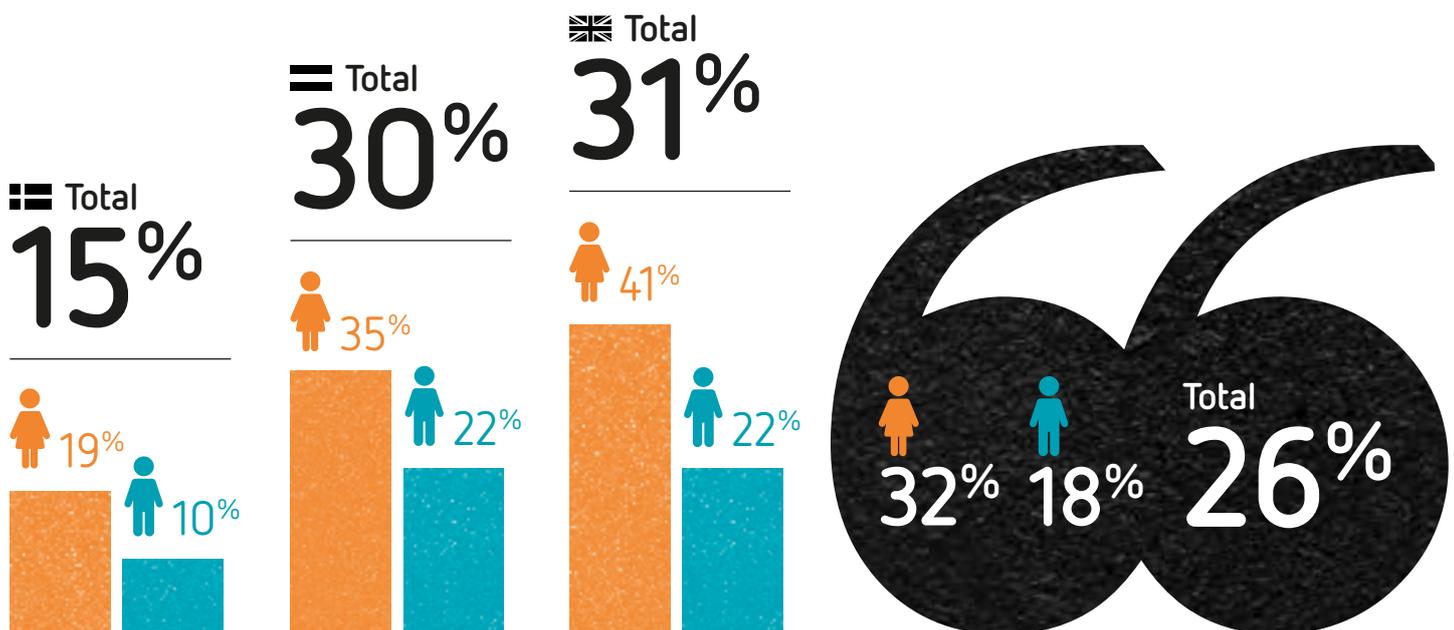
"Honestly I probably wouldn't care that much [about gossip being spread]. I wouldn't have the need to do anything about it... [but] it would suck if it was a really ugly picture" – Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

Such sexualisation can also normalise certain behaviours identified as online sexual harassment, including sexual comments that objectify or shame someone. Over 1 in 5 respondents (22%) said that they felt that getting sexual comments is just part of being online (12% Denmark, 33% Hungary, 23% UK). Boys were significantly more likely to agree with this (25%) compared to girls (17%).

For some young people, their concerns about body shaming actually prevented them from freely expressing themselves online, and this is particularly true for girls. Over 1 in 4 respondents (26%) said that they sometimes don't post images because they are worried about getting mean comments about how they look (15% Denmark, 30% Hungary, 31% UK).

"Because I think girls have more insecurities than boys do and they feel more strange about themselves... Body image... The way they look, their relationships... What other people think about them"

Girl, 13-14 years, UK



Percentage of 13-17s who sometimes don't post images because they are worried about body shaming

**‘Slut shaming’**

Modern culture encourages girls to see their value in terms of their sexual appeal, yet girls can also face being punished and shamed for normal sexual expression (see for example, [Ringrose et al., 2013](#)).

“So I see that the girls put on make-up from the age of 11, they have boyfriends, some have even sex, I know such a girl personally... so... we live in a messed up society, there are lots of girls doing that, unfortunately.” – Boy, 14 years, Hungary

This widespread sexual double-standard plays a key role in driving online sexual harassment, and is a key factor in explaining the greater impact of online sexual harassment among girls.

Moreover, attitudes towards girls were understood by the young people in the context of wider societal attitudes to women. As one young boy said:

“I follow quite a lot of women that post pictures – not nudes, but in bikinis and stuff like that and it’s their choice to put it online and they have to know that people are going to be looking at it. You wouldn’t post a picture online, get 60 likes, and then wonder who those 60 likes were from. You’re going to have to expect people to be looking at it, to be judging you.” – Boy, 17 years, UK

Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) said that girls are judged more harshly for sexual rumours shared about them online than boys (72% Denmark, 70% Hungary, 65% UK). Girls were more likely to agree with this (79%) compared to boys (58%).

There was a sense amongst many of the young people that certain types of behaviour that were considered promiscuous in the peer group, i.e. posting provocative pictures, sending nude images, deserved some kind of backlash. This was particularly apparent in reference to how girls were perceived.

“I have an acquaintance, who is like a brother to me, and he talked with a girl, but without dating, but he asked for a picture and she handled it so naturally that I said to him: “Listen, she is... she sends it to everybody.” Yes, maybe this motivates the girls. That they consider her as a big girl, if she sends such a picture. There’s an expression for this: e-whore.” – Boy, 14, Hungary

“If a boy has hooked up with several girls, then he’s like cool... If girls have hooked up with several you’re like... a slut.”

Boy, 14–15 years, Denmark



‘Slut-shaming’ can be defined as the practice of attacking (primarily) girls and women on the grounds of perceived or fabricated transgressions of socially acceptable sexual behaviours i.e. reposting of texts or images, or the fabrication of information. This practice attacks girls and women on the grounds of their gender and sexual identities, and aims to regulate their behaviour by sending the message that what is deemed as sexually inappropriate conduct can be legitimately used to publicly humiliate them, whether they engage in it or not.

([Childnet Cyberbullying Guidance, 2016](#))

## Victim blaming

Within this context of 'slut shaming', victim blaming emerged as a key theme in this research, reflecting wider societal attitudes in all three countries.

Over half of respondents (55%) said that they felt that if someone's nude or nearly nude image is shared online, they are partly to blame (30% Denmark, Hungary 70%, UK 62%).

"The person who took the picture. It is their fault. They could have chosen not to." – Girl, 14-16 years, Denmark

"Once I heard about a girl who sent a photo to a boy, and the boy posted it. And it's rude, but she could have been smarter, like meeting him personally instead of sending naked pictures as in this case he couldn't post anything. But it was her fault, why did she send an intimate photo to a man?" – Girl, 13 years, Hungary

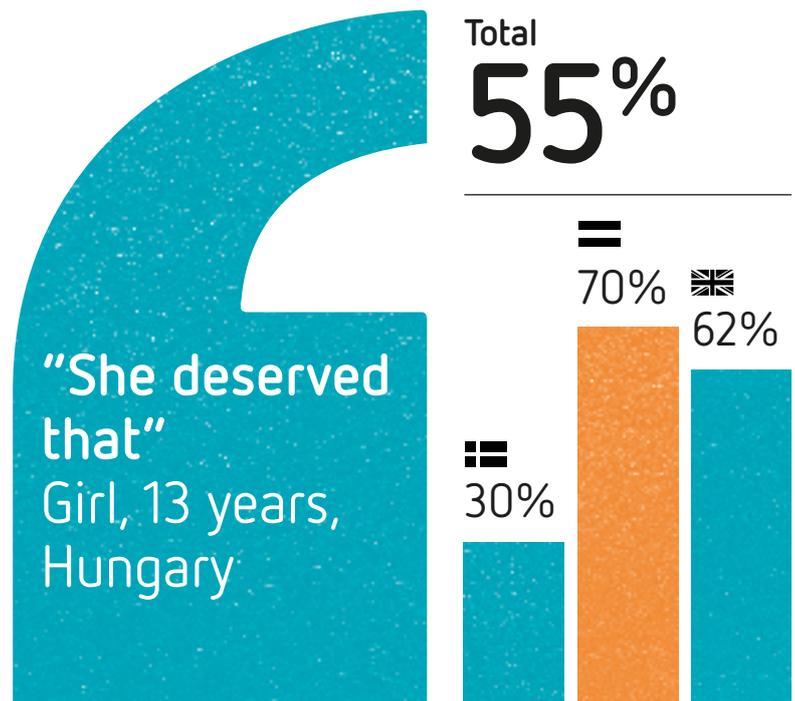
## Marginalised groups and other vulnerabilities

It is recognised that there are complex intersections on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, class, disability, sexuality and sexual identity that can increase young people's vulnerability to online harm as well as forming multiple barriers to their reporting. In addition, young people may be vulnerable because of family issues, a history of sexual abuse, living in care or gang involvement.

A recent EU report, [Forgotten Women](#), examined the way online abuse often intersects with other discriminatory practices such as racist abuse. Similarly, pervasive discriminatory attitudes such as homophobia, biphobia and transphobia ([IGLA Europe, 2006](#)) can lead to online sexual harassment targeted specifically at these groups of young people ([UK Safer Internet Centre, 2016](#)).

Children can also be uniquely vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including online, if they have learning disabilities ([Franklin et al., 2015](#)), are living in care ([Barnardo's, 2012](#)) or are involved with gangs or groups ([Berelowitz et al., 2013](#)).

There are significant and multiple barriers to reporting for those marginalised groups who experience online sexual harassment, including lack of knowledge and awareness, lack of awareness or sensitivity by professionals, cultural factors, confidentiality concerns, isolation and accessibility.



Percentage of 13-17s who feel that someone is partly to blame if their nude image is shared

## Peer group factors

Whilst wider societal norms and attitudes underpin much of young people's behaviours, it is clear that their intimate relationships and incidents of online sexual harassment are also being played out in a more localised manner in the context of their peer groups, with peer norms and attitudes driving their behaviour.

As young people negotiate peer approval and acceptance, there can be intense peer pressure to engage in sexual activities, and peer groups can normalise the expectation to engage in certain behaviour with a group attitude that 'everyone is doing it' – even if this isn't the case.

"I think it has become quite normal... I think that there are many who share it... very many... So it would probably just be a period where you were like, oh it is that guy who has shared or her who has shared... But maybe just a week... I don't think it would last that long... Because it's so normal...". – Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

Any perceived violation of expected norms can result in 'shaming' and this often plays out online. The values of the peer group can also shape young people's attitudes and expectations of relationships, including normalising potentially harmful behaviours. Power, popularity, status and perceived notions of masculinity all emerged as key themes in the focus group discussions as possible motivations for harmful behaviours.

"Because like then if you feel insecure, then if you share that kind of picture of someone else, then in some way you have power." – Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

"Because all their friends are doing it and they feel like they're not one of them any more so to like look cool they're like, 'look, I've got nudes too'" – Boy, 13 years, UK

"Like Pokemon cards. It's about having as many as possible. Wow he's cool. He has a video of that girl." – Boy, 14-15 years, Denmark

"There's a boy among us who is trying to play the big guy, but he's still a little boy. So he's trying to harass everybody, but...maybe he's just trying to show the others that he is a grown-up. He's trying to become respected, because... if a boy harasses a girl – let it be in a sexual way or not – let's say sexually, and the girl sends him photos, meanwhile the boy threatens her and shows the photos to his friends and says "this is my whore" – Boy, 15 years, Hungary

Such behaviour was not seen as acceptable in all male peer groups, but there were some in which the culture of the group encouraged or rewarded such harmful behaviour. The reputational impact for boys, as perpetrators, was considered to be either negative or positive, and very much dependent on their peer group or relationships.

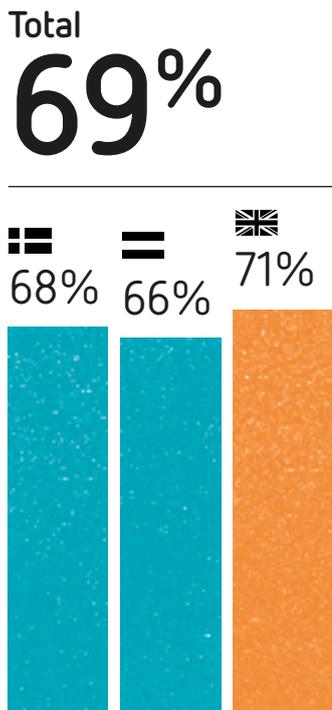
Whilst both boys and girls seemed to be judged on their popularity and appearance, this manifested in different ways for them.

"Maybe, because people would be like 'you can't pull girls and then he'd probably be like hurting because they'll be like 'you can't get girls and you can't get nudes cos you're ugly and stuff like that'" – Boy, 13 years, UK

"It depends on the girl, if it's a girl that don't have much friends that no-one likes then they'd take the mick but if it's a girl that's well known and maybe's got good looks and boys are attracted to her then she'd get a good reputation for it" – Boy, 13 years, UK

**"[You need] some self-confidence, in some way, and just daring to be the one that stands back and not being afraid to like lose the friend if you don't do it."**

Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark



“Because you can mock your friends, you can say stuff to just tease them but you can get too far very easily, there’s a fine line and you’ve got to be careful of over stepping that”  
Girl, 13-16 years, UK

Percentage of 13-17s who have seen people their age making sexual ‘jokes’ (e.g. rape jokes) in the last year

### Banter

While sexual ‘banter’ is a part of many young people’s interactions, it can be easy for jokes to go too far, particularly when they are at the expense of another person. In cases where the victim is impacted negatively it can be classified as a form of online sexual harassment or sexualised bullying.

“Because you can mock your friends, you can say stuff to just tease them but you can get too far very easily, there’s a fine line and you’ve got to be careful of over stepping that” – Girl, 13-16 years, UK

### Bystander effects

Within this peer group dynamic, the perceived responsibility of bystanders to report online sexual harassment seemed to be dependent on how close they were to the young person being victimised. Where young people would often be the first to stand up for their close friends if they were being targeted online, they do not necessarily hold this attitude when it comes to witnessing this happening to someone within their wider peer group.

“I don’t think it is particularly interesting to look at a nude pictures of someone I don’t know at all. But if it is someone I know, then I would find it exciting... [If it was a best friend] I would find it uncomfortable.” Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

## Relationship factors

As young people explore their early sexual interactions and intimate relationships they are learning about consent, respect and trust. They may cross the line between flirting and harassment, encouragement and coercion. Sometimes these behaviours are abusive or exploitative or reinforce damaging perceptions of gender and sexuality.

### Respect, trust and consent

In discussions with young people, whether a nude image was shared non-consensually or not was very much seen as an issue of respect and trust.

“And I feel like if you’re in a relationship, you’re not going to want to send a picture of your girlfriend or boyfriend to one of your friends. You respect each other in a personal way. I would never send a picture of my girlfriend to someone else because I respect her far too much, to mug her off.” – Boy, 17 years, UK

The same boy also commented:

“I feel like it depends as well. If a girl sends a nude image to her boyfriend, if he’s been brought up in a way that respects women he’s less likely to make fun of her and send it around. But if he’s someone that treats women like animals and doesn’t care about them at all, he’ll show it to his friends and makes a real laugh out of her. Yeah, I feel definitely your upbringing.” – Boy, 17 years, UK

### Pressure

Young people can face pressures to engage in sexual behaviour – both online and offline – in their intimate relationships ([Girlguiding, 2013](#); [Wood et al., 2015](#)). Girls in particular can face pressure to be ‘sexually compliant’ to maintain relationships. These pressures can be internal and external.

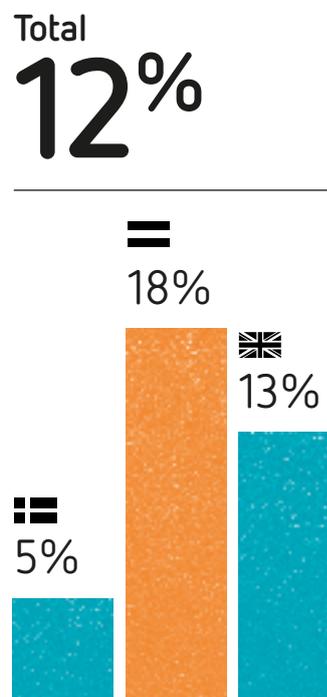
- Internal pressure: Some young people may feel pressure to share nude images as a result of their expectations of relationships, which can be influenced by wider societal or peer group attitudes about normalised behaviours.
- External pressure: For some young people the pressure to share nude images may be external, with their partner actively and overtly coercing or pressuring them to send nude images.

It is this latter type which can be classified as online sexual harassment. However, internalised pressures may play a role in normalising behaviours around online sexual harassment and could prevent young people from recognising these behaviours as harmful.

“Like if I for instance send a Snap to someone, then I expect, or in general, if someone send a Snap to someone, it doesn’t have to be a nude picture or anything. Or just the same as writing a weird message, then of course you expect that the person will respond. Like if the person sends a nude picture to someone, then they expect to have something in return.” - Boy, 13-14 years, Denmark

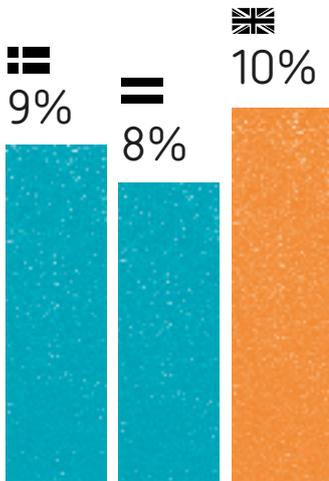
This analysis finds that 12% of respondents think it’s okay for boyfriends or girlfriends to expect nude or nearly nude images from each other (5% Denmark, 18% Hungary, 13% UK).

“If someone sends you like a private picture, then it’s because they trust you. Like I trust you, so of course you shouldn’t send it to all kinds of other people.”  
Boy, 13-14 years, Denmark



Percentage of 13-17s who think it’s okay for boyfriends/girlfriends to expect nude or nearly nude images from each other

Total  
**9%**



**Percentage of 13-17s who have sent a sexual message or image to someone in the last year so they didn't have to do more sexual things 'for real'**

Almost 1 in 10 respondents (9%) said they had sent a sexual message or image to someone so that they didn't have to do more sexual things 'for real' (9% Denmark, 8% Hungary, 10% UK). This represents an indirect pressure to engage in digital sexual behaviour as a way of delaying or preventing other sexual activities in person. It may also be as a result of direct pressure from a partner.

As reported in chapter 6.2, 1 in 10 respondents aged 13-17 years said their boyfriend or girlfriend had pressured them to share nude images (9% Denmark, 7% Hungary, 12% UK). Overall, girls (10%) were significantly more likely than boys (6%) to report that their partner had pressured them to share nude images of themselves.

### Break ups and revenge

Relationship break ups are played out in front of the wider peer group and can involve 'revenge' by both the couple involved and their wider peer group. The 'reputation' of those aggrieved in a relationship was perceived as being important to be maintained and often precipitated perpetration of online sexual harassment.

After break ups, teenagers today will have a digital footprint of their relationship, with evidence (including in the form of screenshots) which may include conversations, sexual messages and images, and potentially arguments.

*"Yeah, and they just use that. I think people lash out in relationships, definitely, it's like I'll just get one up." – Boy, 17 years, UK*

This research found that 1 in 6 respondents (16%) said they have kept a screenshot of a nude/nearly nude image or sexual conversation to re-send or re-share later as evidence (13% Denmark, 19% Hungary, 16% UK).

This 'evidence' can then be disseminated at the click of a button to a wide audience, including peers, family and wider.

Indeed, 'revenge' was one of the top reasons why young people thought others might engage in online sexual harassment and the term 'revenge porn' originated in the experiences of adults who had faced this very circumstance. There was a feeling amongst many of the young people that if girls were motivated to engage in online sexual harassment that they would be more likely to be motivated by revenge.

*"I feel that if it is girls, then they do it for the sake of revenge. Like they'd do it to take revenge in a way." – Boy, 13-14 years, Denmark*

*"It would be really ugly, first they love each other and then they fight, and she just posts it like that... she was no true friend." – Girl, 13, Hungary*

44% of respondents said that young people may engage in online sexual harassment to get their own back on an ex (51% Denmark, 33% Hungary, 47% UK).

## Betti's story

---



Betti, 15 years, goes to school in Budapest. She is with her friend Klári having lunch in school. In their conversation it comes up that Betti still has the password for her ex-boyfriend Sam's Facebook account. They decide to log in and look through his messages on Facebook Messenger and they find that he had received a nude from a girl in their year group. Betti feels really hurt and angry and her friend says the girl is a 'slut' and deserves to be called out for trying to get with Betti's ex. They screenshot the message (including the nude image) and Betti shares it in a group chat on WhatsApp with their close girl mates from school, saying 'what should we do to the bitch [devil face emoji]' However, one of the girls in the group screenshots this and sends it to someone else and it ends up being shared in a WhatsApp group for their whole year group. By the end of the school day everyone is talking about Betti and saying she is a 'bitch' for sharing the nude and a 'crazy stalker' for logging into her ex's account. Even Betti's closest friends say she has gone too far and push her away. It gets so bad that Betti can't face going to school the next day. Betti feels really bad for the girl whose nude has been seen by the whole school and she knows she has done something wrong. She's scared of getting into trouble and what her family would say if they found out. ”

Note: This composite case study is drawn from the real experiences of multiple young people.

## Developmental factors

As young people transition from childhood to adulthood, developmental factors underpin their tendency to seek new sensations, take risks and explore their emerging sexuality, while their vulnerability to peer pressure and lack of understanding about sex and relationships can place them at greater risk.

### Developing sexuality

Sexting and online relationship dynamics are related to online sexual harassment, and need to be understood in the context of the sexual development of young people (Bryce, 2015; Horvath et al., 2013; Temple et al., 2014). These behaviours are part of the process of exploring and developing sexual identities and relationships during adolescence (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014).

For many young people, sexting is a means of flirting and teenage experimentation or a way of enhancing a sexual relationship; however, for some it can be a marker for risky sexual practices or involve coercion and exploitation (Quayle et al., 2016).

This sexual development is taking place in a wider context where many young people are exposed to online pornography – either accidentally or intentionally – and this can affect attitudes and expectations (Martellozzo et al., 2017). Within this landscape, activities such as sexting become part of young people’s sexual culture (Quayle et al., 2016).

As young people negotiate these developmental tasks individually and in their peer networks, it is important that they receive guidance about consent, trust and the boundaries between wanted and unwanted sexual comments and contact.

It was clear from the focus groups that young people vary in their understanding of sex and relationships. For example when discussing the use of emojis with a sexual connotation, although many young people had witnessed or even participated in using them, some were unsure of their actual meaning.

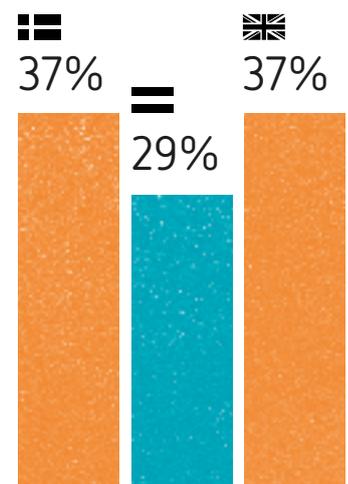
“There is a tongue [emoji], and then there is some water. I’m not sure, but that tongue...it is probably just something like arrrrgh, I don’t know...” – Boy, 14-15 years, Denmark

### Online risks and teenage risk-taking

Research shows that young people encounter both positive opportunities online as well as risks (Livingstone et al., 2011; Ólafsson et al., 2014; Smahel & Wright, 2014). The 2014 report from EU Kids Online compared findings from 2010 to 2014 with young people aged 11-16 years across 7 European countries. It found that around half of all 11-16 year olds had encountered one or more of the 10 risks asked about, with the proportion of children who reported being bothered or upset online in the past year increasing from 13% to 17%. Girls in particular were more likely to experience both risk and harm in 2014 compared to 2010.

Research highlights the important influence of the peer group on adolescent risk-taking in offline environments (Albert & Steinberg, 2011a), as well as behaviour online (Reich et al., 2012). This is also part of adolescent development (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009), but the enduring nature and audience for digital content means that online communication facilitates different forms of risk taking and potentially intensifies the associated impacts.

Total  
35%



Percentage of 13-17s who have shared something online in the last year that they regretted later

## Digital factors

Whilst sexual harassment is not a new phenomenon, and young people were also experiencing it offline, it was clear that digital technology can facilitate it, opening the door for new forms of sexual harassment. Young people cited different ways in which being online put them further at risk.

- ‘Audience’ – the internet widens the audience of bystanders
- ‘Viral’ – the internet can facilitate the rapid spread of harassment
- ‘Instant’ – with mobile devices to hand it is easier to share something quickly without time to reflect
- ‘Evidence’ – digital content has a footprint and anything you do, say or share can endure online
- ‘Disinhibition’ – the internet can enable people to act in ways they wouldn’t in person
- ‘Fans and followers’ – popularity matters on the internet
- ‘Digital empathy gap’ – digital communication can make it harder to understand other people’s emotions
- ‘Anonymity’ - the internet provides opportunities for people to hide their identity or use an alternative identity
- ‘Constant communication’ – ‘24/7’ communication can happen at any time and this can mean it is difficult to escape harassment, with it intruding into spaces that have previously been regarded as safe and private

These characteristics of the online environment and communication influence young people’s online behaviour and can facilitate greater risk-taking. The ease with which content can be shared with a large audience in a short time ([Mitchell et al., 2012](#); [Wolak et al., 2012](#)), the difficulty in removing content and potential for it to circulate indefinitely ([boyd, 2007](#)), and the ability to mask behaviours behind anonymous or fabricated identities, all create a situation in which young people can lose control over their content ([Sticca & Perren, 2012](#)). This has implications for the emotional and social impacts of online sexual harassment (e.g., [Bryce, 2015](#); [Strassberg et al., 2013](#)).

“That’s the big thing about online, things can be really misunderstood. You can’t really convey emotion online. Somebody may say something on Facebook messenger, and then say it in front of you, and you’re gonna get completely different vibes.” – Boy, 17 years, UK

“It’s not going to be removed from the internet anyway. Those who have seen it, have seen it.” – Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

1 in 4 respondents (25%) said they worry about losing control of an image they have shared online (Denmark 24%, Hungary 33%, UK 22%). Girls are more likely to say they worry about this (29%) compared to boys (20%).

The focus groups also revealed the different challenges that young people had in navigating numerous different online platforms, both public and private, and that sexual harassment could move from one platform to another very quickly. They also thought that because of this that adults would not be able to help them.

It is also clear that although young people did at times have negative experiences online, they keenly felt the importance of remaining connected with each other online. When asked why someone may stay online after experiencing homophobic bullying, one girl in a focus group in the UK said:

“Because we’re teenagers, that’s what we do. All we do is speak to people, even if it’s just starting a new relationship with someone, it’s just what we do” – Girl, 13-14 years, UK

“You’ve got a screen to hide behind so you don’t have to say it to his face.”  
Girl, 13-14 years, UK

“When you have sent it to a friend, then it’s like a tree, right? – with branches and everything, that’s growing. When you have shared it, you cannot get it back because it is all over the place.”  
Boy, 14-15 years, Denmark

## Motivations

Contextualised within a wider framework of societal, peer group, relationship, developmental and digital factors, it can be considered how online sexual harassment emerges and the motivations that can underpin it.

When asked why young people might engage in online sexual harassment, the most common responses in Denmark, Hungary and the UK were:



### Young people's perceived motivations why others might engage in online sexual harassment

		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To get their own back on an ex (51%)</li> <li>2. To get respect from their friends (51%)</li> <li>3. To hurt someone (46%)</li> <li>4. To retaliate because someone else started it first (46%)</li> <li>5. As a joke (44%)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To hurt someone (50%)</li> <li>2. As a joke (47%)</li> <li>3. To retaliate because someone else started it first (42%)</li> <li>4. To get their own back on an ex (33%)</li> <li>5. To get respect from their friends (32%)</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As a joke (54%)</li> <li>2. To hurt someone (52%)</li> <li>3. To retaliate because someone else started it first (50%)</li> <li>4. To get their own back on an ex (47%)</li> <li>5. To get respect from their friends (45%)</li> </ol>

These motivations give an indication of the peer dynamics at play, and indicate how experiences of online sexual harassment can vary in different contexts. They have also been identified in previous research examining this behaviour ([Ringrose et al., 2012](#); [Walrave et al., 2014](#)).

The next chapter presents the forms of online sexual harassment emerging from this research and the prevalence and impact of these behaviours. These behaviours need to be contextualised within young people's wider social and cultural landscape and as such, cannot be understood solely in the context of an individual 'victim' or 'perpetrator'.

# 6

## Young people's experiences of online sexual harassment

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6.2	Exploitation, coercion and threats	p45
6.3	Sexualised bullying	p48
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# 6. Young people's experiences of online sexual harassment

For most young people the internet plays an essential role in their friendships and relationships, providing positive opportunities for communication, connection and self-expression.

However, for many young people, online sexual harassment is embedded in their digital lives and to some extent normalised and expected. It emerges as part of the wider dynamic of their peer group and intimate relationships.

In this report, online sexual harassment is defined as unwanted sexual conduct on any digital platform and it is recognised as a form of sexual violence. Online sexual harassment encompasses a wide range of behaviours that use digital content (images, videos, posts, messages, pages) on a variety of different platforms (private or public). It can make a person feel threatened, exploited, coerced, humiliated, upset, sexualised or discriminated against.

This report specifically focuses on peer-to-peer online sexual harassment taking place between young people.

Such harassment takes place in a gendered context, with girls being more likely to be targeted than boys - particularly for some forms of online sexual harassment - and these incidents often resulting in more negative outcomes for girls. 80% of respondents aged 13-17 years said that they think online sexual harassment happens more often to girls than boys, while just 2% said it happens more to boys and 17% thought it was about the same.

In this report online sexual harassment has been categorised in four main types. These different behaviours are often experienced simultaneously and can overlap with offline experiences of sexual harassment.

## Non-consensual sharing of intimate images and video

A person's sexual images and videos being shared without their consent or taken without their consent

### 6%

of young people across Denmark, Hungary and UK have had their nude or nearly nude image shared with other people without their permission in the last year

“A boy who told me he really liked me and that if I sent him it we could be such an amazing couple... I fell for it and the next day my pictures were all around school even though he sent me a picture first.”  
Girl, 14 years, UK

See section 6.1

## Exploitation, coercion and threats

A person receiving sexual threats, being coerced to participate in sexual behaviour online, or blackmailed with sexual content

### 9%

of young people across Denmark, Hungary and UK have received sexual threats online from people their age in the last year

“I was being pressurised into sending sexual photos and videos of myself and was threatened if I didn't. They would go on and on at me when I said no but would carry on with the threats.”  
Girl, 13 years, UK

See section 6.2

## Sexualised bullying

A person being targeted by, and systematically excluded from, a group or community with the use of sexual content that humiliates, upsets or discriminates against them

### 25%

of young people across Denmark, Hungary and UK have had rumours about their sexual behaviour shared online in the last year

“I had an acquaintance, and we fell out, ugly, so he wrote ugly comments to my photos and things like that, and then he made a new profile with my profile picture, he added all my friends on Facebook and he posted that “I am gay”  
Boy, 14 years, Hungary

See section 6.3

## Unwanted sexualisation

A person receiving unwelcome sexual requests, comments and content

### 24%

of young people across Denmark, Hungary and UK have received unwanted sexual messages and images in the last year

“If they write like, huge knockers, nice ass and so on, then you think... Then you'd feel like you're violated by the person, because it is a boy.”  
Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

See section 6.4

## 6.1 Non-consensual sharing of intimate images

"Lots of people asked for nudes and I finally sent one to a boy who told me he really liked me and that if I sent him it we could be such an amazing couple... I fell for it and the next day my pictures were all around school even though he sent me a picture first. Everyone says it's okay for boys to send 'dick pics' but when girls do it all you get is hate, like slag, sket, slut, etc. I made the wrong decision, I regret it and it has made me think greatly."

Girl, 14 years, UK

# 6%

of young people across Denmark, Hungary and UK have had their nude or nearly nude image shared with other people without their permission in the last year

The non-consensual sharing of intimate images, sometimes referred to as 'revenge porn', is a form of online sexual harassment. It commonly involves young people sharing their nude or nearly nude image or video with someone consensually, also known as 'sexting' – for example as part of sexual exploration in a relationship (see Chapter 5) – and then this imagery is consequently shared non-consensually with other people.

Images or videos are typically shared with the wider peer group, either via messaging apps or social media pages (for example 'bait out pages' that invite young people to share nude images or sexual gossip about their peers). In some instances folders or collections of nude images – sometimes hundreds – are being circulated within a peer group, for example via AirDrop. These images can also be shared offline by merely 'showing' them to the wider peer group.

Intimate imagery can range from nude or nearly nude images to videos of sexual acts. In some instances this can involve images and videos of non-consensual sexual acts (including rapes or sexual assaults) and form part of a wider exploitative situation. Young people can also be victimised by someone sharing a nude image that is attributed to them, but in fact is not their own image.

Across Europe it is illegal to create, possess or distribute indecent images of children. However, there is a growing recognition that children who are victims should not be criminalised for creating a nude image of themselves. For example, in the UK the College of Policing has provided guidance to police services ([College of Policing, 2016](#)) on how to respond to cases of under 18s producing and sharing indecent imagery of themselves.

As a result of non-consensual sharing, young people often face further harassment and bullying as a result of their image or video being seen by a wider audience of their peers. The research reveals that young people often blame the young person who sent their nude, rather than directing their blame at the person who shared it non-consensually.

Despite the fact that the overall prevalence of being victimised with non-consensual sharing is broadly the same for boys and girls, the research finds that girls are more likely to face a negative backlash from their peers if their nude is shared online.

The focus groups indicated that there was a perceived gender difference in the motivations for sharing nude images non-consensually. There was a clear perception that boys were likely to request nudes and then non-consensually share them more widely in order to obtain peer approval and status within their peer networks. For girls, the motivations for non-consensually sharing were characterised as for 'revenge' or because they did not like someone in the peer group, or as a way to position themselves in their peer group. See Chapter 5 for further discussion of perceived motivations for online sexual harassment.

### Victim

The report finds that 6% of young people aged 13-17 years have had their nude or nearly nude image shared with other people without their permission in the last year (6% Denmark, 6% Hungary, 6% UK). There were no significant gender differences in being victimised with this form of online sexual harassment.

“Well I know someone who sent a picture to a boy, where she was wearing a bra. And she did that 2 years ago, and they still keep on... They still walk around and laugh. When they see her, they keep mentioning it... So it's still going on.” – Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

### Perpetrator

1 in 12 survey respondents (8%) aged 13-17 years reported that they have shared a nude or nearly nude image of someone else without their permission in the last year (10% Denmark, 6% Hungary, 8% UK).

“On Messenger. The boy who sent that photo, he has such a girlfriend who sends pics in bra or in a towel...” – Girl, 13, Hungary

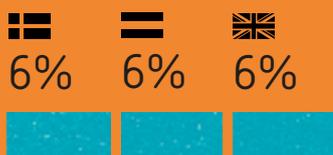
“Someone had recorded [a female friend of one of my friends] during sex and then had gone around showing it to some of his friends. He hadn't shared it right, but showed it on his phone. So that is also something that could happen.” – Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

### Bystander

Around a third of young people aged 13-17 years in Denmark (35%) and Hungary (29%) have witnessed people their age sharing nude or nearly nude images of someone they know in the last year, compared to over half of young people in the UK (51%).

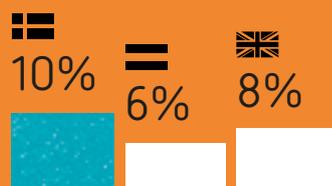
“A nude was sent and it was screenshot and posted on social media. From there it was screenshot and sent around other people and into group chats. Ongoing comments were made about for a period of time for various reason. It still happens now even though it happened a year ago.” Girl, 15 years, UK

Total  
**6%**



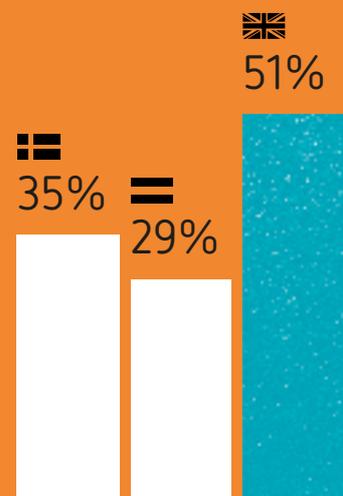
**Victim** “My nude/nearly nude image was shared with other people without my permission”

Total  
**8%**



**Perpetrator** “I have shared a nude/nearly nude image of someone else without their permission”

Total  
**41%**



**Bystander** “I have seen people sharing nude/nearly nude images of someone I know”

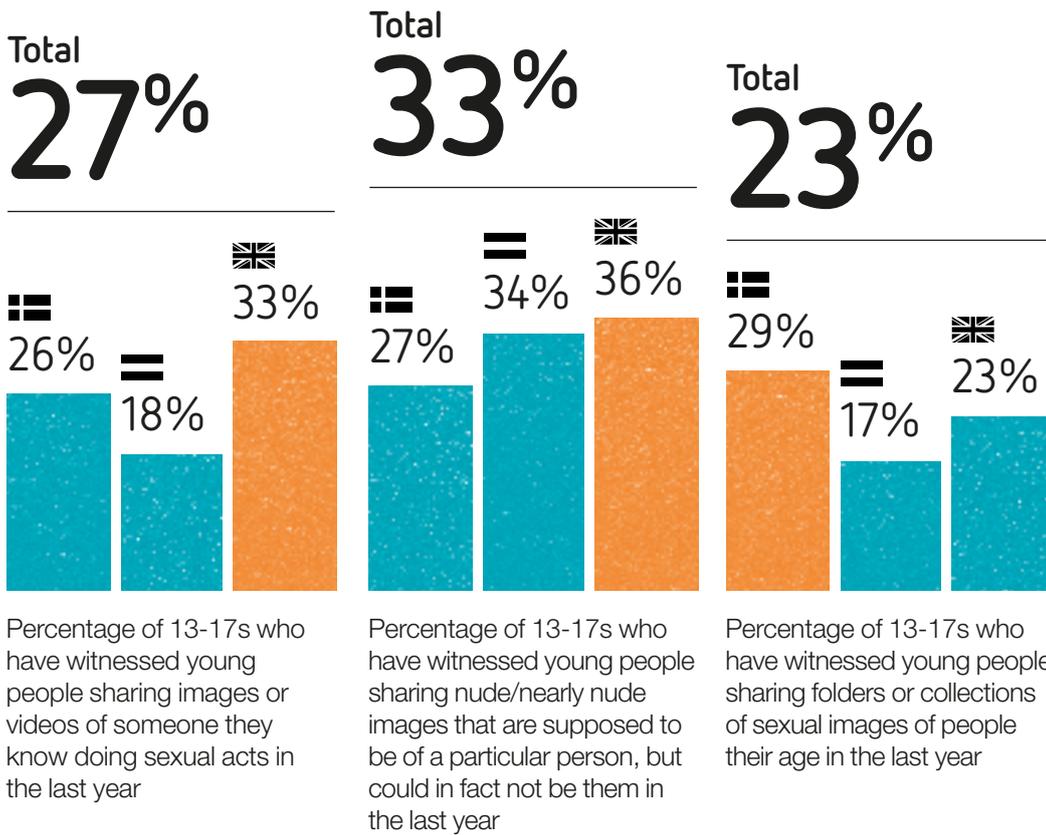
Prevalence of young people in Denmark, Hungary and the UK being involved in non-consensual sharing of intimate images in the last year as a victim, bystander or perpetrator

## Sara's story



Sara, aged 13, lives in Birmingham, a large city in England in the UK. She has recently been chatting online to a boy in the year above who she really likes. She feels very flattered by his attention, particularly as she's been finding things at home difficult recently as her mum was unwell. When he asked her for a nude, she decided to send one, hoping he might go out with her. But now someone has told her that her nude photo has been posted on two different Instagram accounts called 'Slags\_of\_Birmingham\_xx' and 'Brum\_beef\_100'. She feels distraught and doesn't know what to do. She's not sure if it's true and if the boy did it, as she doesn't have access to the accounts as they are 'private' and say you have to send gossip or images to be allowed to follow them. She is too scared to tell anyone, because she thinks she might get into trouble with the police and that they would blame her for sending images of herself. She's worried the boy might get into trouble too. She is too embarrassed to speak to her parents or a teacher. She feels like everyone has seen the image, and doesn't want to go to school. She has even considered taking her own life. A teacher notices that she looks very distracted and quiet in class, and overhears a few remarks made by other pupils that makes him think something had been going on. At the end of the class he asks to have a word with her to check if everything was okay. Although she doesn't feel she can tell him everything, he tells her who she could speak to in school and reassures her they would help. This gives her confidence to speak to another school staff member the next day. The school is really supportive and reassures her they would help her deal with this. They speak to the boy and his friends and make them delete the images. The school speaks to any pupils who follow the Instagram accounts. The school involves the police, but the police said they can't do anything without evidence that the nude photo was on the Instagram account. ”

Note: This composite case study is drawn from the real experiences of multiple young people.



**“It is like gossip right. You know that it is wrong, but... you might share it anyways.”**  
 Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

### Victim blaming and ‘slut shaming’

The research revealed some of the attitudes underlying the further victimisation that young people, particularly girls, can face as a result of their nude image being posted online. This victim blaming and ‘slut shaming’ needs to be contextualised within the wider social and cultural landscape (see Chapter 5).

The majority of respondents in the survey (55%) agreed that if someone’s nude or nearly nude image is shared online they are partly to blame. This victim blaming attitude is particularly prevalent in Hungary (70%) and the UK (62%), while less than a third of young people in Denmark (30%) agreed with this. This can result in the peer group reacting negatively to the victim, while young people who are victims of this can also blame themselves and feel guilt and regret.

“I made the wrong decision, I regret it and it has made me think greatly.” Girl, 14 years, UK

Despite this, the vast majority of respondents do not believe it is acceptable to send a person’s nude images to others. Only 3% of respondents agreed that if you receive a nude or nearly nude photo from someone, it’s okay to send it to other people (1% Denmark, 3% Hungary, 3% UK).

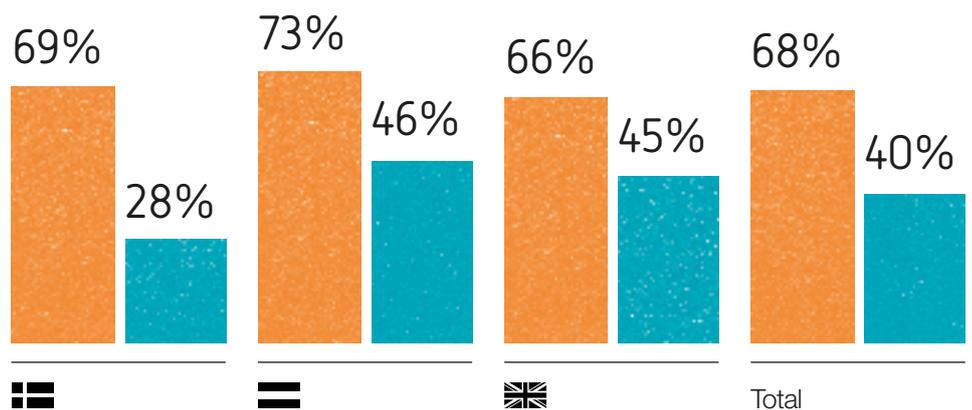
Girls are particularly likely to have a negative reaction if their nude image is shared online, with over two-thirds of respondents (68%) saying that people will think badly about a girl if her nude or nearly nude image is posted online, compared to 40% who said that people would feel that same about a boy that this happened to.

“It’s definitely a lot worse for girls. From my point of view, I hear a lot more male nudes going around than female. And I feel like, not that they don’t care, but it’s not a surprise to them anymore. They’re just like, ok, whatever. If a girl does it, it’s a lot more sensitive.” – Girl, 17 years, UK

### Differences in negative reaction after nude images of a girl or boy are shared

■ Percentage of 13-17s who think that people will **think badly about a girl** if her nude/nearly nude image is posted online

■ Percentage of 13-17s who think that people will **think badly about a boy** if his nude/nearly image is posted online



### Creep shots and upskirting: non-consensual taking of images

Online sexual harassment can also involve the non-consensual taking of intimate images, also known as 'upskirting' or 'creep shots', which can then be shared with the wider peer group online.

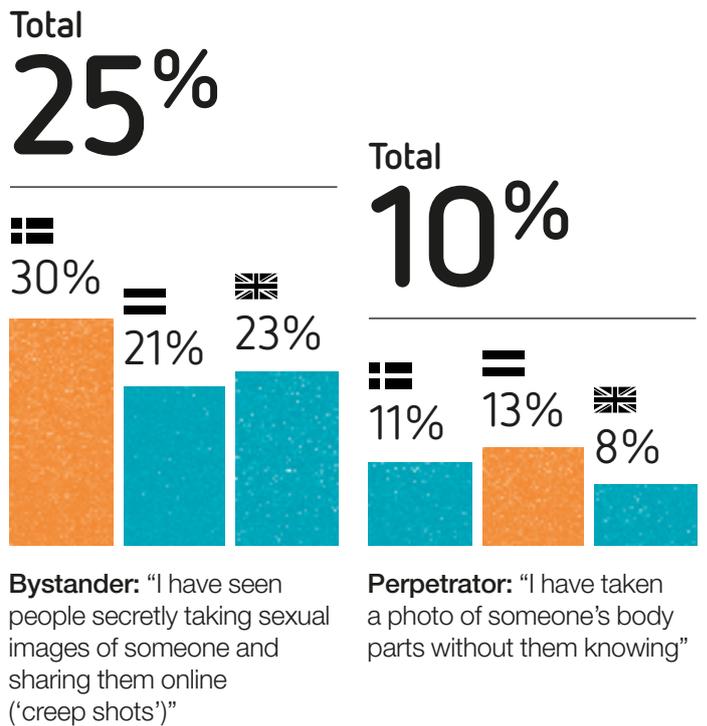
*"I'd probably call it severe bullying if you take pictures of others while they are not fully dressed." – Boy, 13-14 years, Denmark*

In some instances it was heard how young people may take a photo of a friend getting changed (for example in changing rooms at school, or at a sleepover) and then share this to humiliate the person, or sometimes as a 'joke'. This was often in the context of friendship group 'drama', with these images being shared again to punish a person after they had fallen out.

A quarter of respondents (25%) aged 13-17 years have witnessed young people secretly taking sexual images of someone and sharing them online in the last year (30% Denmark; 21% Hungary; 23% UK).

1 in 10 respondents aged 13-17 years reported that they have taken a photo of someone's body parts without them knowing in the last year (11% Denmark, 13% Hungary, 8% UK).

*"I'd probably call it severe bullying if you take pictures of others while they are not fully dressed."  
Boy, 13-14 years, Denmark*



## 6.2 Exploitation, coercion and threats

Online sexual harassment can involve exploitative, coercive and threatening behaviours.

Almost 1 in 10 young people have received sexual threats online from someone their age, which includes threats of sexual violence (such as rape threats), the threat to publish intimate images of them, the threat to share allegations of their sexual behaviour, name them as a victim of sexual assault or make their sexual orientation known (to 'out' them) when they may not feel ready for this.

This threat may be used to coerce or blackmail a young person to behave in a certain way, including to share more nude images or engage in sexual activities both online and offline.

In some instances young people may be pressured into sharing sexual images for the sole purpose of later blackmailing or controlling them. It was heard how young people can feel coerced to share a nude image because a person knows a secret about them or has a screenshot of a sexual conversation they had.

Some young people may experience this peer-to-peer exploitation as part of a wider context of relationship abuse or gang involvement. It can also take place alongside sexual exploitation involving adults.

While some victims will identify that they are being exploited, there may be some situations where young people do not recognise this. Young people may be pressured or coerced to share sexual images or engage in sexual behaviour both online and offline by someone they trust, including someone they are in a relationship with. In this research, 1 in 10 young people had been pressured by a boyfriend or girlfriend to share nude or nearly nude images of themselves, with girls being particularly likely to experience this.

# 9%

of young people across Denmark, Hungary and UK have received sexual threats online from people their age in the last year

"I was being pressurised into sending sexual photos and videos of myself and was threatened if I didn't. They would go on and on at me when I said no but would carry on with the threats. It made me feel worthless and that I was just being used which felt horrible and that I was a target. I felt that I couldn't do anything or tell anyone so I carried along with it and hoped it would be over soon."

Girl, 13 years, UK

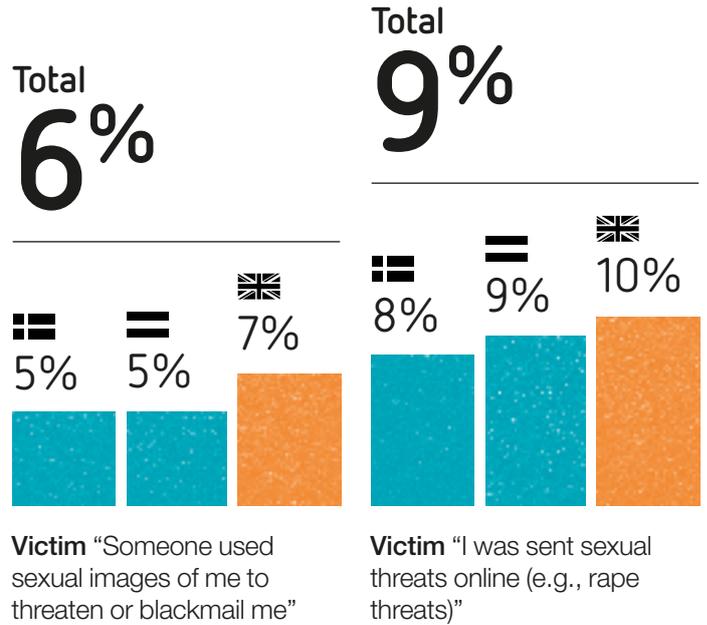
### Sexual threats

6% of respondents aged 13-17 years said that someone had used sexual images of them to threaten or blackmail them in the last year (5% Denmark, 5% Hungary, 7% UK). There were no significant gender differences.

Almost 1 in 10 respondents aged 13-17 years (9%) said they have had sexual threats targeted at them in the last year (8% Denmark, 9% Hungary, 10% UK). There were no significant gender differences.

Just under a third of young people (29%) have witnessed people their age making sexual threats, for example rape threats, on the internet in the last year (29% Denmark, 25% Hungary, 31% UK).

The case study interviews highlighted how these experiences can overlap with wider experiences of sexual exploitation and grooming.



Percentage of 13-17s in Denmark, Hungary and the UK who have been targeted with sexual threats or blackmail online in the last year

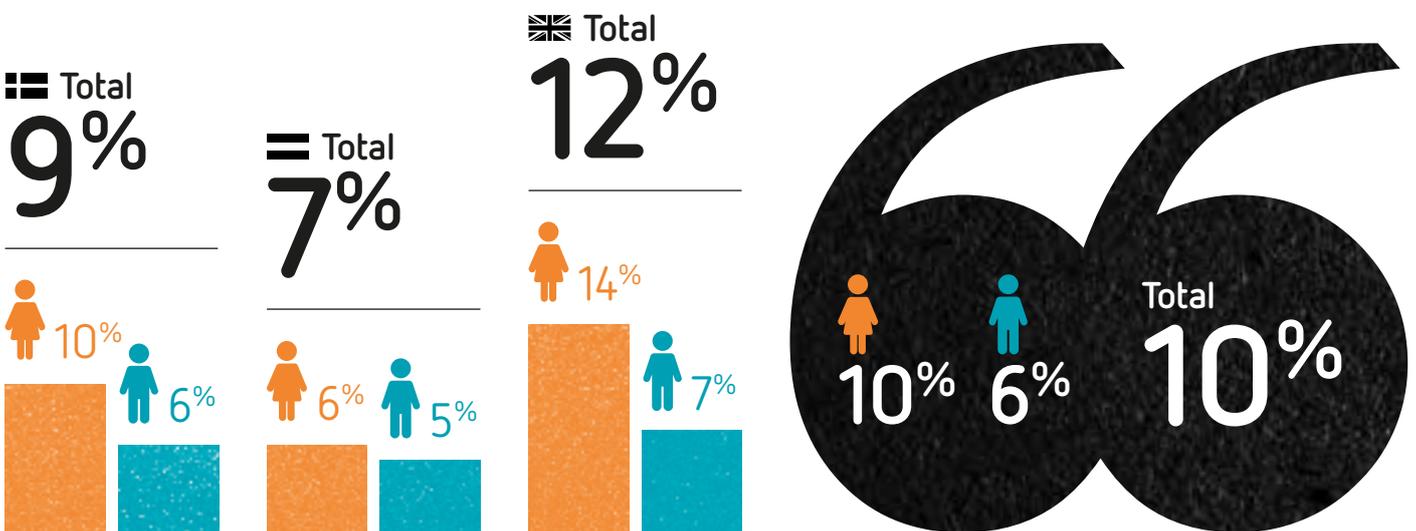
### Coercion and pressure

1 in 10 respondents aged 13-17 years said their boyfriend or girlfriend had pressured them to share nude images in the last year (9% Denmark, 7% Hungary, 12% UK).

Note that the total prevalence for respondents in Hungary (7%) is higher than for girls (6%) and boys (5%) as the overall total includes those who did not disclose their gender or who prefer to self-describe.

Overall, girls (10%) were significantly more likely than boys (6%) to report that their partner had pressured them to share nude images of themselves in the last year.

"He asked me for a nude. In the beginning, of course I said no, but he kept on asking me. I felt forced to do it and when I had sent the picture, he asked for more pictures. I didn't want to anymore so I said no. He blackmailed me and said, that if I didn't send more pictures he would send my nude to all of his friends and to the people at my school." – Girl, 13 years, Denmark



Percentage of 13-17s who have been pressured by a boyfriend/girlfriend to share nude images in the last year

## Katie's Story

---



Katie's (15) mother, living in Budapest called the Kek Vonal internet helpline very distraught and worried about her daughter. Her daughter had previously had a two-month-long relationship with a 32 year old man. This had recently ended and since then he had been harassing Katie with online messages across various platforms and also in real life. On occasions he followed her, and one time this ended in a physical assault. The police were involved, but it took a long time to process her case. However, although the report was made to the local police about the harassment and physical assault, the parents didn't know that the man has also been blackmailing Katie saying he would share the intimate photos Katie previously shared with him. The man decided to send these photos to the boys in Katie's class. When these classmates received the photos, they shared them with other friends, relatives, and sport mates, so the rumours started to spread about Katie in many schools and different peer communities. Due to the rumours and lies spreading along with her pictures, Katie was sent messages, calling her names, and actual sexual offers from peers, and older boys as well. The helpline offered to help the mother to have a consultation with the school, and also referred Katie to the local Child services to a psychologist to receive emotional support. The police are now involved but the investigation is ongoing and Katie and her mother have not heard from the police for some time. ”

Note: This composite case study is drawn from the real experiences of multiple young people.

## 6.3 Sexualised bullying

**This form of online sexual harassment involves a person being targeted by, and systematically excluded from, a group or community with the use of sexual content that humiliates, upsets or discriminates against them.**

This research identifies a range of behaviours that can constitute sexualised bullying, which is typically focused on 'slut shaming' (see Chapter 5) or discriminating against someone because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender, gender identity or physical appearance.

These behaviours typically take place in front of an active, engaged audience within a school or local community and may be perpetrated by a large group of young people. This group phenomenon aims to systematically exclude a person, with a number of actions signalling that the young person is not included, whether as the target of a joke being made about them or being rejected from the peer group. This exists in the context of wider peer group dynamics, centred around friendship 'drama', falling-outs and 'banter'.

These behaviours can take place without the knowledge of the victim in 'private' digital spaces (such as group chats) or can be targeted at the victim or visible to them and the wider peer group in 'public' digital spaces (such as social media profiles or video platforms). The content being shared can either 'name and shame' a person, or an 'indirect' may indicate who the person involved is without naming them directly. Sometimes young people can be intentionally excluded from these conversations about them. In some instances young people may not know who the perpetrators are, particularly when fake profiles have been created.

This form of online sexual harassment typically seeks to elicit a reaction from others. When a young person – or group of young people – impersonates a peer to behave sexually towards others, or when they publish someone's personal details and invite others to harass them, they are prompting a wider response from the peer group.

The 'bait out' phenomenon characterises this, with young people setting up a page or group on social media for people in their school or local area to share sexual gossip or images. It can also involve videos being shared on a platform like YouTube where young people name 'sluts' in their school. This 'shaming' culture is particularly targeted at girls, who can face ongoing harassment and bullying as a result.

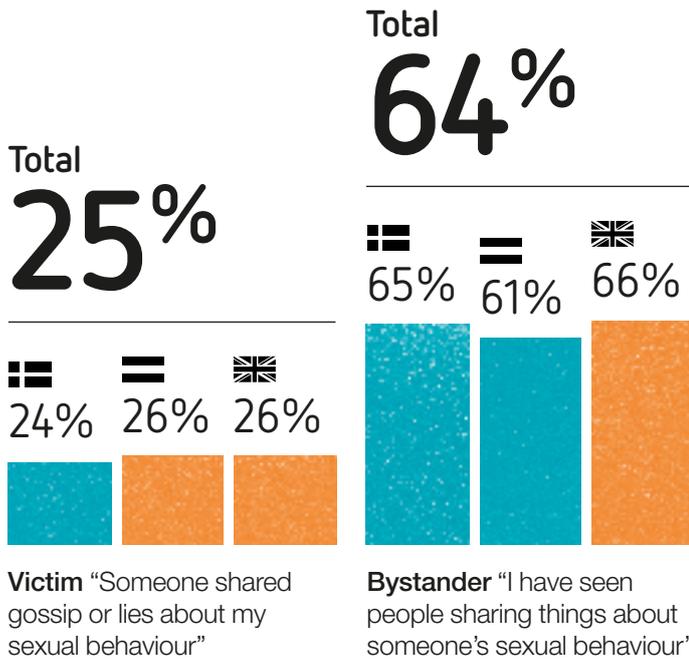
The perpetration of this form of online sexual harassment can range in behaviour, from simply 'liking' a post to sharing content to encourage a reaction from others. While young people may not feel they have participated if they 'like' a post, this can contribute to the victimisation of the target.

The group dynamics with this particular form of online sexual harassment can make it difficult for young people to recognise it as harassment. Many young people find it hard to draw distinct boundaries between 'banter' and harassment, with many saying this kind of behaviour is usually being carried out for amusement rather than to intentionally harm someone else, despite the very real impact it can have on the young people being targeted. Regardless of the intention, sexualised bullying is defined by the victim's felt experience.

# 25%

of young people across Denmark, Hungary and UK have had rumours about their sexual behaviour shared online in the last year

"I had an acquaintance, and we fell out, ugly, so he wrote ugly comments to my photos and things like that, and then he made a new profile with my profile picture, he added all my friends on Facebook and he posted that "I am gay" Boy, 14 years, Hungary"



### Sexual gossip

A quarter of young people (25%) have been the target of sexual gossip online in the last year, with people their age sharing gossip or lies about their sexual behaviour (24% Denmark, 26% Hungary, 26% UK).

"One of my friends, right, on his school there is this internet profile... Then you send something to them... gossip right, and then they make a post about it." – Boy, 14-15 years, Denmark

"Rumours started about me having sex with a boy in the school. The rumours soon got out of hand and spread online and more throughout school. Some of them were unfortunately true but most of them were false and horrible that made me feel awful. I told a teacher and eventually they got sorted but some are still going around." – Girl, 15 years, UK

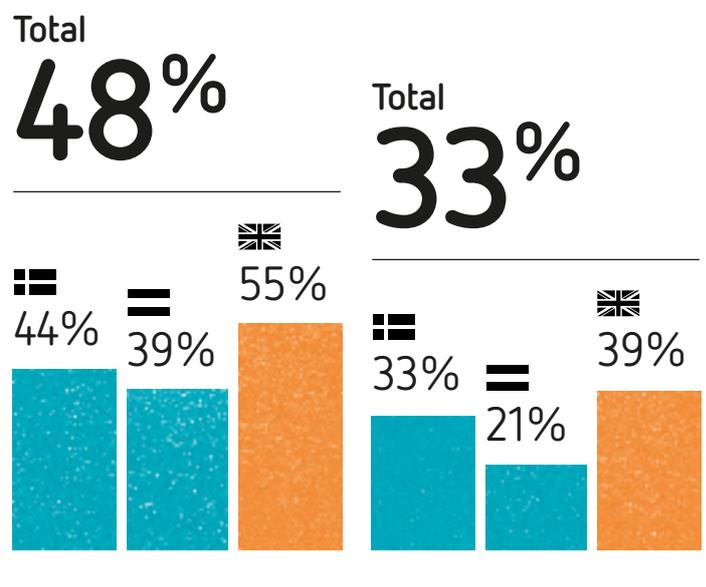
This behaviour had been witnessed by almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents in the last year (65% Denmark, 61% Hungary, 66% UK).

Percentage of 13-17s in Denmark, Hungary and the UK who have witnessed or been the target of sexual gossip being shared online

"I think for the most part people just mind their business and they just act as if they don't know what's happening. I think the majority of people go with the crowd, with the more popular group, the people who have more people on their side."  
 Girl, 16-17 years, UK

There is a significant gender difference with girls (26%) being more likely to be the target of sexual gossip in the last year compared to boys (23%).

Moreover, attitudes revealed in the survey indicate that girls are more likely to receive a negative reaction if sexual gossip is shared about them online. Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) said that girls are judged more harshly for sexual rumours shared about them online than boys (72% Denmark, 70% Hungary, 65% UK).



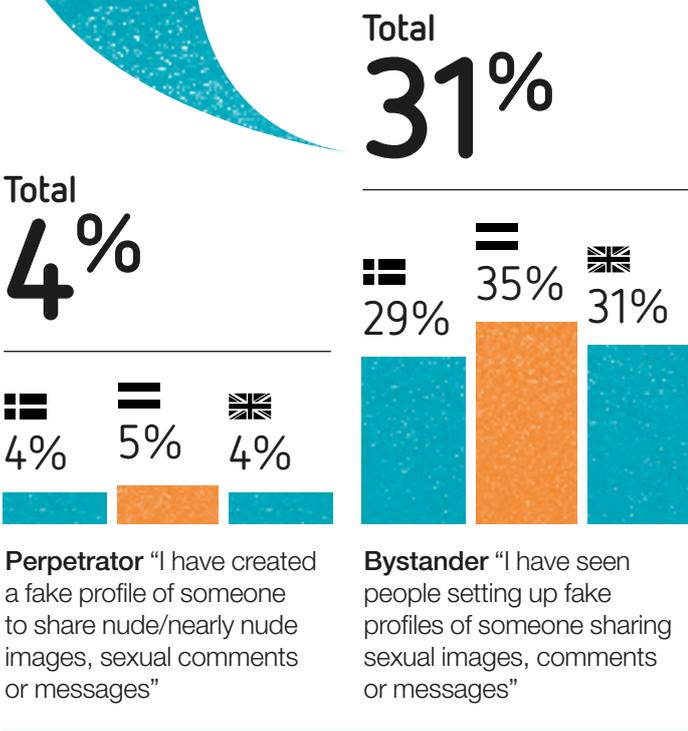
Percentage of 13-17s who have witnessed people sharing things about someone's sexual behaviour without naming them ('indirects') in the last year

Percentage of 13-17s who have witnessed people setting up a page/group on social media in the last year for people in their school to share sexual gossip or images ('bait out page')

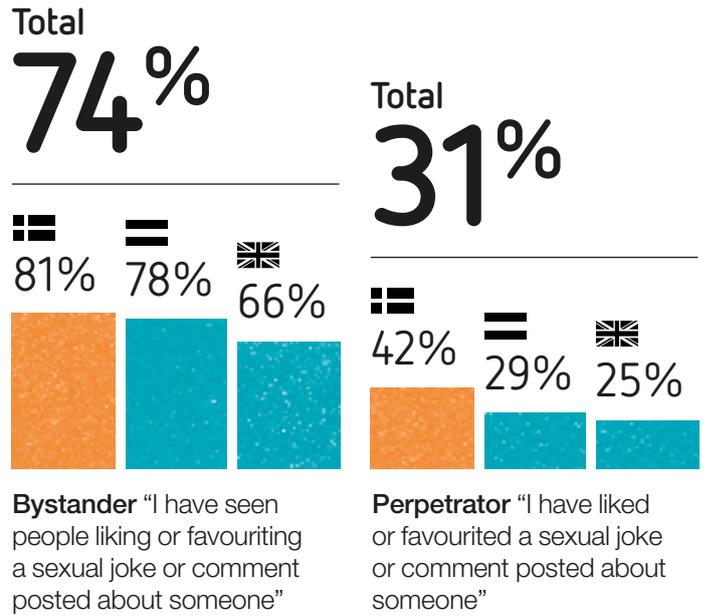
**Participating with a 'like'**

The research found that many young people are participating in online sexual harassment by 'liking' or 'favouriting' a sexual comment posted about someone. While young people may not feel they have participated if they 'like' a post, this plays an important role in the further victimisation of the target and can endorse and extend the impact of the initial post. In some cases the post may be intended as a joke, but the impact on the victim can be severe if they feel they are being ridiculed and shamed by the wider peer group.

"Someone has made a fake account of my friend, and have been commenting mean things on other people's photos, so the person who puts the photo on the internet think it's the person... it has stopped now, but she still doesn't know who did it."  
 Girl, 13, UK



Percentage of 13-17s in Denmark, Hungary and the UK who have created a fake profile to share sexual images in the last year, comments or messages or who have witnessed others doing this



Percentage of 13-17s in Denmark, Hungary and the UK who have participated by 'liking' or 'favouriting' or who have witnessed others doing this in the last year

**Sexualised impersonation**

In the context of cyberbullying, the use of 'fake profiles' is well documented. When fake profiles are used to share content or behaviour of a sexual nature, this can then be defined as a form of sexualised bullying and online sexual harassment.

"Apparently, I sent a nude to a girl in my year, but this was from a fake account with a picture from the internet. This went on for at least 2 months. It made me feel depressed, lonely and angry." – Gender unknown/undecided, 14 years, UK

This research found that 1 in 25 respondents (4%) aged 13-17 years said that they had created a fake profile for this purpose in the last year, while almost a third (31%) had witnessed others doing this.

Fake profiles typically come in two main forms:

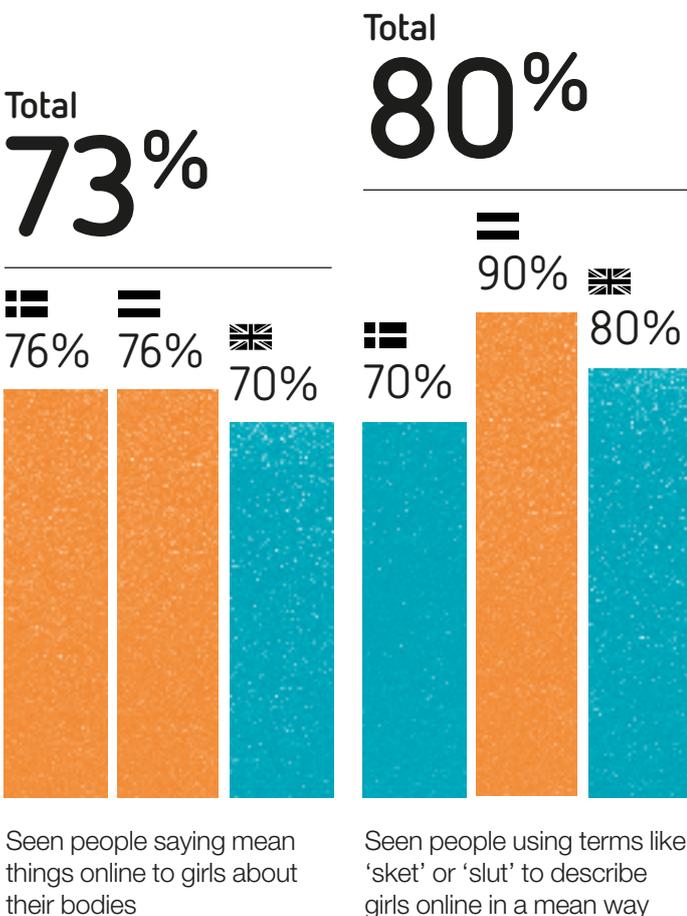
- a) **Realistic:** A realistic impersonation is meant to appear to be a particular person. The profile then seeks to connect with or 'friend' the wider peer group and may share inappropriate content or behave towards others in an inappropriate way. For example, this may include sexually harassing others by sending unwanted sexual images or messages. The person being impersonated can then face a backlash from the wider peer group for their alleged behaviour.
- b) **Non-realistic:** A non-realistic impersonation is not meant to appear to be a particular person, but may be used to ridicule and bully a particular person. In the context of online sexual harassment, this may be to bully someone based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation, or to shame them for their alleged sexual activities.

### Doxing and online sexual harassment

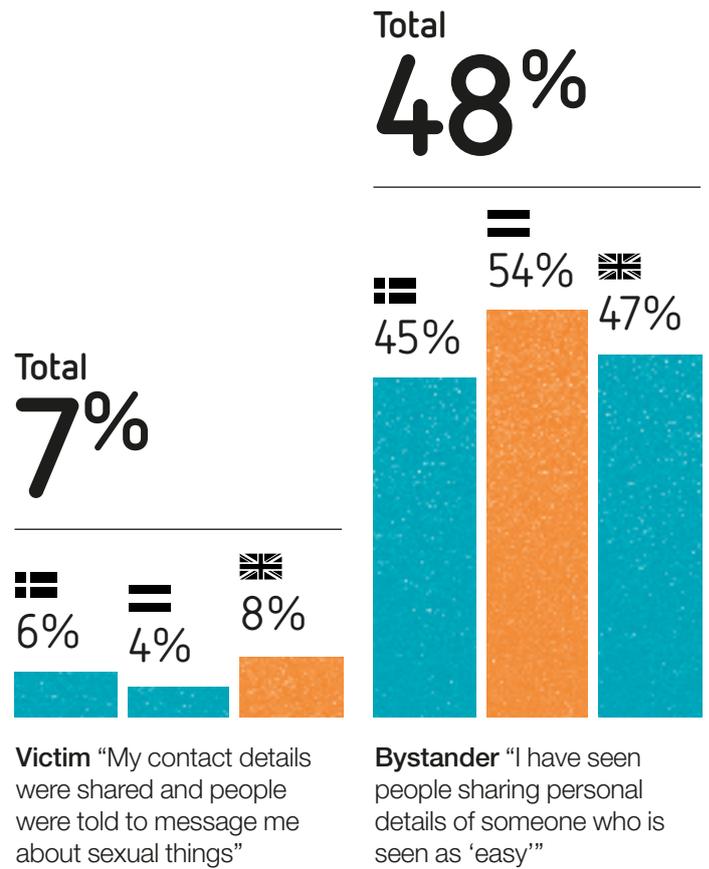
Doxing is the practice of posting personal information of an individual online. In the context of online sexual harassment, this can involve naming a person and sharing their contact details (including social media accounts) accompanied with something of a sexual nature. For example, their personal details accompanied by their nude images or a disclosure about their alleged sexual activity (for example that they are 'easy'), or inciting others to sexually harass the person.

7% of respondents aged 13-17 years said that in the last year their contact details were shared and people were told to message them about sexual things (6% Denmark, 4% Hungary, 8% UK). There were no significant gender differences in being victimised with this form of online sexual harassment.

Almost half of respondents (48%) had witnessed other young people sharing personal details of someone who is seen as 'easy' in the last year (45% Denmark, 54% Hungary, 47% UK).



Percentage of 13-17s in Denmark, Hungary and the UK who have witnessed girls being called offensive sexual names or being shamed about their bodies in the last year



Percentage of 13-17s in Denmark, Hungary and the UK who have witnessed or been a victim of doxing in the last year

### Shaming girls: body shaming and slut shaming

The majority of young people had witnessed girls being called offensive sexual names or being shamed about their bodies. This takes place in a wider social and cultural context (see Chapter 5).

'There was a girl in a photo cuddling a different boy to who she was going out with and its got sent around 2 different schools and everyone was screenshotting it and posted it to their story's saying "slut" or "slag" or "cheater" or "she cant keep her hands off boys lol" Girl, 13 years, UK

4 in 5 respondents (80%) had witnessed people their age using terms like 'sket' or 'slut' to describe girls in a mean way online in the last year (70% Denmark, 90% Hungary, 80% UK). Over a quarter of respondents (26%) admitted doing this themselves in the last year (15% Denmark, 46% Hungary, 26% UK).

Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) said that they had witnessed people their age saying mean things online to girls about their bodies in the last year (76% Denmark, 76% Hungary, 70% UK).

## Sofie's story

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Sofie is a 14 year old girl who lives in a small suburban town in Jutland in Denmark. She has learning difficulties and sometimes finds it hard to make friends. She wants to get in with a popular group of girls in her class and has been trying to share the same kind of things they post on social media. They always post really pretty pictures of themselves, showing a lot of skin, so she posts a photo of herself in her underwear on her Snapchat Story. However, one of the popular girls screenshots the photo and posts it on her Story writing 'nice try' over the image. Everyone joins in with saying she looked ugly and that she is an attention seeker for sharing that. Sofie gets lots of direct messages from people replying to her Story saying horrible things or sharing emojis to ridicule her like the 'crying laughing emoji' or the 'geek glasses emojis'. At one point she was added into a group chat on WhatsApp with about 15 people and they were sharing the photo and making jokes about her. She knew some of the people but not all of them. Some of the people said really disgusting sexual things about her. Then they removed her from the group. She feels really worried about what people were saying behind her back. She doesn't speak to anyone about it, as she feels embarrassed about the photo and doesn't think any adults would understand or be able to help her anyway. A year later people still joke about it, and she is always worried that her picture is going to be shared again or might come up if you search her name. She doesn't really post on Snapchat anymore now. ”

Note: This composite case study is drawn from the real experiences of multiple young people.

### Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic online sexual harassment

Online sexual harassment can include discrimination and hate crimes, including online sexual harassment related to a person's actual or perceived gender identity or sexual orientation. This needs to be contextualised within a wider culture of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (see Chapter 5).

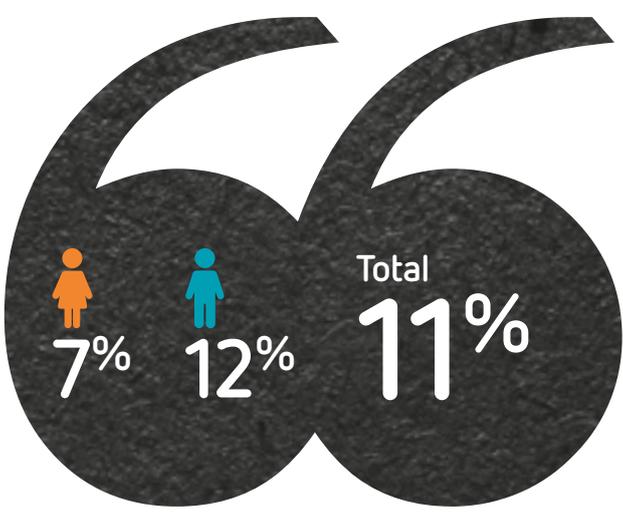
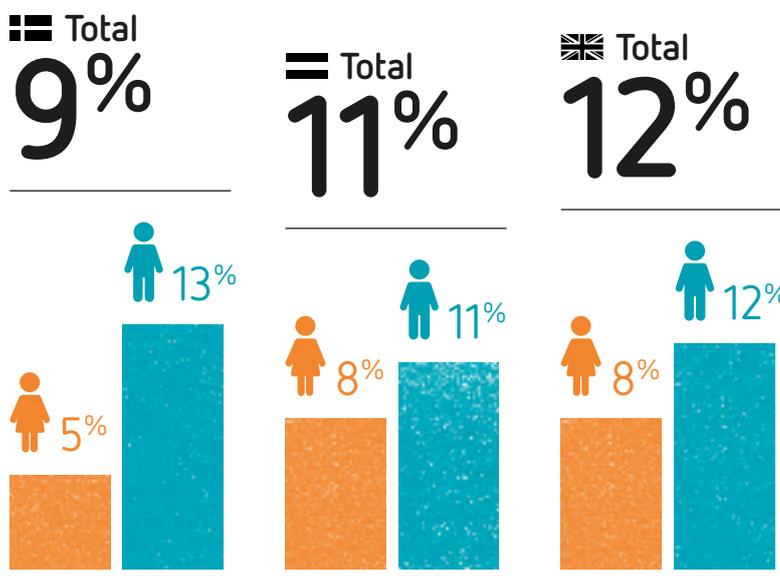
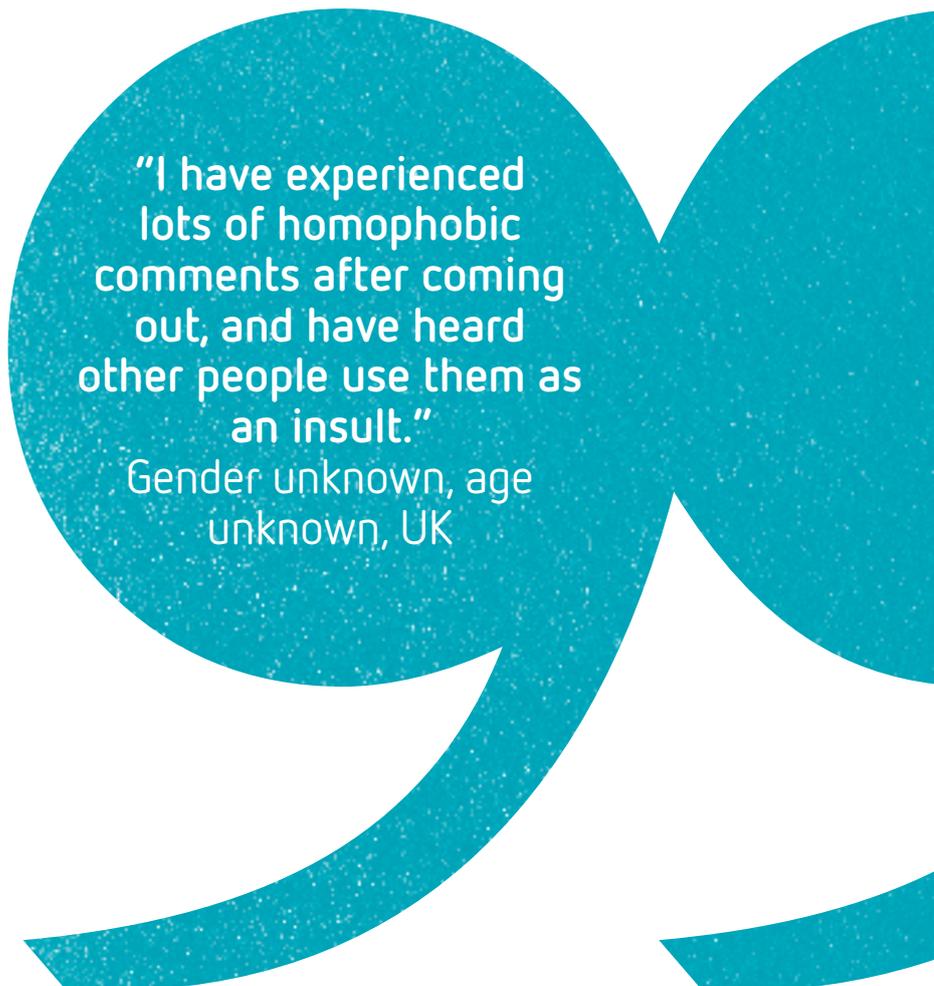
This can include homophobic, biphobic and transphobic online bullying, including 'outing' someone online.

Over 1 in 10 respondents aged 13-17 years (11%) said they had been bullied online in the last year using homophobic or transphobic language (9% Denmark, 11% Hungary, 12% UK).

*"I have experienced lots of homophobic comments after coming out, and have heard other people use them as an insult."* – Gender unknown/undecided, age unknown, UK

Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) said they had witnessed this behaviour in the last year (71% Denmark, 59% Hungary, 72% UK).

There is a significant gender difference with this form of victimisation, with boys (12%) being more likely to have been targeted in the last year compared to girls (7%). The limited sample size prevented further analysis into the unique experiences of young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT+), and this remains an important area for further research.



Percentage of 13-17s who have been bullied online using homophobic or transphobic language (mean words about being gay, lesbian or trans) in the last year

## Owen's story

---



Owen is a 14 year old boy living in a village near Aberystwyth in north Wales in the UK. Someone has created a fake profile on Instagram 'owen\_bums\_mr.crane' which ridicules him for being gay, saying that he has a crush on his teacher Mr Crane. The profile shares photos that had been secretly taken of him talking to his teacher and edited to make them sexual. Lots of people in his school follow the profile and like the posts shared. Even people who Owen thought were his friends. He feels it is probably all meant to be a joke, even though he feels really upset by it. His phone number is posted on the page and he starts getting anonymous messages calling him really offensive names. Owen thinks he might be gay but hasn't told anyone yet and doesn't feel he can speak to his family or a teacher about this. A close friend, Harry, is worried that Owen seems really low and had missed school that day. That evening his friend Harry speaks to his mum about this and she encourages him to speak to a teacher. After finding out, the school called the Professionals Online Safety Helpline in the UK to get help with reporting the profile, which was removed that day. The school support Owen, and check that it's okay to involve his parents. Later that week another fake profile is created, and the school help Owen to report it and get it removed, but as they don't know who in school created it they found it difficult to address this behaviour. They decide to hold a whole-school assembly and say they will involve the police if another profile is created. ”

Note: This composite case study is drawn from the real experiences of multiple young people.

## 6.4 Unwanted sexualisation

Online sexual harassment can involve unwelcome sexual requests, comments and content. This form of online sexual harassment is significantly more likely to be experienced by girls.

Young people can face this behaviour across multiple platforms and contexts and this can take place in private or public digital spaces.

- **Private:** Unwanted sexualisation can take place in private digital spaces, for example direct messages to a person sharing unwanted sexual content (including sexual messages and images) or unwelcome sexual requests (including to share nude images or engage in sexual chat).

“There is like several on my football team who swiped right or what it is called... And then just went into all the friends they got and then just wrote, send nudes, send nudes, send nudes, send nudes etc.” – Boy, 14-15 years, Denmark

- **Public:** Unwanted sexualisation can take place in public digital spaces, for example sexual comments on a person's photos on their social media profile, unwanted sexual content shared in a group chat, or editing someone's photo to make it sexual and sharing this online.

“Someone I know posted a photo of herself and she kept getting comments to take off her top or other things” – Girl, 14 years, UK

These behaviours can have negative impact on the young person (typically girls) being targeted with such harassment in both the short and long term.

This behaviour can form part of a wider context of relationship abuse or stalking.

“Some kid decided to message me saying how he sees me everyday and how he wants to have sex with me. It made me feel like I couldn't go outside as he's 'seen' me everywhere. I stopped going out at night and stopped going out on my own. I blocked him, haven't heard from him since but still creeps me out.” – Girl, 13 years, UK

It is sometimes difficult for young people to identify the boundaries between 'unwanted' and harassing sexual behaviour online, compared to 'wanted' and consensual sexual interaction online. The perspective of the victim and their perception of the interaction is essential in defining the context of this harassment.

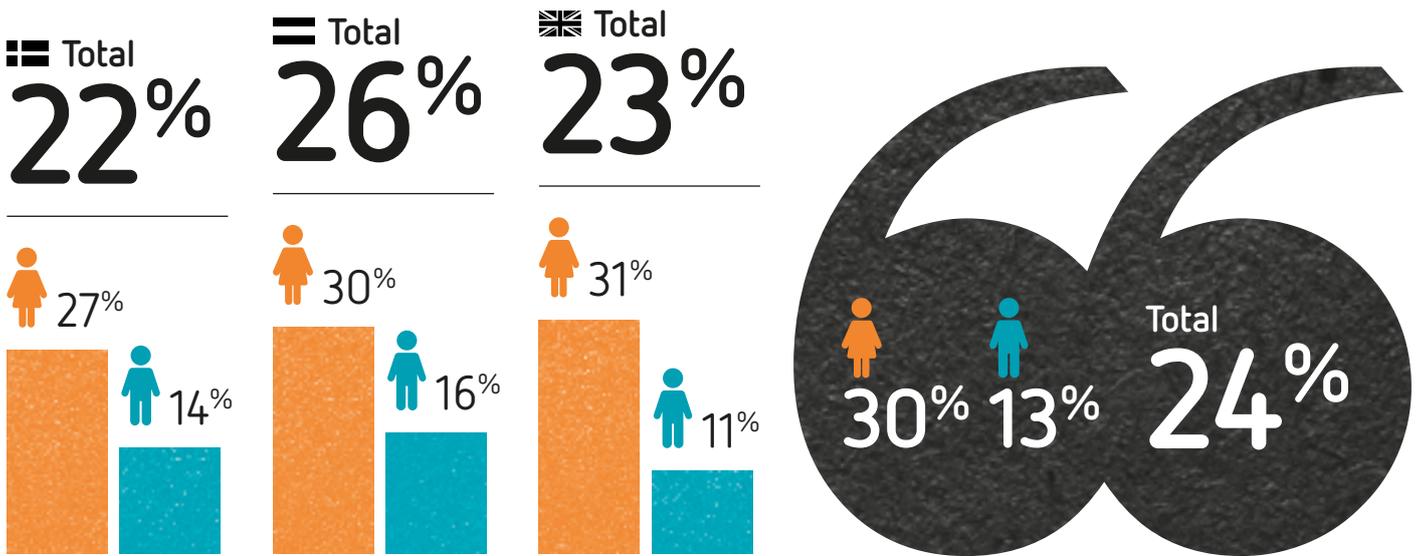
“But I don't want to see them [the photos], he just brings his mobile and says 'Look' so you have to look at it and there it is...” – Girl, 14 years, Hungary

# 24%

of young people across Denmark, Hungary and UK have received unwanted sexual messages and images in the last year (30% of girls compared to 13% of boys)

“We always bantered with each other, you know, and once he... well, he just sent a really really intimate photo of himself...but I was just kidding, I didn't mean it... I never thought he would be able to send such a pic to his classmate... and of course I didn't want him to...”

Girl, 13 years, Hungary

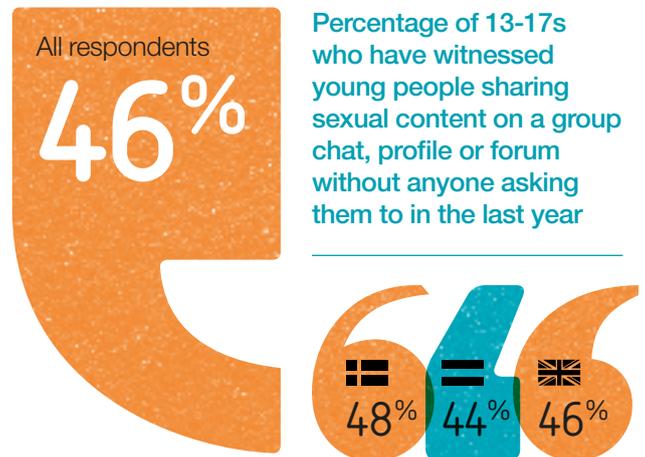


Percentage of 13-17s who have received unwanted sexual messages and images in the last year

Almost a quarter of respondents (24%) said that in the last year someone kept sending them nude or nearly nude images or sexual messages when they didn't want them (22% Denmark, 26% Hungary, 23% UK).

Girls are significantly more likely to be victimised with this unwanted sexual communication, with 30% of female respondents aged 13-17 years saying they had experienced this in the last year compared to 13% of male respondents.

“It was late at night and I got a message on Facebook messenger it was from a boy from my school. It was pornography and then he started messaging me. I blocked him but I still get upset about it sometimes.”  
 Girl, 15 years, UK



### Sexual comments

"I'm a member of a group where...they posted a photo of a girl and wrote such comments [like 'I wanna fuck her']." Girl, 13 years, Hungary

Unwanted sexual comments, typically on photos, are a public form of unwanted sexualisation that objectify the person in the image. This may involve someone posting a comment or emoji about how attractive someone looks or what sexual acts they want to do with that person.

"If it's sexual or saying nasty things about someone...it can also be like in the way that you write it, with... If you write hot body and then this tongue man... that can be like a bit sexual as well... it could affect her... that there is someone who writes something like that to her, and she then don't feel comfortable." – Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

While sometimes the intention of this behaviour may be to compliment someone, this unwanted sexualisation can contribute to the wider experience of harassment and objectification that many girls face online (see Chapter 5). It is important to consider the victim's perspective and the impact this has on them. The impact of this sexualisation on a particular young person is likely to depend on many factors, including their relationship with the person commenting, the nature of the comment and the regularity and intensity of these encounters. It is important to recognise that young people may want to receive compliments on their images and this can be done in a respectful way. However, there are instances where young people may feel harassed as a result of this behaviour.

Almost a quarter of respondents (24%) reported that they had received sexual comments on a photo they posted of themselves in the last year (27% Denmark, 17% Hungary, 26% UK). It is not possible from this analysis to know if these sexual comments were unwanted and had a negative impact on the person.

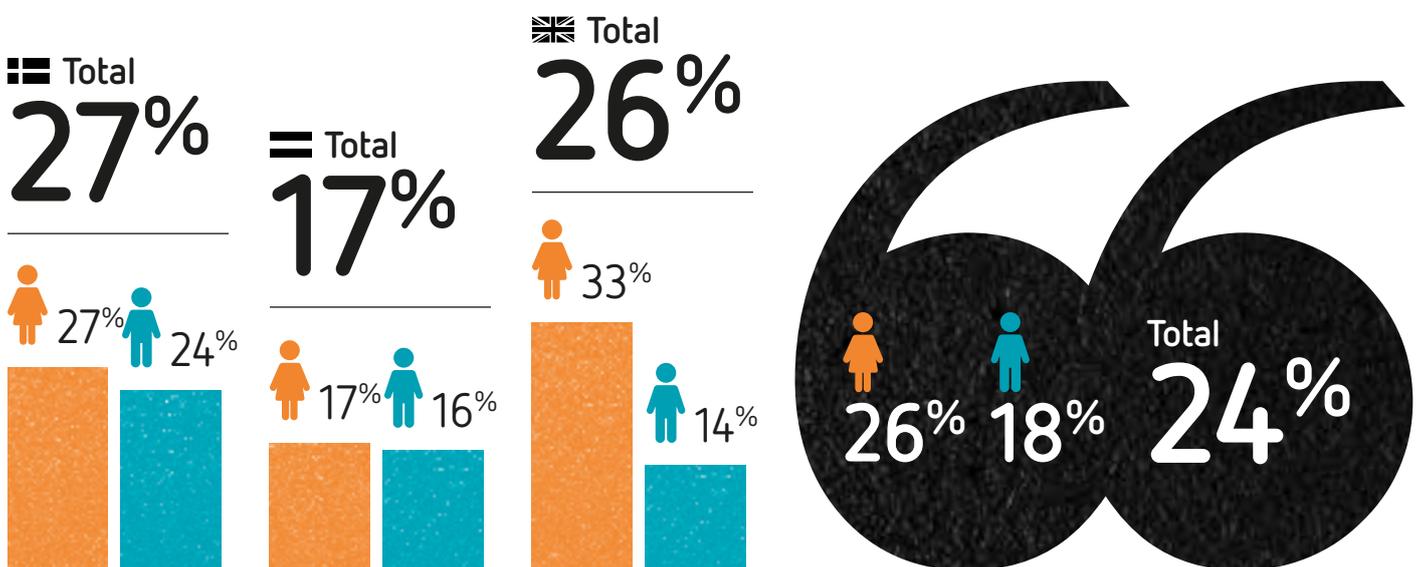
Girls are significantly more likely to experience this, with 26% of female respondents saying they had experienced this in the last year compared to 18% of male respondents.

"As more of the comments [on her photos] have been coming on, she's like 'I think I'm doing a bad thing, it's getting all these bad comments, like sexual comments, I don't think I should do this anymore' and she starts posting less which makes her feel less conscious about herself, making her feel worse about herself rather than feeling really good, that she's doing something nice, that she loves. She's like 'I shouldn't do this cos it's a bad thing, what am I doing wrong?' So that's causing her to spiral down. It could get worse" – Boy, 14-15 years, UK

Almost half of respondents (49%) have witnessed other young people posting sexual comments on an image of someone they know in the last year (46% Denmark, 48% Hungary, 53% UK).

"Everybody who posts pictures of themselves can have these types of comments from people they don't even know, but at the same time have some from someone we know, where they write like, nice body and so on." Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

The survey revealed that many young people hold attitudes that normalise the expectation of this form of interaction. As reported in Chapter 5, over 1 in 5 respondents (22%) said that they felt that getting sexual comments is just part of being online (12% Denmark, 33% Hungary, 23% UK).



Percentage of 13-17s who have received sexual comments on a photo they posted of themselves in the last year

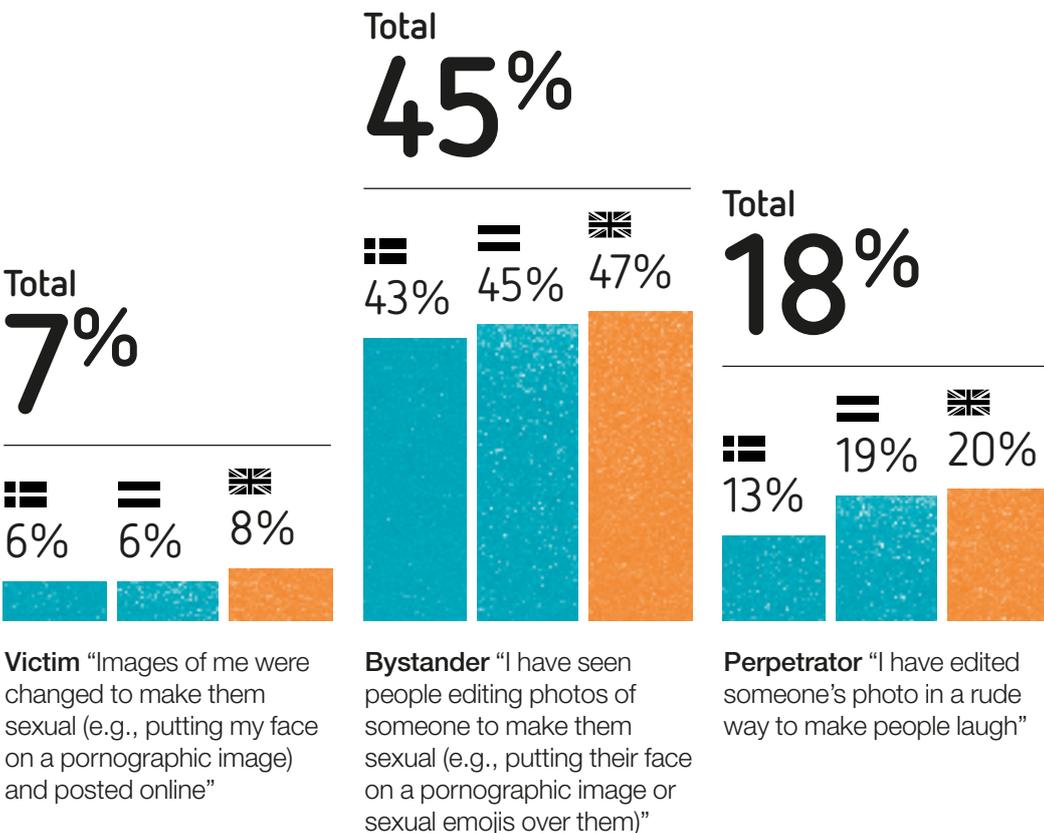
**Editing photos to make them sexual**

Almost half of respondents aged 13-17 years (45%) said that in the last year they have witnessed people their age editing photos of someone to make them sexual, for example putting their face on a pornographic image or sexual emojis over them (43% Denmark, 45% Hungary, 47% UK).

In the last year, 7% had experienced their images being changed to make them sexual and posted online (6% Denmark, 6% Hungary, 8% UK). There was a significant gender difference, with boys (8%) being more likely to be victimised with this form of online sexual harassment in the last year compared to girls (4%).

Almost 1 in 5 respondents (18%) said they have edited someone's photo in a rude way to make people laugh in the last year (13% Denmark, 19% Hungary, 20% UK). This could be considered as online sexual harassment if a person feels targeted or victimised as a result.

It is interesting to note that more young people reported that they have edited someone's image (18%), compared to being the target of this (7%). It might be that edited images are shared privately (for example in group chats) without the victim being aware that this is happening. Or it may be a result of the way these were worded differently, with young people being asked if their images had been changed to 'make them sexual', or being asked if they have edited someone's photo 'in a rude way to make people laugh'. There may also be differences in the ways that victims and perpetrators identify such behaviour.



Prevalence of young people in Denmark, Hungary and the UK being involved in image-editing as a victim, bystander or perpetrator

# 7.

## Preventing and responding to online sexual harassment

7.1 How young people respond and barriers they face

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7.2 Young people's experiences of preventative education

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7.3 Perspectives of teachers and professionals

p72



# 7. Preventing and responding to online sexual harassment

The research reveals that while there are examples of effective multi-sector cooperation in preventing and responding to online sexual harassment, there remain significant challenges.

These range from providing effective preventative education and overcoming barriers that prevent young people from reporting, to ensuring that schools, police and others are equipped to effectively handle incidents.

Furthermore, it is essential to better understand local and national strategies, which significantly vary between countries and even between individual schools or police services.

"I didn't search for a teacher or anyone else for help, I tried to handle it myself. I know this is not the best way. Though I think I handled it well; I talked to him. I threatened him badly, I said if he even thought about my girlfriend something bad would happen."

Boy, 15 years, Hungary

"Someone was sent nudes from a person that they didn't want them from and were being pressured into sending them back. My friend downloaded Zipit and sent a picture saying "It's never gonna happen" and then proceeded to block the person."

Girl, 14 years, UK

## 7.1 How young people respond and barriers they face

### How young people would be likely to respond to online sexual harassment

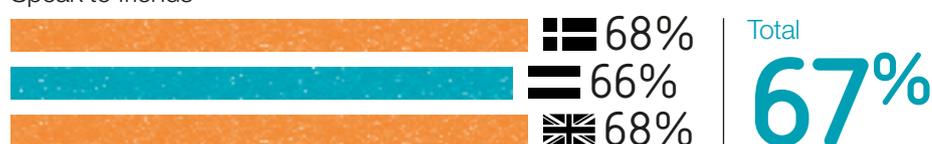
The survey asked young people what they would be likely to do if they experienced online sexual harassment in the future.

#### How young people would be likely to respond to online sexual harassment - top 4 responses

##### Block them



##### Speak to friends



##### Tell the people involved to stop or take images / comments down



##### Speak to a parent / carer



In all three countries, young people said that if they experienced online sexual harassment they would be most likely to:

- Block them (82%)
- Speak to friends (67%)
- Tell the people involved to stop or take the image/ comments down (65%)

Participants in focus groups often talked about confiding in friends should they find themselves in this situation. However, young people also said they faced challenges when supporting their peers.

“I don’t feel like there’s much you can do about it...It might be that you can delete it, but it’ll still be there forever, like on the internet. But what you can do is just... Like if I had a friend who had experienced something like this, then the only thing I could do was to try to stand by her and try to support her as much as I can. Because there’s... To be completely honest, I don’t feel like there is very much you can do.” – Boy, 13-14 years, Denmark

Almost half of respondents (48%) said they would speak to a parent or carer if they experienced online sexual harassment. Young people in the UK were least likely to say this (39%) compared to young people in Denmark (56%) and Hungary (58%).

Fewer young people said they would be likely to:

- Report to a social network (39%)
- Report to police (27%)
- Speak to a helpline (15%)
- Speak to teachers (14%)

Young people talked about different coping strategies and responses they had developed in order to deal with online sexual harassment. Some young people cited using humour, threats or other alternative ways in order to resist pressure or to tackle online sexual harassment.

“Someone was sent nudes from a person that they didn’t want them from and were being pressured into sending them back. My friend downloaded Zipit and sent a picture saying “it’s never gonna happen” and then proceeded to block the person.” – Girl, 14 years, UK

### Ignoring online sexual harassment and the barriers young people face in reporting

2 in 5 respondents aged 13-17 years (39%) said they would be likely to ignore online sexual harassment if it happened to them in the future and young people reported a range of barriers that might prevent them from reporting online sexual harassment.

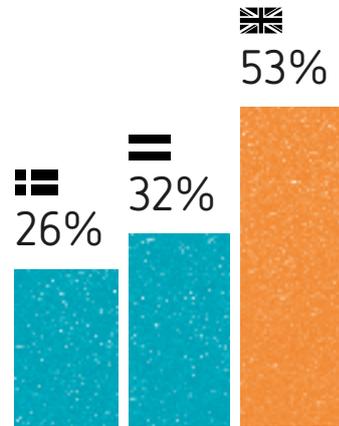
Young people in the UK were most likely to ignore online sexual harassment, with over half of UK respondents (53%) saying they would do this compared to just 26% of Danish respondents and 32% of Hungarian respondents. Indeed, young people in the UK were more likely to ignore online sexual harassment than to speak to their parents or carers, unlike young people in Denmark and Hungary who were more likely to speak to a parent or carer.

Young people reported a range of barriers that might prevent them from reporting online sexual harassment, for example to a parent or carer, teacher, police or social network.

Top 5 barriers to seeking help:

- Too embarrassed (52%)
- Worried about what would happen next (42%)
- Worried about being targeted by those involved (42%)
- Worried that they are to blame (39%)
- Would rather sort it out themselves (39%)

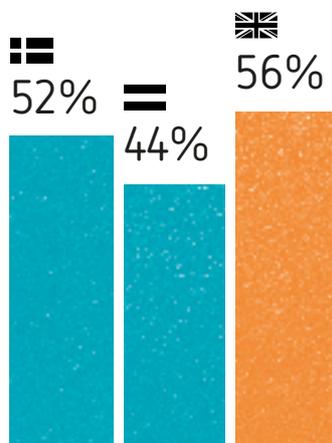
Total  
**39%**



Percentage of young people who said it is likely they would ignore it if they experienced online sexual harassment

**“It’s not something that you are proud of most of the times. And it’s like really vulnerable to talk to someone about it. Like standing by that I’ve sent a nude picture.”**  
Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

Total  
**52%**



### Embarrassment

The main barrier that young people face when reporting online sexual harassment is embarrassment.

Over half of respondents (52%) agreed that they might not report online sexual harassment because they would be too embarrassed, and this was the most common response for young people in Denmark (52%), Hungary (44%) and the UK (56%).

“Because of the boy... I couldn’t talk to my mum about this stuff because I’d be ashamed of the boy. Mum would say “Who is this guy you are talking to, it’s pathetic!” – Girl, 13 years, Hungary

Percentage of young people who might not report online sexual harassment because they would be too embarrassed

## Concerned about the consequences of reporting

There was a clear understanding and recognition that the involvement of adults could be beneficial to helping young people deal with the experiences and impact of online sexual harassment.

*"In terms of her having the feeling that everyone knows the picture, I think it would be pretty good if she spoke to someone. To like, be relieved inside. Like, talked to someone who knew something about it. Some professionals."* – Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

However, it was very clear that there are significant barriers to telling teachers, parents, and police which were associated with concerns about reactions and judgements, as well as not being sure what exactly would happen once an adult was told. Confidentiality and privacy were key concerns for young people.

*"Just knowing that all of the pupils in the school have seen it, but then if you go to the police, then the police have seen it, and if you go to a teacher then your teachers have seen it. So really you just want as many people to not see it, so going to other people, showing them, that would get worse. Knowing that all the teachers in the school have seen it, and obviously it would be shared"* – Girl, 13-14 years, UK

Many young people agreed that they might not report online sexual harassment because they would be worried about what would happen next (42%) and were concerned that they might be targeted by those involved (42%) or called an informer or 'snitch' (29%).

*"It just becomes even worse, because then you're just someone who squeals to the teacher..."* – Girl, 14-15 years, UK

Young people may also not report because they are worried that they are to blame (39%) and that they might get into trouble or be prevented from using the internet (30%).

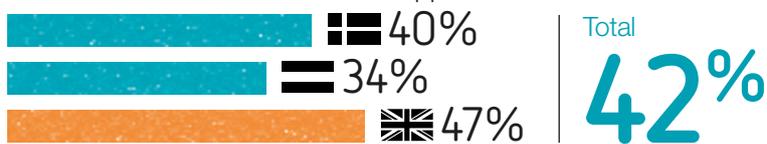
*"You might also think a little like, why did I do it, why didn't I just not do it. So you probably feel a lot of guilt when you start talking about it"* – Girl, 14-16 years, Denmark

*"The teacher tells everything to their parents, shows them what they did, so the parents can decide what to do, forbid them from using Facebook or from meeting friends..."* – Boy, 14, Hungary

Young people in the UK are more concerned about these factors than young people in Denmark and Hungary.

## Percentage of young people who might not report online sexual harassment because of concerns about the consequences of reporting

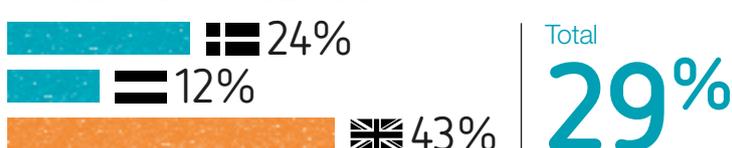
"I'd be worried about what would happen next"



"I'd be worried that I would be targeted by those involved"



"I wouldn't want to be called a snitch"



"I'd worry that I was to blame"



"My parents/carer would stop me using the internet"



*"It just becomes even worse, because then you're just someone who squeals to the teacher..."*  
Girl, 14-15 years, UK

### Dealing with it alone and hoping it will pass

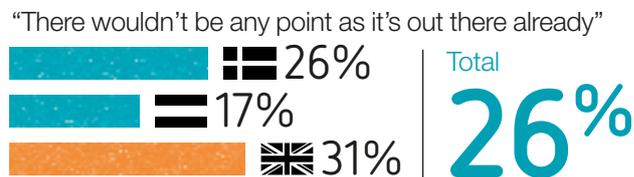
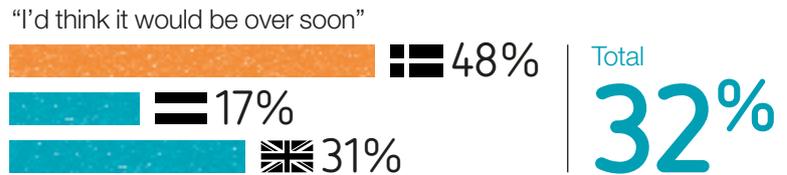
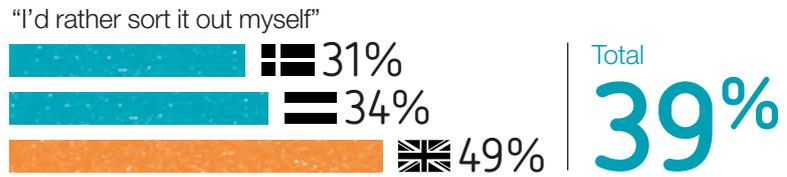
A significant number of young people said they would be unlikely to report online sexual harassment because they would rather sort it out themselves (39%) or they would think it would be over soon (32%).

“People can internalise the struggle and try and ignore it so it just goes away but obviously it won’t.” – Boy, 16-17 years, UK

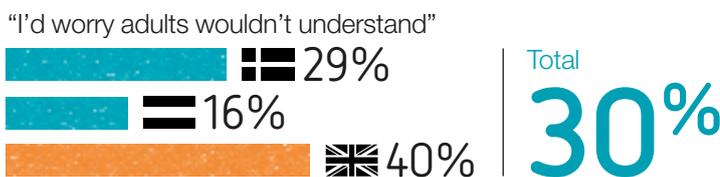
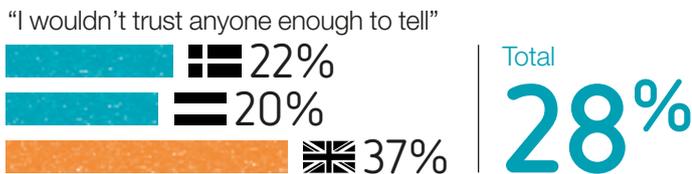
A quarter of respondents (26%) also felt that there wouldn’t be any point in reporting as it’s out there already.

“When it’s out, it’s out. Maybe I can get those who did it reported, but I think there is so much more that’s important. So I would probably see a psychologist, and work with it myself, instead of somebody having to go to jail. It’s not going to be removed from the internet anyway. Those who have seen it, have seen it.” – Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

### Percentage of young people who might not report online sexual harassment because they would deal with alone or just hope it would pass



### Percentage of young people who might not report online sexual harassment because of a lack of trust and understanding



### Lack of trust and understanding

Almost a third of respondents (30%) agreed that they might not report online sexual harassment because they would be worried that adults wouldn’t understand, with young people in the UK particularly likely to say this (40%) compared to young people in Denmark (29%) and Hungary (16%).

“Maybe just, have a clear mind when you go into a situation, despite knowing what had happened, don’t inflict your opinion on the student or whoever, because it doesn’t make anyone feel better, just makes the situation worse I think” – Girl, 16-17 years, UK

28% of respondents agreed that they might not report online sexual harassment because they wouldn’t trust anyone enough to tell, with young people in the UK particularly likely to agree with this (37%) compared to young people in Denmark (22%) and Hungary (20%).

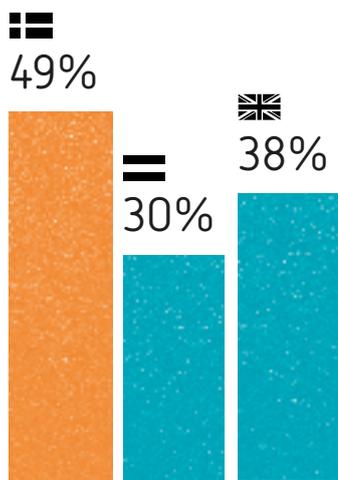
### Reporting to social networks and barriers faced

Almost 2 in 5 respondents (39%) said they would be likely to report to a social network if they experienced online sexual harassment.

Young people in Denmark are most likely to report to a social network (49%) compared to young people in Hungary (30%) and the UK (38%).

“I don’t know how to [report on social media]” – Girl, 14, Hungary

Total  
**39%**



### Percentage of young people who said it is likely they would report to a social network if they experienced online sexual harassment

In comparison, 82% said they would be likely to block someone on social media if they experienced online sexual harassment.

“I’ve tried reporting stuff before but it’s a long process cause like say Instagram or Snapchat you’d get a reply maybe after a week, a month or something. By the time it finishes then something else could have happened” – Boy, 13 years, UK

The main barriers that may prevent young people from reporting online sexual harassment to social media companies is not thinking it would help (43%) or that the social media company wouldn’t do anything (40%).

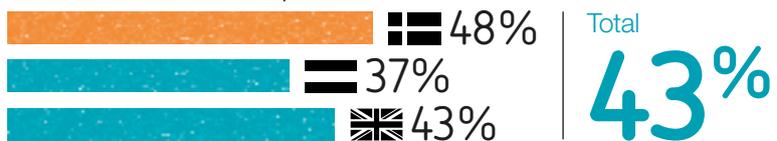


Top reason for not reporting on social media:  
**Not thinking it would help (43%)**

“In the end, I blocked him.”  
Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

### Barriers that prevent young people from reporting on social media

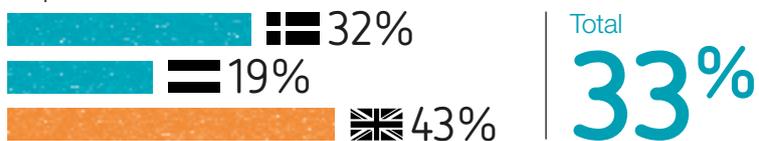
“I don’t think it would help”



“I don’t think they would do anything”



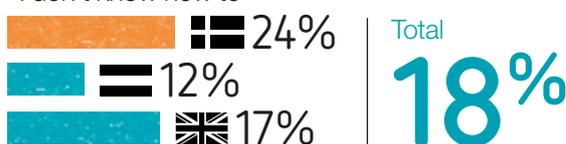
“I would be worried that the people involved would find out or get notified that I reported them”



“It’s too much effort”



“I don’t know how to”



**Reporting to police and barriers faced**

Over a quarter of respondents (27%) said they would be likely to report to the police if they experienced online sexual harassment.

Young people in the UK were least likely to say this (18%) compared to young people in Denmark (36%) and Hungary (33%).

“If you also had to sit down with the police, then you might feel more insecure and won’t feel like saying as many things.” – Girl, 14-16 years, Denmark

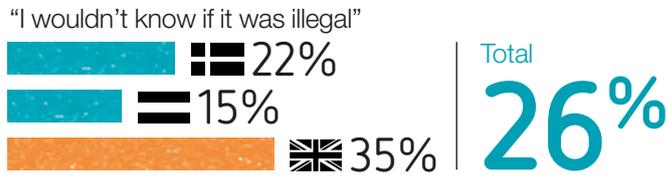
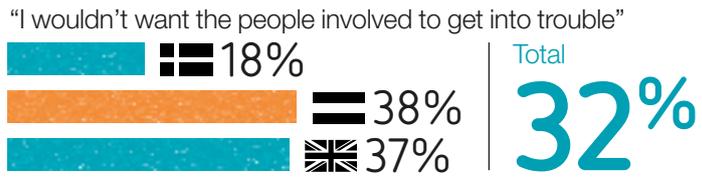
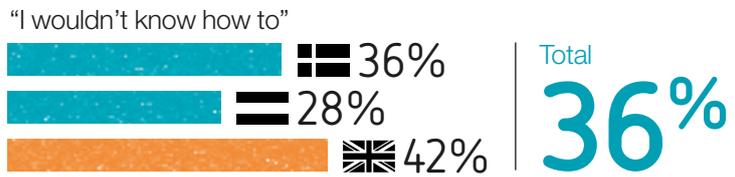
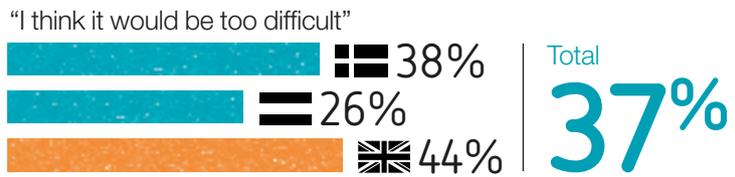
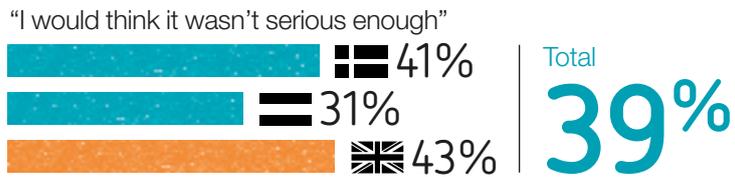
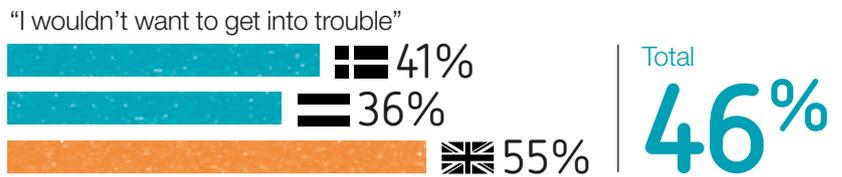
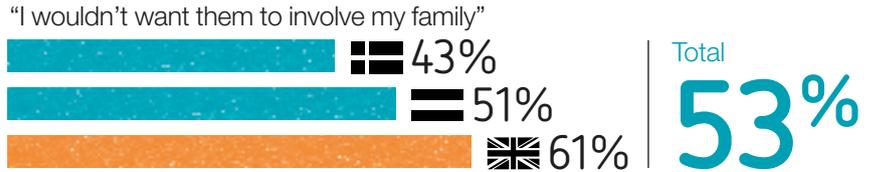
“If you were a guy then they’d be like ‘you should have just manned up and dealt with it’ instead of getting the police involved” – Boy, 16-17 years, UK

The main barriers that young people face when reporting online sexual harassment to the police are being concerned that they would involve their family (53%) and that they might get into trouble (46%).



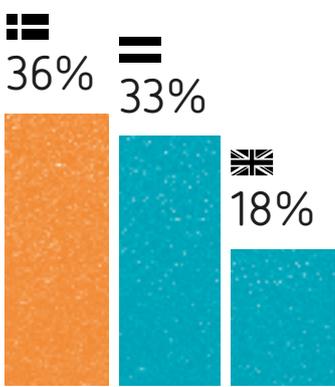
**Top reason for not telling the police:  
Not wanting them to involve their family (53%)**

**Barriers that prevent young people from reporting to the police**



“I would be too scared to go the police”  
Girl, 13-14 years, UK

**Total**  
**27%**



Percentage of young people who said it is likely they would report to the police if they experienced online sexual harassment

### Speaking to teachers and barriers faced

Just 1 in 7 respondents (14%) said they would be likely to speak to a teacher if they experienced online sexual harassment. Many of the young people cited having a good relationship and trusting their teachers as central to being able to talk to them.

“I’ll tell you the truth, I would only trust my form teacher. He is the teacher who didn’t tell anyone else the things I had said to him, I said him a very personal thing once, but I haven’t heard it back since then.” – Boy, 14, Hungary

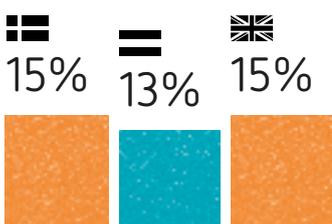
Young people were as likely to speak to teachers in Denmark (15%), Hungary (13%) or the UK (15%).

“It might be that you wouldn’t want to tell the teacher, because you are afraid that the teacher will tell your parents or tell it to the other teachers down in the staff room. You don’t know if you can trust an adult, because you don’t know the person. And I know that adults talk about some of the things that happens to the children in the school with other teachers in the staff room.” – Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

The main barriers that young people face when reporting online sexual harassment to a teacher is being concerned that the school would overreact (50%) and that it would make it worse (43%).

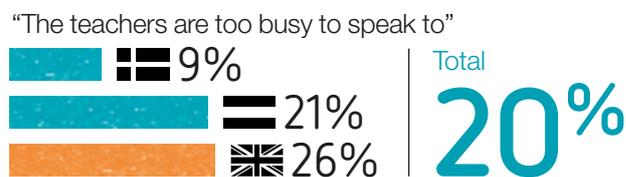
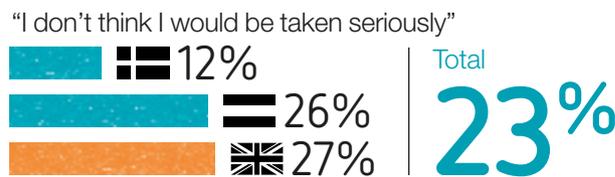
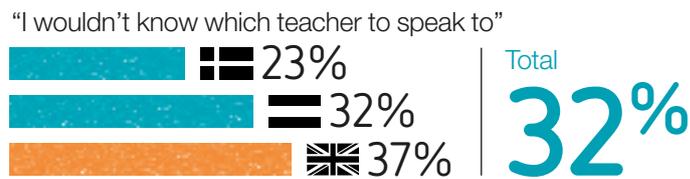
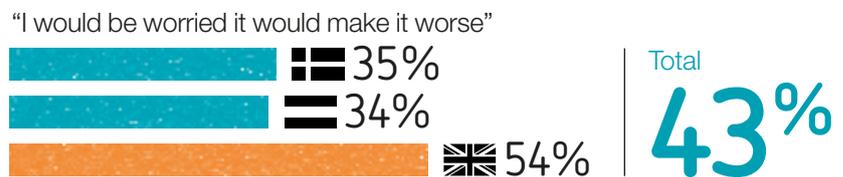
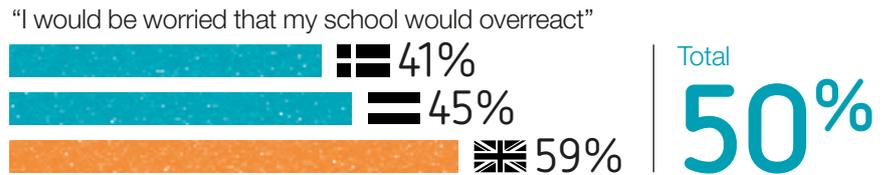
“Some people might say have an assembly on it, but it’s just gonna make that person feel even more crap – a whole assembly based on you, for the school to laugh at you, even when they’re laughing at you behind your back already. They may not be laughing at you in the assembly but mentally they’re all going to be going ha-ha look at her.” Boy, 17 years, UK

Total  
**14%**



## Top reason for not telling a teacher: Worried that their school would overreact (50%)

### Barriers that prevent young people from telling a teacher



Percentage of young people who said it is likely they would speak to a teacher if they experienced online sexual harassment

### Speaking to a Helpline

15% of respondents said they would be likely to speak to a helpline if they experienced online sexual harassment.

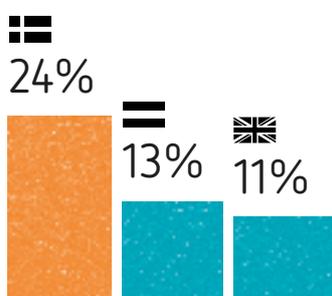
Young people in Denmark are most likely to speak to a helpline (24%) compared to young people in Hungary (13%) and the UK (11%).

Professionals working on helplines cited anonymity and confidentiality as being important to young people, and crucially, having non-judgemental people to be able to speak to about their experience of online sexual harassment.

It is interesting to note that in Denmark there is a specialist helpline for young people to get support about photos that have been shared without consent and other types of online sexual harassment.

Total  
**15%**

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Percentage of young people who said it is likely they would speak to a helpline if they experienced online sexual harassment



### Danish Helpline 'SletDet'

In 2016 the subject of online sexual harassment among youth came to the public eye in Denmark. As a response to what was seen as an urgent need among children and youth, Save the Children started a helpline to help and support young people experiencing these issues. The helpline 'SletDet' ('Delete It' in English) started the 1st of May and children and young people can now get help and support both by writing online and calling. The helpline has received over 700 requests since the start.

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## 7.2 Young people's experiences of preventative education

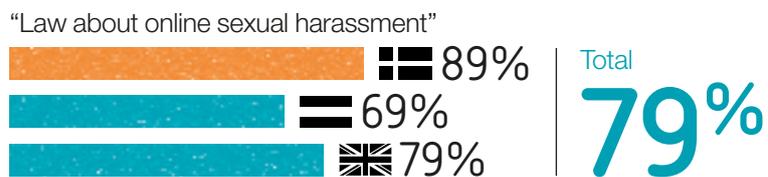
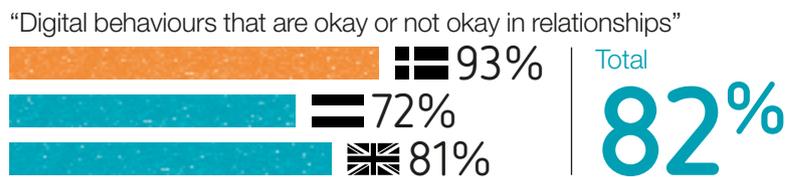
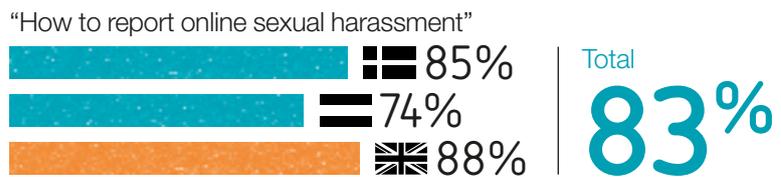
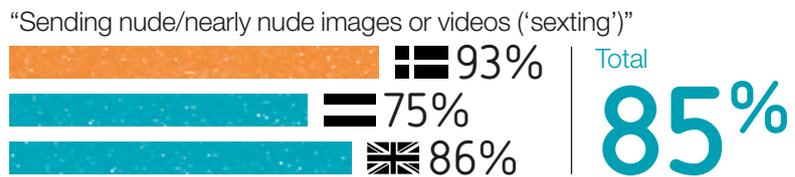
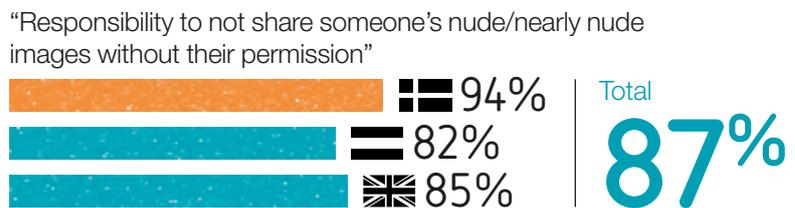
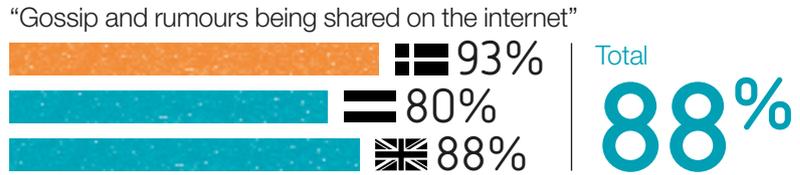
Whilst some young people had found the education they had received helpful, throughout the discussions and survey, young people also communicated what they thought was important to learn and the manner in which they should be taught. This area clearly needs further exploration and Project deSHAME will continue to consult and work closely with young people to ensure that any educational materials it produces are relatable, non-judgmental and helpful.

"[We need to learn what] 'sexual harassment' really is - in regards to being online. Everyone gets comments about being 'hot' and what would be classed as sexual comments, but no one really knows where the limit is; no one is aware of what classes as harassment when everything - comments, photos - revolves around sexualising bodies. Then once we can identify it, we can then be taught how to deal with it." – Girl, 17 years, UK

The majority of young people in Denmark, Hungary and the UK have learned about key topics relating to healthy relationships and online sexual harassment at school.

"Once we can identify it, we can then be taught how to deal with it."  
Girl, 17 years, UK

Percentage of young people who had learned about the following key topics at school



Despite the fact the majority of young people have learned about these topics in school, of those, a large number did not feel that these lessons had been helpful.

They highlighted a range of ways in which preventative education could improve; from removing the taboo around the topic to clearer descriptions of what constituted online sexual harassment, as well as what constituted healthy online relationships.

“What you can do and what you can’t do... and consequences” – Boy, 13-14 years, Denmark

“[What] the digital behaviours that are ok in a relationship and those of which aren’t.” Girl, 14 years, UK

They also felt that some preventative measures and responses had an adverse effect on the victim as they often focused on the actions of the victim rather than the perpetrator.

“I think that they should stop making out that people who send nudes are bad people. People make mistakes - some more than others. Sitting in assembly in front of around 100 people who know what you did while watching a video about why “people who send nudes are awful people” is a really horrible experience” – Girl, 14 years, UK

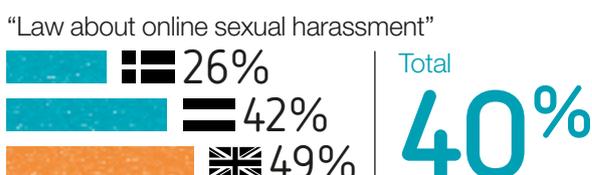
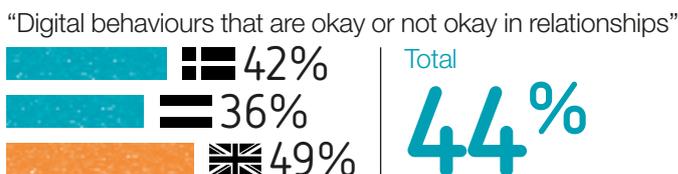
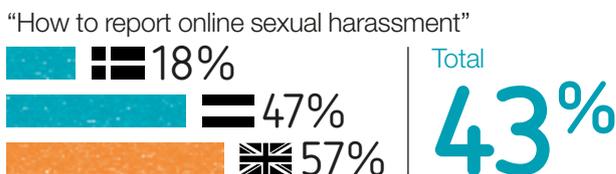
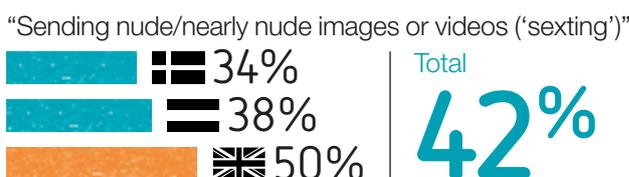
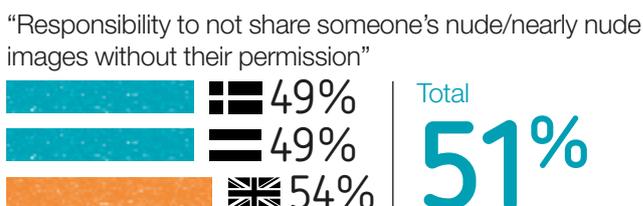
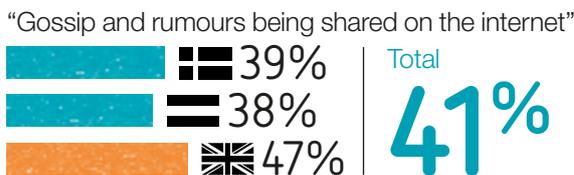
Many also commented on tackling the taboo around talking about sex and online relationships as well as online sexual harassment.

“Maybe like make some educational programs and like talk a little more freely about it, so that you don’t think that it is an embarrassing thing to talk about. So that you know that, alright I can go to my teachers or my parents or the police, and they won’t judge me on it, but that they really... they want to help me. So that you know that it is alright to tell it to someone, so I can get help, instead of keeping it to yourself so that you never get any help.” Girl, 14-16 years, Denmark

Not knowing the consequences of reporting proved to be a significant barrier for young people and they identified needing to know exactly what happened once they reported as well as the long-term consequences.

“More in depth scenarios about certain individuals that have experienced [online sexual harassment] and how it turned out for them and how they coped, it would help to know the full story rather than just the highlighted parts shown by the school” Girl, 14 years, UK

### Percentage of young people who found the lessons about key topics they had at school helpful



“I would like to learn about the process that the police use to sort out problems like this as I have no clue what they do to help in these situations” – Girl, 14 years, UK

The way in which lessons around online sexual harassment were taught were also seen as crucial. Some young people mentioned that learning in a more informal setting would be beneficial, and others discussed the differences in how girls and boys may engage in such education.

“It would be nice to do it in a more private and conversational atmosphere instead of a lecture-style.” – Girl, 15 years, UK

“[Better to have a separate classes because] the boys always laugh about those things, once at a lesson we were talking about a girl and a boy dating, not even sex issue, and they burst into laughter as they were embarrassed.” – Girl, 14, Hungary

The young people who were consulted had a variety of insightful suggestions in how future preventative education around the issue of online sexual harassment could be addressed. In the next section, this report will explore the good practices schools have exhibited as well as the challenges they face.

“We had one now where we watched a documentary and we talked about and so on. And that actually changed my view on it quite a lot. Like how serious it actually is and so on. They can just get shared and so on...It might not change the boys' view on it, like the thing about him like not caring, if he was a part of it anyways, but... I think it can have the effect that the girl isn't just as quick to send it, because then you can really see that, wow there are really consequences if you do it. And then they think about it an extra time. So if you get some education on how serious it is, then I think that the girl will think about it an extra time.”

Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

## 7.3 Perspectives of teachers and professionals

Preventing and responding to online sexual harassment in school communities is varied and very much dependent on local factors. Listening and understanding teachers' perspectives, from a variety of different roles in the school, from class or form teacher, senior management, school psychologists to safeguarding and pastoral leads was crucial to identify good practices as well as the challenges they face.

The following has emerged from interviews and focus groups with teachers and further interviews and case study analysis from schools, local government/authorities, charities, helpline professionals and police services. It is important to recognise that these are preliminary findings and Project deSHAME will continue to consult and work closely alongside teachers, police and the wider children's workforce to develop effective preventative measures and reporting routes.

This report does not seek to make a comparative analysis between the three countries although there were apparent differences in each country in both the preventative measures undertaken and reporting routes.

### Preventing online sexual harassment

#### A whole school approach

"I think it's more an ethos of the whole school. The strongest thing we have in our school is probably relationships. I think we're firm but at the same time can be quite informal and relaxed with our kids." – Teacher, UK

Schools discussed how to establish a strong school ethos that makes it clear what behaviours are deemed acceptable or not in the school community. Teachers cited how they develop and communicate the school culture alongside developing strong relationships with the students and being approachable.

**Parental involvement:** Schools gave many examples of how they try to involve the wider school community in tackling online sexual harassment, particularly parents and carers. Many teachers felt that to effectively prevent problematic behaviour and to raise awareness of the issue, a collaboration between parents and carers and the school was key. Indeed, schools that felt they had trust and communication between parents and carers, with a strong sense of a school and wider community, felt more confident in handling incidents. However, many schools found significant challenges in engaging parents and carers in this issue.

"We teach and talk and talk. It is the parent who know their children. So much of it I think, not to lay the responsibility, but as a mother to a teenage daughter I think that it is I who should be updated on her at home." – Teacher, Denmark

"We've run workshops, we've had open evenings inviting parents in but you don't get them to come." – Teacher, UK

"I did not want to have our school to participate in this survey [the questionnaires] because this issue is quite a taboo amongst our parents [who are of ethnic minority background]. They don't want us to research around this, and I think the parents would not have allowed their children to participate." – Teacher, Hungary

"I think the key that we need to start with is the parents; parents and guardians. If we can get them on board and get them to understand then I think you've made that baby step. But a lot of our parents are...they just don't want to believe it. And it's hard. When you're having to tell a parent "Your child has been online bullying, your child has been sexually harassing..." the first thing as a parent is to deny it; it's not mine." – Teacher, UK

"So we do all of the training; we have STD workshops, we have healthy relationship workshops, condom workshops but it's very different...If our students aren't taught at home as well, and parents aren't open, and a lot of our parents aren't...we are in a multicultural school where some of our parents are uncomfortable with discussing sex or relationships." – Teacher, UK

"The parents come in prepared to fight, and they are surprised to meet someone who is open for them and with no prejudice against their child." – School psychologist, Hungary

It is important to recognise that this research did not involve parents. Future research could explore the important role they play and the potential challenges they face in working with schools around this issue.

**Equipping staff:** Schools recognised the need to train and support staff in order to prevent online sexual harassment. Teachers in the focus groups mentioned their use of resources from charities as well as other organisations. However they also talked about the challenges they faced in terms of capacity, lack of training and financial obstacles. Additionally, they expressed uncertainty and lack of direction about age appropriate educational messages on online sexual harassment.

"We have really lacked the materials I think." – Teacher, Denmark

"Teachers should be taught to set up Facebook profile and Messenger to be able to communicate with pupils". – Teacher, Hungary

"But there is no money in the bank, so we couldn't attend [training]." – Teacher, Denmark

### Encouraging open dialogue

Many of the teachers in focus group discussion emphasised the importance of encouraging children to challenge wider societal attitudes and behaviours in order to effectively prevent online sexual harassment. Encouraging young people to proactively think about scenarios and asking them what they would do in various situations was seen as more effective than students passively listening to teachers on behaviours and rules. A variety of methods to achieve this interaction emerged such as using films and videos as prompts for discussion, having external speakers and mentors, and taking part in role-playing decision-based scenarios.

“A mentoring programme would work amazingly well in this school, because I think, a lot of them, there is a distance between teachers. Yeah, they have their favourite teachers and the age gap kind of a thing, it does play into it.”  
– Teacher, UK

However, teachers did find significant challenges in establishing positive behavioural expectations in the context of what young people would be witnessing and coming into contact with outside of the school community. As explored in Chapter 5, young people’s experiences and attitudes to online sexual harassment are significantly shaped by negative societal norms and behaviours.

“But the language is rough. Like if you see what adults are writing to each other, then it is hard to demand that the young people should do something completely different.” – Teacher, Denmark

### Modelling positive technology use

“We have talks, in the higher classes, about that we want to make some phone-free time. Like they shouldn’t have their phones or they’re only allowed to have them in some places and at some times. And that is to provide them with an alternative to be together around something other than a screen. We can’t control that when they’re by themselves, but in the school we can show them examples of that you shouldn’t let yourself be controlled by it.” – Teacher, Denmark

Schools recognised the importance and positive uses of technology in educating and communicating within the school community. Certain schools

also expressed methods of regulating young people’s technology use on their school premises in order to maintain and encourage positive use. However, it is difficult to conclude whether this was effective in reducing online sexual harassment among young people, or whether it merely took it out of the school premises.

“Since we’ve had a mobile phone ban, it’s less. After every break there would be an issue before (the ban) with mobile phones, every break. But now because they are literally not allowed, it’s calmed that down a little bit but it still goes on outside” – Teacher, UK

“Something they can get involved [in], decision-making, they’re making decision, they don’t want to sit there and just be told. I’ve sat in countless assemblies where I get told, or they get told, don’t do this, and don’t do that, it’s bad for you. Clearly there’s only so much of an impact that really has. They need to be making those decisions for themselves.”

Teacher, UK

## Responding to online sexual harassment

### Reporting routes for young people - who, how and when

“We’ve always said, you talk to someone you feel comfortable talking to. And sometimes it’s not even teaching staff, it’s other support staff or technicians, or all sorts of people that they will and talk to, the school nurse.” – Teacher, UK

Similar to preventative measures, embedding a whole school approach where all staff were equipped to deal with any report of online sexual harassment was highlighted. The relationships they had with young people were seen as fundamental, as well as having accessible ways in which young people could report.

“It’s getting the students to understand that they don’t just have to deal with it on their own. They don’t just have to try and hide away. We are human, we’re not just teachers, and we have been young as well and that they can come and speak to us about it. I think that’s one of the biggest barriers that they face.” – Teacher, UK

Moreover, when and how they could report also emerged as important. For example the timing of a report so that young people did not have to be seen by their peers.

“I experience that they don’t dare to come in, because they are afraid that someone might spot it. Then they want me to make up an excuse for me to go get them.” – Teacher, Denmark

Whilst teachers often want young people to report to them, building such relationships with students proved to be challenging. Schools talked about not knowing about an incident until much later, and often finding out from others, not from the student who had experienced online sexual harassment themselves.

“The cases are very rarely reported to teachers or school staff. It usually turns out by gossip.” – Teacher, Hungary

“Some of what shocks me the most, as an adult, is that all of this is going on without us knowing it.” – Teacher, Denmark

“Most of our teachers were socialized in the 50s - so they don’t have a clue what’s going on with the children on the internet. They don’t know what their pupils do.” – Teacher, Hungary

Teachers also expressed a gap between themselves and their students, which was particularly amplified by a perceived or actual lack of knowledge around young people’s experiences of online sexual harassment as well as the language and technology young people used.

“This [online sexual harassment] is a real, existing problem, but the teacher decides not to pay attention to it. [S]he quits consciously. Then he should not expect that the children will have trust towards him or her.” – Teacher, Hungary

“Some of the boys from 9th grade last year, [were] called a faggot, which I don’t care about, it hit them really, really hard, really. And I thought, why is that so bad? They call each other things that are 20 times worse in my ears. It didn’t matter, that word was the worst. And that is sexualized.” – Teacher, Denmark

“It’s that language thing as well. I mean a student came in the other day and used something I’d never even heard of. But it changes so quickly. When the word ‘brain’ came in, “It’s okay Miss, I only gave him brain, it was fine.” I have to sit there as if I know what they’re talking about. Because to me a brain means very intelligent; it’s (a term for) oral sex.” – Teacher, UK

“Teachers don’t even know how to use Facebook. They should learn how to use Facebook, Instagram, etc. how to report, how to delete, ban, etc.” – Teacher, Hungary

### Handling incidents effectively

“I think the school has been very, very good at handling it. Like it has been the most important thing in the world, and everything has been set aside to handle this, while the incident occurred. It’s here and now, and then we deal with it and handle it until late in the afternoon, and again in the following morning... It has really been a focal point. And it has been enforced. Those incidents that have happened, the ones I know of, there the whole school has been informed about it afterwards, anonymously of course, right. Now there has been this incident, and so on and so on. Remember the importance of this.” – Teacher, Denmark

In order to handle and respond to incidents of online sexual harassment, quick reactions and taking the issue seriously emerged as key.

“You have to be shown to be proactive. Not just letting certain things go or when it gets so severe. I think nipping it in the bud as fast and as severely as you can is the best approach to go.” – Teacher, UK

“I was checking the public Facebook profile of our children.... Then I could ask them what happened, you are changing your status about being in relation. After this it was possible to sit down with them and talk... It worked even when the child was not someone who opens up easily” - Former teacher, Hungary

Young people expressed that their main concern about reporting to a teacher is that the school might overreact (see Chapter 7.2). However, teachers in the UK and Denmark particularly felt they had to take issues seriously and show that they were clear and firm in their responses. However teachers did also show nuanced ways of handling incidents trying to encourage the young people involved to think about their actions and the effect that it had on their peers.

“I do restorative justice every week so I quite often am in here with everyone round the table. It’s when you start getting them to understand how what they’ve said has affected, not just the person but their wider family, how it’s affected their education, their attendance to school.” – Teacher, UK

Whilst many schools showed a variety of positive measures and outcomes in handling incidents, they also expressed a range of challenges in responding effectively.

“It’s hard isn’t, if you let them sit out, or not come to the lesson, they’re still going to be talking about her not coming in or him coming in, and then it creates that situation even more, because she’s not in the lesson, or he’s not in the lesson and then they know something’s up and they start digging at break and lunch for information from others and start gossiping more.” – Teacher, UK

Many teachers talked about working with other colleagues and the senior staff in the school, or the staff member responsible for safeguarding. In some schools there were clear procedures, roles and responsibilities in who should deal with incidents of online sexual harassment.

However, due to procedural, confidentiality or capacity issues, teachers also expressed difficulties in not being kept updated about new developments. There was often inconsistency in reporting routes and responses from different staff members, as well as how the issue was sometimes understood.

“I think what kind of annoys me sometimes, is when your form group know more than you do about a student who’s not there. You say ‘where’s so-and-so?’ and they say ‘oh yeah they’re being dealt with because of this’ and you haven’t got a clue about it. I think that’s a little bit frustrating.” – Teacher, UK

“One teacher does have a close relationship with some pupils. She wants to help, but she is sometimes even encourage them in their inappropriate behaviour in these [online sexual harassment] cases.” – School psychologist, Hungary

It was also clear that dealing with incidents of online sexual harassment becomes significantly more complex when the behaviours may cross the legal threshold, if there are significant risk factors identified around the young people involved, or if it takes place outside the school premises.

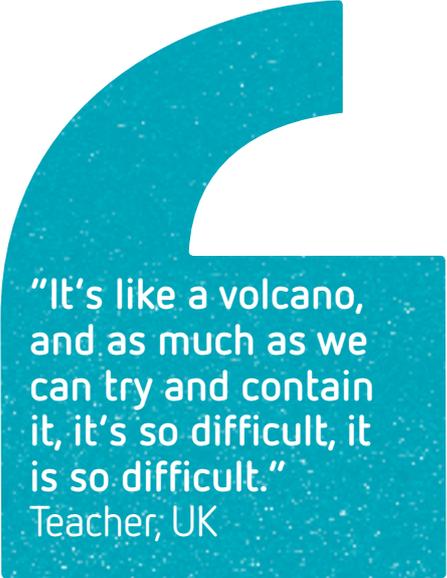
“So I think there’s a perception that it happens outside of school, it’s not school’s problem. I think they try and contain it outside of school, obviously once it’s out there, it’s fair game” – Teacher, UK

There was significant uncertainty as to which agency should take the lead in dealing with cases of online sexual harassment. In Hungary, there was significant feeling amongst teachers that this was not an issue that they should be handling.

“It is also a question whether this is their role at all, but as these things happen, they do not know anything about what happens with the child.” – Teacher, Hungary

Whilst schools were more prepared to handle incidents, they were still sometimes uncertain on the role of external agencies, such as police or social workers, and what they could do to intervene.

“I actually also would like specific information on what the police actually can do? If this is reported to the police, what then can the police do? How much search warrant does it takes to pull data out of these different IP addresses or where ever the things have been going on?” – Teacher, Denmark



“It’s like a volcano, and as much as we can try and contain it, it’s so difficult, it is so difficult.”  
Teacher, UK

### Complex incidents present particular challenges

Discussions with teachers showed that they were often aware of the numerous complexities and intersecting factors that were at play when dealing with incidents of online sexual harassment. It was clear that each case had to be dealt with in its own way due to a number of different factors.

Many teachers faced denial from young people that their behaviour was harmful or problematic in any way. As discussed further in Chapter 5, young people often crossed the line between banter and harassment and either were not aware, or possibly used it as an excuse for their behaviour.

“Yeah, I think with the ‘just a joke’ line it’s a very defensive mechanism.” – Teacher, UK

Each incident was also described as multi-layered. As one teacher in Denmark said:

“Then there is more. Then several pops out of the ground, because then it’s actually layers on layers and then we’re only told when everything comes crashing down and you can’t figure out how to sort everything out.” – Teacher, Denmark

This was particularly exacerbated by the online element which also meant that sometimes young people from other schools and other local areas could be involved. This significantly complicated the way an individual school could handle an incident and required them to work with the other schools and other agencies.

Professionals also emphasised how technology could intensify and amplify incidents of online sexual harassment, making it very difficult for them to respond effectively. Police in the UK for example highlighted the difficulty in recording crimes where many children were involved and having to record each online incident as a separate crime.

*“I think some students have this unrealistic expectation that we can control the internet and that we’re able to then stop it, straight away, we get it back, and that it’s not going to go anywhere further. They don’t understand that we don’t have that capability.” – Teacher, UK*

Furthermore, due to the peer-based nature of the issue, there were further complications in how to safeguard and respond to victims, perpetrators and others in the school community.

*“Being victim and being the abuser is usually a changing role within the community – once up, or once down. There are some abusers who are usually on the perpetrator role, but usually originally they also started to be on the victim’s side. For instance, I know a boy reported that he was originally abused by the others, but after surviving he became one of the main abusers – he felt he has the right to abuse others” – School psychologist, Hungary*

Schools also had to tailor their responses to meet the needs of specifically vulnerable or marginalised groups of young people. Professionals in all three countries highlighted the need for different approaches when handling incidents which involved groups of young people who were looked-after, with special educational needs or disability, who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT+) or were of a particular ethnicity, race or religion. For example, whether or not to involve their families was a key factor for those who were LGBT+ or from specific communities where involving family could potentially further victimise the young people. Professionals also highlighted the particular importance of technology and communication for these young people.

*“I actually think that it is even more important to the bilingual [ethnic minority] girls who aren’t allowed to run around in the streets. Then it’s the way they are together.” – Teacher, Denmark*

*“If she hasn’t reconciled within herself the fact that she is gay, or questioning, or whatever, she’s not going to want to draw attention to that.” – Teacher, UK*

## Family involvement

Whilst families were seen as very important in order to holistically and effectively respond both in the short term but also support the young person in the long term, schools also cited incidents where families escalated the situation.

*“Parents care for the children, but usually they are also not aware what is happening between them. If it gets open, in several cases they also get involved in the online conflict, therefore escalating it further.” – Teacher, Hungary*

*“So you get parents commenting and making inappropriate comments instead of being that protective factor. “She’s a slut, keep away from her; she’s a slag.” Instead of thinking, “This is a child.” You know I need to record it in a way of supporting this vulnerable child who has put herself out there for the world to see so it’s a huge, huge problem.” – Teacher, UK*

*“And when they drag parents and siblings into it, then it goes wrong. It’s really violent. There’s also siblings who have been involved in something and they have then threatened some other, so in some way it spreads to others.” – Teacher, Denmark*

## Conclusion

These discussions with key professionals, including teachers, reveal that while there are examples of effective strategies for preventing and responding to online sexual harassment, there remain significant challenges.

In the next stages of Project deSHAME it will be essential to continue these conversations with a variety of professionals and involve them in the development of training and teaching tools that will help professionals to overcome these challenges, deepen their understanding and learn from good practice in preventing and responding to online sexual harassment.

*“So many students have different accounts and it’s really hard for us to monitor it, it’s almost like a hidden element of social media that we can’t see”  
Teacher, UK*

# 8. Concluding remarks



## 8. Concluding remarks

**This report raises many questions and it sets a challenge.**

The challenge is for all of us to consider how we can work together to prevent and respond to online sexual harassment and support young people to recognise and develop healthy relationships.

Fundamental to this is listening to young people's experiences, and understanding the nuances, complexities and wider context of their behaviour. We need to understand all perspectives including those who have been victimised, or those who may have perpetrated or witnessed online sexual harassment.

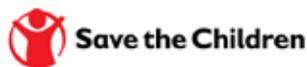
It is only through the continued involvement of young people that we can develop our understanding of this issue and address outstanding questions.

As we look ahead to the next stage of Project deSHAME, we will be learning from this research and collaborating with young people and experts to develop effective educational interventions to help prevent and respond to online sexual harassment and empower young people to speak up about these issues.

Through building the capacity of teachers and police officers with new training tools, we hope to improve multi-sector collaboration and remove the barriers that may prevent young people from seeking help about online sexual harassment.

We want to deepen our understanding of specific vulnerabilities in the context of online sexual harassment, including understanding the unique experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT+) young people, those with disabilities or special educational needs and other intersecting factors such as class, race and ethnicity. We still need to explore the role of families in supporting young people, as we know that their active involvement is central to helping prevent online sexual harassment from happening as well as to support young people recover if they experience it.

We hope most of all that this report begins a conversation, between young people, families, schools, police, government, charity, the internet industry and other key stakeholders who will all play a crucial role in our collaborative effort to tackle online sexual harassment and ensure young people can and do speak up with confidence and get the support they need.



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"It's not going to be removed from the internet anyway. Those who have seen it, have seen it."

Girl, 14-15 years, Denmark

"I couldn't talk to my mum about this stuff because I'd be ashamed of the boy. Mum would say "Who is this guy you are talking to, it's pathetic!"

Girl, 13 years, Hungary

"It's definitely a lot worse for girls. From my point of view, I hear a lot more male nudes going around than female. And I feel like, not that they don't care, but it's not a surprise to them anymore. They're just like, ok, whatever. If a girl does it, it's a lot more sensitive."

Girl, 17 years, UK

"If he's been brought up in a way that respects women he's less likely to make fun of her and send it around. But if he's someone that treats women like animals and doesn't care about them at all, he'll show it to his friends and makes a real laugh out of her."

Boy, 17 years, UK

"It's not something that you are proud of most of the times. And it's like really vulnerable to talk to someone about it. Like standing by that I've sent a nude picture."

Girl, 13-14 years, Denmark

"When you have sent it to a friend, then it's like a tree, right? – with branches and everything, that's growing. When you have shared it, you cannot get it back because it is all over the place."

Boy, 14-15 years, Denmark

"There's a boy among us who is trying to play the big guy, but he's still a little boy. So he's trying to harass everybody, but maybe he's just trying to show the others that he is a grown-up."

Boy, 15 years, Hungary

"It passes on, everyone has friends, those friends have friends, and it all links back. The internet makes it such a small world."

Boy, 17 years, UK,



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