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Youth and Sexual Harassment: From #MeToo to #MeTooK12

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The Gender Policy Report

Youth and Sexual Harassment: From #MeToo to #MeTooK12

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Courageous survivors and supporters are mobilizing to fight sexual violence, even within a culture that has long-since actively obscured violence against women. Online mobilization through hashtags like #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, #YouOKSis, and others are, in part, a realization of decades of feminist research and activism around rape culture and toxic masculinity, while media outlets featuring brave survivors are helping the broader public recognize and challenge misogynistic environments. Whether learning about the silencing effects of nondisclosure agreements or institutional and governmental failures to enforce Title IX, story after story, accusation after accusation, we are peeling back the layers of patriarchy and silence. We are exposing institutions that have long reinforced inequalities.

Yet aside from the sorts of stories that came to light in Roy Moore's failed Senate campaign, we hear very little from youth, despite evidence that they endure substantial rates of sexual harassment and violence.

Underreporting of child sexual assault is commonly linked to family loyalty and to fear about being disbelieved, treated negatively, blamed for the assault, or dismissed. Just as adult women and men have few incentives to come forward and reveal their abuse in a climate that questions their motives, responses, delays, and their very voices, young people have little incentive to go to adults and reveal the victimization they have endured. If we want to protect kids from sexual violence and abuse, we must ask incredibly hard questions: How does our culture foster persistent sexual violence? How can we facilitate disclosures? How can we allow our schools, our homes, and our neighborhoods to represent the most dangerous, toxic, and vulnerable spaces for children? These are where the roots of gender inequality begin. Report after report after report—even with underreporting caused by shame, stigma, and cultural pressure, shows that sexual victimization is common among children and youth across the United States. We cannot continue to believe otherwise.

In my own study, I found that objectification, sexual harassment, and abuse were woven into the fabric of girls' lives.

Sexualized violence was often normalized because it was so common and indiscriminate. "That's what boys do," "They do it to everyone." In a heteronormative culture, young women are taught to acquiesce, to question their feelings and desires, and to comply and stay silent for the sake of others or to prevent conflict. In a recently published companion piece, I studied young men's experiences with sexual violence, too. The toxic expectations of masculinity excluded these boys from dominant notions of victimhood (in which men are positioned as sexual aggressors and women as victims); they grew up believing that men could not be sexually victimized because a "real" man is strong, powerful, self-sufficient, and impenetrable. And yet boys, too, were sexually victimized.

Children learn what is acceptable and what is expected of them from their families, schools, culture, and institutions that largely fail to hold boys and men accountable for sexual victimization.

They also fail to fully acknowledge boys as victims. Young men are left alone to negotiate what it means to be victimized in a culture that reinforces rape tropes and stigmatizing myths about homosexuality and emasculation. Similar to C.J. Pascoe's and James Messerschmidt's work, many boys in my study did not disclose assault and often sought to regain power by emphasizing strength and physical and sexual aggression. Other research has found that families "reaffirm" the masculinity of boy victims by teaching them to objectify and degrade women and girls in an attempt to assert heterosexuality. Maybe this is how we end up with 1 in 3 college men saying they would rape a woman if they could get away with it.

This is how rape culture functions. We disempower and empower girls and boys in sexist, racist, misogynist ways. We give little attention or credence to children's real experiences, we teach women and girls to "just say no" and excuse men and boys when they refuse to take no for an answer. We erase institutional and structural responsibility, as well as our individual responsibility to sensitively ask, carefully listen, and actually hear youth, despite our own fears.

National policy conversations about sexual assault often focus on colleges and universities, and that's important. But overlooking K-12 sexual harassment and abuse functionally permits and encourages it—and lays the groundwork for rape culture to flourish on campuses, in boardrooms, and in power structures of all sorts.

By listening to youths' voices, structures of violence, power, and privilege become apparent. Their experiences do not easily translate to law and policy reforms, but they can be incorporated into best practices. For example, children who fear that "nothing will be done"

if they report their abuse often have little trust in criminal justice authorities; I find that fear of the intrusive nature of state intervention, especially when the perpetrator is a family member or friend, is a real barrier to change. To that end, Children's Advocacy Centers – regarded as best practice for improving children's experiences when reporting violence – should carefully consider whether using law enforcement officials to complete on-the-scene interviews or transport children might actually hinder disclosures. Listening to youth can reveal systemic flaws that keep other youth from speaking up.

We must also acknowledge that for many children and adults, justice is often not dependent upon state punishment. For many youth, particularly minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, a social system of carceral punishment begins in schools with zero-tolerance policies. A tendency to label and punish children rather than educate and incorporate restorative justice practices to assist victims, families, and communities affected by violence is often a source of children's silence.

| Further, if we cannot talk about sex as a culture, how can we talk about sexual violence?

Programs like Stop Sexual Assault in Schools (SSAIS) work to educate students, families, and schools about the right to an equal education uncompromised by gendered violence. Piggybacking on the coverage of workplace sexual harassment, SSAIS recently launched a #MeTooK12 campaign, helping bolster their argument that elementary schools are ideal places for early discussions about cultural gender norms, bodily integrity and respect, coercion, consent, and healthy relationships including intersectional approaches to sexuality, gender, age, race, class, and abilities. One-size-fits-all policies often lack the local knowledge necessary to prevent and intervene in these ways. But by listening, we can create policies that respond appropriately to *specific* K-12 contexts.

| Let us remember that #MeToo was created by Tarana Burke when she realized she didn't know how to respond to a 13-year-old girl who had been sexually assaulted.

We need to treat young people as knowledgeable agents and decision-makers, create safe spaces for dialogue, and challenge our systems and ourselves to confront the prevalence of normalized, sexualized violence experienced by many children. We must challenge our communities, our families, and our government to confront the gendered cultural practices that are so clearly communicated and frightfully disempowering to children.

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