# Young people's experiences of online sexual harassment

Executive Summary

A cross-country report from
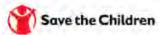
**PROJECT
deSHAME**

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## PROJECT
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# About this report

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

# 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:

**"Block the people involved"** **82%**

**"Speak to friends"** **67%**

**"Tell the people involved to stop"** **65%**

**"Speak to parents/carers"** **48%**

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:

**#1** "Too embarrassed" (52%)

**#2** "Worried about what would happen next" (42%)

**#3** "Worried about being targeted by those involved" (42%)

**#4** "Worried that they are to blame" (39%)

**#5** "Would rather sort it out themselves" (39%)

**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

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